Uncertainty and Resilience
Experiences at Theological Libraries During the COVID-19 Pandemic
by Megan E. Welsh, Ian Burke, and James Estes

ABSTRACT This study examines the experiences of theological library deans and directors in the United States and Canada as they navigated the COVID-19 pandemic. Survey and interview data gathered in spring and fall 2020 provide insight about how library leaders managed change and uncertainty, including the sudden shift to virtual learning environments, meeting changing patron needs, and identifying opportunities amidst unprecedented challenges. The researchers contextualize this research within the recent history of theological education and alongside the limited information available about the impacts of the pandemic on libraries. Further research is needed to understand the long term implications of the pandemic on theological librarianship.

Prior to the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, theological librarianship was already confronting institutional uncertainties. Librarians sought to address complex financial, pedagogical, technological, and administrative issues when the pandemic's arrival exacerbated these challenges. This article describes the situational context of theological librarianship amidst the uncertainty of the pandemic and reports on survey and interview data from theological library deans and directors articulating the range of their responses to the pandemic. The purpose of this work is to share the practices of library leaders in the United States and Canada, to inform and engage theology librarians who may feel isolated in their own institutional settings, and to provide future library professionals and researchers with a snapshot of how theological libraries have responded to the pandemic and are providing for patron needs during this unsettling time.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic is ongoing, research and media attention provide context for studying its effects on academic libraries, theological education, and theological and religious studies libraries.

The Pandemic and Academic Libraries

In its "Statement on COVID," published on March 13, 2020, the American Library Association (ALA) acknowledged the uncertainty of the times and the rapidly developing situation pertaining to the spread and impact of the novel coronavirus (Hall 2020). Whether libraries chose to close, to remain open, or even to expand their services, ALA acknowledged the variety of decisions libraries faced. This statement also linked to a resource page for libraries to consult for information that might inform library guidelines and practices (ALA 2020). The Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) issued their own statement which reaffirmed ALA's statement and advocated for closing academic libraries (ACRL Board of Directors 2020). ACRL also created a resource guide with the goal of "supporting our members, staff, and all librarians and library workers during these uncertain times" (Association of College & Research Libraries 2020). The Association of Research Libraries (ARL) also issued a statement detailing the unique challenges of the pandemic, the posi-

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tionality of research institutions to meet these challenges, and the resilience required to support patrons amidst a rapidly developing situation (Kennedy 2020). ARL underscored the long history of research institutions supporting patrons through virtual media.

Included in each of these resource pages and statements were links to critical information about Ithaka S+R's extensive data collection efforts and comprehensive reports which describe how academic libraries responded to the pandemic. In March 2020, Lisa Janicke Hinchliffe and Christine Wolff-Eisenberg published results of a large, ongoing survey, "Academic Library Response to COVID19," which first launched on Wednesday, March 11, 2020 (ITHAKA S&R 2020). Initially, as the realities of the pandemic were beginning to be felt, Hinchliffe and Wolff-Eisenberg (2020a) forecasted the direction libraries might take: "We also anticipate shifting of in-person and patron access to online, phone, and mediated access, particularly if libraries shift to not only allowing but actually mandating remote work."

Reporting data gathered within 48 hours of opening the survey, Hinchliffe and Wolff-Eisenberg (2020b) described how the landscape of library services had already drastically shifted compared to just 24 hours before:

> In sum, more libraries are radically changing their service model or closing altogether, providing for increased social distance and staff and user safety. Specifically, **our data show significant growth in the number of academic libraries closing, decreasing hours, restricting access, limiting services, and expanding remote work**. (emphasis original)

Hinchliffe and Wolff-Eisenberg (2020b) declared, "**Business-as-usual is no longer the usual for academic libraries in the United States**" (emphasis original). Ten days after the opening of the survey, library practices had solidified: in-person classes on campus shifted to online environments, administrators closed physical library locations, more reference services were virtual, access to print materials dramatically declined, and libraries were allowing—if not mandating—their employees to work remotely (Hinchliffe and Wolff-Eisenberg 2020c).

Other resources and further research continue to support library decision-making. One such resource is the ongoing research project "REopening Archives, Libraries, and Museums" (REALM) (OCLC 2020). REALM researchers are publishing evidence-based recommendations that inform library policy and procedure for materials handling. For example, testing through this project found that SARS-CoV-2 was not detectable on books and other common library materials after three days of quarantining (OCLC 2020). This research directly influenced the circulation of materials in many libraries.

