Special Forum: Distance Learning

Distance Learning at the General Theological Seminary

by Melissa Chim

The General Theological Seminary is located in the heart of Chelsea in New York City. The seminary is fortunate enough to keep classes very small, and as the reference librarian I am able to know all of the students by name. The library plays an integral role in upholding the seminary's sense of community. This proved challenging with the onset of the coronavirus, which required faculty and staff to work from home and hold classes via Zoom. However, with the seminary's introduction of a new online Doctor of Ministry program, discussions around distance learning had already happened before the changes brought by the pandemic. Additionally, as a student who attended my MLIS course completely online while working, my experiences have inspired me to serve both as a reference librarian and archivist to students at a distance. I aim to provide services to remote students with a three-pronged approach: webinars, online communication tools, and library guides.

WEBINARS

As an MLIS student, I chose to pursue a concentration in both academic librarianship and archives. While taking courses online, I was also able to get hand-on experiences in archives through my internships in local historical societies. However, my current and future online students at the seminary may not have the same opportunity to come visit our special collections as often as they would like. Women's History Month was the perfect time to celebrate the history of women at the seminary, and I coordinated with the library's manager, the academic deans, alumni relations, and many other departments to construct a webinar for the end of March 2020. Our archives hold a wealth of information regarding the first female students, and this webinar was able to bring the rich resources of special collections to students in the comfort of their own homes.

At the beginning of this project, I used the remaining days I had working physically in the library to collect copies of relevant photographs and institutional publications. I collected graduation photos, particularly those of the first female students from the class of 1974, Peggy Muncie and Paige Bigelow, and materials related to famous activist Pauli Murray and Christian education pioneer Professor Doris P. Chaplin. I also gathered board meeting minutes from as early as 1917, which revealed that Grace Amelia Littel served as interim librarian without being afforded the title. I framed these experiences into the context of women as a whole in the Episcopal Church and encouraged female students and faculty members to share their own stories.

Next, various departments helped me in advertising my webinar through our seminary newsletter and by posting flyers through high traffic areas, such as the refectory and dormitories. I organized all of my findings into a PowerPoint and broadcast it via Zoom, giving students and faculty the opportunity to submit questions and feedback live. Ultimately, the webinar's success was due to timing. In lieu of the regular academic advising hour taking place each Wednesday, the deans gave faculty and their advisees permission to attend my webinar instead. I had thirty participants in total, which reflects more than half of the current student body.

Melissa Chim is Reference Librarian at General Theological Seminary.

In order for future students to have access to this webinar, the library plans to upload the MP4 to its website. One challenge to consider before creating future webinars is the platform. I was the only participant to have both audio and video. Students and faculty who wanted to join in the discussion were limited to using the chat function, which resulted in unformatted blocks of text. For future webinars, I intend to work with the registrar in structuring these presentations as one would an online class. This will allow all participants to be able to use both audio and video, which will strengthen their sense of community and engagement.

ONLINE COMMUNICATION TOOLS

Communicating with students is an essential component of being a reference librarian, and often remote students express feeling cut off from the library while away from campus. This is especially true in the weeks leading up to final exams when the Writing Center (of which I am the manager) is inundated with questions regarding citations and formatting. Our library has recently started to implement a live chat function on our webpage in addition to answering questions by email and phone.

In my experience, I have found that my students are overall more comfortable contacting me by email than through the live chat. On average, I may receive one message through the live chat during the day, compared to dozens of emails from students. The chats I receive are usually easy to answer queries, such as what the library's hours are and if a student can renew a book. My students feel much more comfortable asking more in-depth questions via email, such as asking for help in finding sources and how to construct strong thesis statements.

As we welcome more distance learning students in the future, I expect to see an increase in the amount of live chat questions I receive. The library advertised our live chat function by campus-wide email, but as our student body grows we may explore other options, such as advertising in the weekly newsletter. Curating a stronger social media presence, especially on Instagram and Twitter, will also be beneficial for communication and increasing the visibility of the special collections. Fortunately, I am able to stay connected to the student body and continue providing reference services using these virtual resources.

LIBRARY GUIDES

In lieu of an in-person tour of the library, I compiled a library guide for the incoming Doctor of Ministry students and a separate guide for MA students. They are comprehensive instruction manuals on how to use the library, ranging from how to register as a patron to how to submit their thesis. Although directions for accessing the collections are the same for both sets of students, the requirements for the thesis differ in length. The guides are in a PDF format and will be located on the resources section of our website. I paid the most attention to crafting sections on how to access our collections and other important resources remotely.

Our library is fortunate enough to have access to a wide range of e-books through our catalog. In my guides, I added step-by-step instructions with screenshots on how to access these books through our catalog and how to subsequently create accounts for ProQuest and EBSCO. Additionally, I included information on the Atla Reciprocal Borrowing Program. I hope to make these guides helpful for both on-campus students and students at a distance.

As the General Theological Seminary welcomes more remote students, I plan to develop Lib-Guides on subjects related to theology, history, and philosophy. Due to budget restraints, we may not be able to afford a traditional LibGuide platform. However, I may pursue nontraditional platforms such as creating online resource guides through Google Docs and sharing them with the student body.

CONCLUSION

Serving students at a distance presents both opportunities and challenges for the General Theological Seminary. The library is an essential resource for both remote and on-campus students. The coronavirus pandemic and the implementation of a new online program allowed us to consider how to best reach students who are away from campus. As the reference librarian, my approach to serving remote students is to provide webinars, online communication, and library guides. My goals for the future are to provide more web-based services and to increase the library's online presence while bringing visibility to the special collections. Consequently, the library will continue to be an integral component of both the online and virtual General Theological Seminary campus.