The State of Theological Education & Librarianship

Theological librarianship is a subset of academic librarianship, although it has distinct characteristics depending on institutional setting. These institution types may consist of seminaries and divinity schools, religiously-affiliated institutions, public universities, and more. Institutions within the field of theological education, particularly seminaries and divinity schools, experience their own challenges separate from—but compounded by—the pandemic. Writing a history of theological education, Justo González (2015, 241) notes that it is commonly understood that "North American theological education is in crisis." Factors that have already negatively impacted theological institutions include declining enrollment, with 55% of ATS-accredited institutions declining in the 2019–20 academic year (Meinzer 2019), and financial hardships (González 2015; Seltzer 2016; Lovett 2017;

Allen 2020), including those caused by declining denominational membership. González (2015) notes that changing demographics also challenge institutions to adapt or face irrelevancy, which could push schools to merge or close altogether (Seltzer 2016). Institutions must be flexible and creative in their response to challenges and the changing educational landscape (Brown and Meinzer 2017). Such flexibility could include considering "location and ease of access" (González 2015, 255) for potential students. Increased accessibility encourages distance education and, for libraries, implies the necessity of connecting students with information wherever they may be located.

As James Estes & Myka Kennedy Stephens (2020, iii) note, "[t]heological libraries are not immune to the broader issues that shape theological education." Scholars have described the impact of these factors on theological libraries (Sweetser 2016), and several theological libraries have closed or merged as their institutions have closed or were absorbed into other institutions (Seltzer 2016; Sweetser 2016). Theological libraries also face challenges of communicating the value of the library to administrators. Numerous articles and presentations treat this topic, such as Jay Blossom's (2015) suggestions about building relationships with influential stakeholders and Andrew J. Keck's (2013) address which highlighted the value of theological libraries as collection, place, and people. Keck (2013, 10) stated that he is "increasingly convinced that our ability to articulate answers [related to questions of the value of theological libraries] is critical to the thriving of our libraries and resilience of our profession." Indeed, as the information landscape and institutional contexts change, it is more important than ever for theological libraries to demonstrate value and creativity.

Pandemic Impacts on Theological Education & Libraries

Limited information is available about the impact of the pandemic on the field of theological librarianship. The popular press has reported that some religiously affiliated schools are closing permanently (Associated Press 2020) or at risk for permanent closure based on dire financial situations (Corpo 2020), while other theological institutions are receiving aid from the federal government (Nadworny 2020), which may adequately support operations. The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) released the results of a survey of CEOs and CAOs of ATS-accredited institutions which explored immediate and longer-term challenges related to the pandemic (Gin 2020). Although libraries were not mentioned specifically, the institutional challenge of supporting students' remote learning needs and retaining staff are directly relevant to library employees at ATS institutions.

On March 13, 2020, Atla published a blog post listing resources that could support librarians "challenged with developing or expanding efforts to effectively support online learning" (Atla 2020a). A month later, the President of Atla's Board of Directors published words of encouragement, emphasizing the value of libraries connecting patrons with resources and one another (Sweeney 2020). Michael Bradford and Jamie Lin (2020) noted Atla members' desire for learning opportunities focused on technology and library instruction, two valuable means of reaching patrons during the pandemic.

In August and October 2020, Atla's Technical Services Interest Group hosted two "colloquial conversations" encouraging participants to share practices their libraries adopted as a result of the pandemic (Atla 2020b). Participants shared the value of connecting with colleagues, the pivot to predominantly online resources and remote services, and the importance of flexibility in responding to changing situations. Even given the inherent anxieties created by the pandemic, hope was also expressed. Despite continued challenges and uncertainties, the group agreed that they were "getting along quite well" (Atla 2020c).

METHODS

This research study contributes to the conversation about how well theological libraries are "getting along" throughout the pandemic using the words of library deans and directors who are leading through this challenging time. The research questions which served as a basis for this study are:

1) How has the pandemic affected theological libraries as institutions?
2) How has the pandemic affected individuals who work at theological libraries?

This study consisted of two phases of data collection: first, a survey sent to deans and directors of theological libraries in spring 2020 and, second, interviews with several of these deans and directors in fall 2020.

Survey

We developed and distributed a survey to deans and library directors responsible for managing theological libraries in May 2020 (see Appendix A). In order to recruit the broadest number of survey respondents as possible, we compiled a list of theological library deans and directors from ATS-accredited institutions and we also emailed deans and directors through an Atla listserv to which members of this population subscribe. This survey is also discussed in an Atla newsletter article published in October 2020 (Burke, Welsh, and Estes 2020).
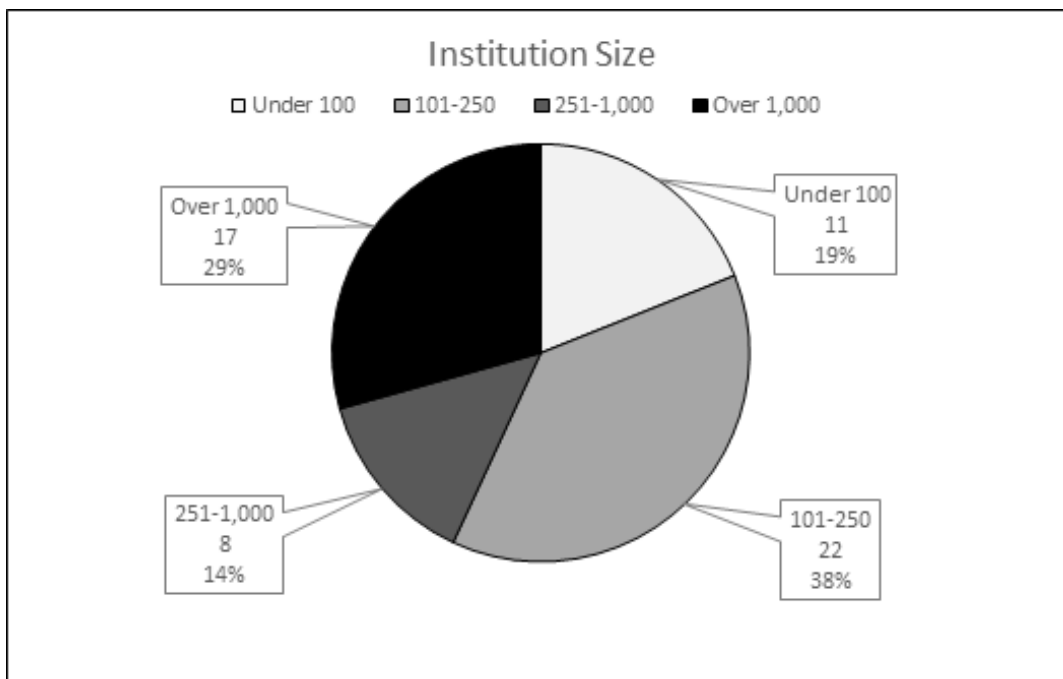

Figure 1: Size of survey respondents' institutions, n=58

Fifty-eight deans and directors completed the survey. Of these, 28 were administrators for libraries serving a college or university, while 30 were administrators for libraries serving stand-alone seminaries. Of the 28 college and university libraries, 15 (54%) served small institutions with en-

rollments of less than 1,000, while 13 (46%) served institutions with enrollments greater than 1,000. Twenty-eight out of 30 (93%) stand-alone seminary libraries represented in the survey served institutions of 1,000 enrollees or less; two institutions served larger populations (figure 1).

Most respondents represented institutions affiliated with Christian traditions. Table 1 details the religious affiliations of respondents' institutions.

| Religious Tradition	Count	Percentage
Roman Catholic	12	20.7%
Protestant (Evangelical Tradition)	20	34.5%
Protestant (Mainline Tradition)	18	31.0%
Jewish	1	1.7%
Unitarian Universalist	1	1.7%
Other religious tradition (incl. multi- / non-denominational Christian)	5	8.6%
Not applicable	1	1.7%

Table 1: Religious affiliations of survey respondents' institutions, n=58

To gain a sense of broad trends in library pandemic response strategies, the survey included several checkbox items prompting respondents to report whether their libraries experienced one or more potential consequences of the pandemic, including changes to library services, building access, and employment practices. A summary of selected findings from these items is shown in figure 2. The most common response to pandemic conditions reported by respondents was a shift to some or all employees working from home. Most respondents also reported campus closures and/or facility closures. A notable minority of respondents reported immediate budgetary consequences for their libraries.

Respondents were also asked to rate their degree of confidence in information related to the pandemic and the institutional decision-making process, and to respond to several open-response items regarding their approaches to pandemic response and their expectations for the future. The means, medians, and standard deviations (SD) of these responses are reported in table 2.

Question	Mean	Median	SD
How informed have you felt when making decisions regarding services and staffing during the COVID-19 pandemic?	7.28	8	1.67
How would you rate your confidence in the decisions made by yourself or other administrators in your institution regarding services and staffing during the COVID-19 pandemic?	7.40	8	2.14
How would you rate your library's administrative autonomy during the COVID-19 pandemic?	5.59	5	2.60

Table 2: Means, medians, and standard deviations for scale items in the deans and directors survey, n=58
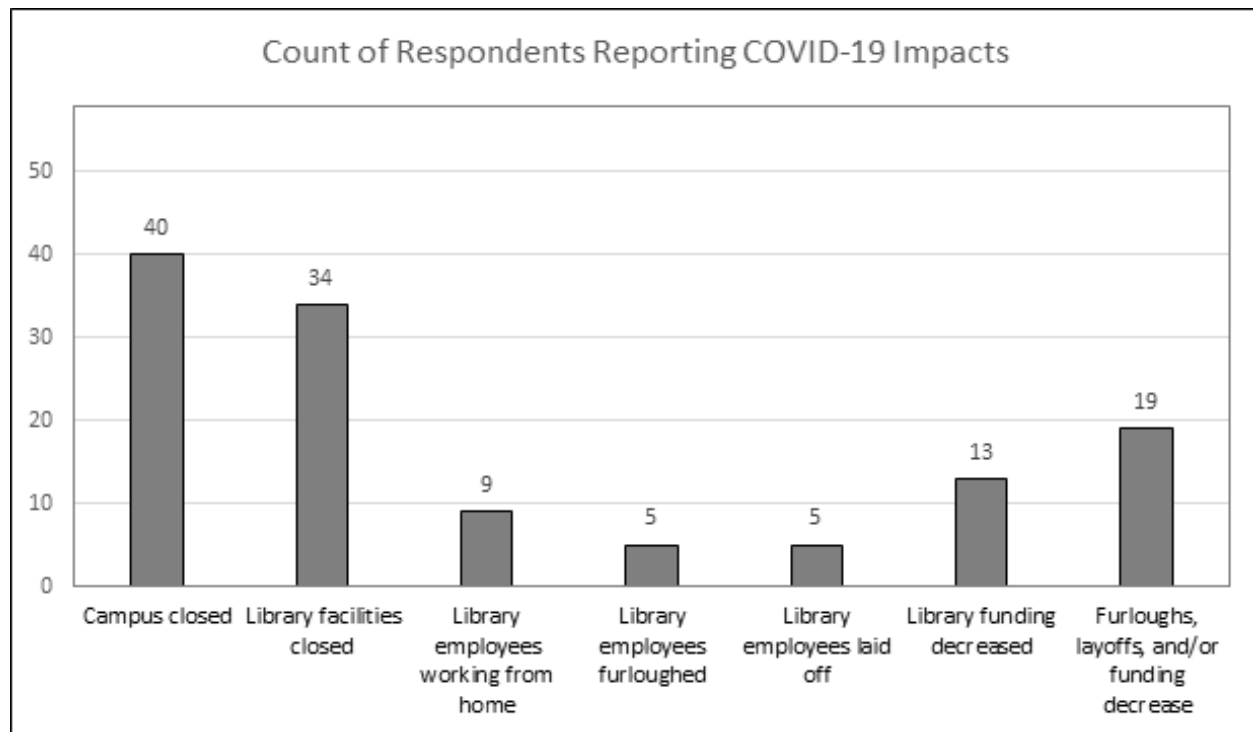
Figure 2: Counts of respondents reporting various impacts caused by COVID-19, n=58

Respondents reported relatively high levels of information and confidence in decision-making. However, responses to the question of administrative autonomy were highly variable, with a trend toward low scores. It is possible that responses to this last item were not influenced by the pandemic, but were instead driven by pre-existing administrative structures.

Interviews

We developed a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix B) by reviewing survey responses and discussing emergent lines of inquiry. The protocol included questions about changes in pandemic policies since spring 2020, the effects of the pandemic on budgets and staffing, interviewees' experiences with increased demand for online resources, concerns for the future, and potential opportunities arising from the pandemic. The protocol was divided into two sections: prompts designed to gain context about the interviewees' libraries, and prompts oriented toward understanding how interviewees responded to the pandemic in their leadership roles.

Recruitment emails were sent to deans and directors who indicated a willingness to participate in a follow-up interview and a total of nine were interviewed. These nine interviewees were affiliated with institutions across five states and two Canadian provinces and included libraries serving universities, stand-alone seminaries, and libraries serving multiple institutions.

The survey protocol served as a guide for moderating interviews and functioned as a guiding framework for conversation. Conversations with interviewees naturally progressed from discussing library contexts toward recollections of how interviewees and their institutions responded to the pandemic. We took individual notes during and after each interview, discussed their primary

takeaways from the conversation, then met to organize these into the themes described in the discussion section. Recorded interviews with transcripts supported us as we reviewed notes for accuracy and contextualized findings.

Limitations

We want to acknowledge several limitations to this study. The field of theological librarianship is relatively small and some deans and directors may not have completed the survey or participated in interviews because they may have thought their comments could identify them. An additional challenge in recruiting more participants could have been caused by the very nature of the subject of study and the energy that they already devote to addressing the impacts of the pandemic in their daily work. The pandemic can cause stress and fatigue for all library workers, but especially those with great responsibility.

Researcher biases and assumptions are also important to acknowledge, as these affected the construction of survey and interview questions. For example, we are primarily experienced with campus library settings and did not anticipate the number of survey respondents serving institutions focused on distance learners prior to the start of the pandemic. Additionally, we note that the study involved two different data collection methods and sampling methodologies. The mixed-modality design allowed for more flexibility while collecting data, but limited the degree to which changes over time could be analyzed.

DISCUSSION

Developing Pandemic Response Strategies

Several themes emerged from the responses to open-ended prompts in the spring survey about the effects of the pandemic. Respondents cited the rapid shift to an online presence (and the corresponding loss of face-to-face contact) as a major impact on their role in theological librarianship. Survey respondents also mentioned concerns regarding changes to staffing practices, including reliance on student workers, hiring freezes, and staff furloughs. However, the most prominent theme identified in open-ended responses related to access to library materials and services. Respondents listed impacts such as "cut[s] in hours and severe limitations on access to the public and our faculty, staff and students," and noted that "graduating students had a very hard time getting resources for their final papers." Some contemplated their own limitations stating, "we [were] limited in the ways we can assist our students and faculty members since we do not have access to our stacks or our building," and others thought about directions for the future: "This situation has renewed conversations about pedagogy and new ways of accessing information and library services. I do think that important innovations will come out of this event." That respondents chose to frame their discussions of pandemic effects in terms of patron access speaks to shared values held across the profession.

While direct correspondence between the trends noted in aggregate survey results and the experiences described in follow-up interviews is not generalizable, contrasts between the two offer a glimpse into the process of addressing the pandemic as a known situation rather than a sudden crisis. This transition was marked by the development of strategic objectives within libraries and

sponsoring institutions, informed by developments in conventional wisdom regarding effective pandemic response strategies.

One interviewee who mentioned that their institution was "more reactive than proactive" with regard to their pandemic response in the spring survey reported feeling more confident in their pandemic response following the implementation of "clear protocols" for mask-wearing, social distancing, and disease-tracking. Another interviewee recalled a strong feeling of uncertainty among the staff during the early stages of the outbreak, "because it was so unknown... the best way to describe the mood [was] a little anxious and kind of like, 'how are we going to handle this?'" This institution also implemented formal mitigation policies for the fall semester, leading to more confidence in the library's ability to handle the stresses of the pandemic: "...everything is do-able. You've just got to figure out the best methodology."

Methods employed by theological libraries in response to the pandemic included limiting the number of persons in the building at one time, symptom checks for employees, contact tracing, and quarantine for employees with symptoms or in contact with a known COVID-19 case. Some interview respondents also mentioned quarantine of materials brought in from outside the library, although the efficacy of this practice at limiting the spread of disease was questioned by one respondent. In general, pandemic mitigation measures were adopted in support of practical goals, such as allowing a return to in-person campus operations or supplying patrons with needed materials while reducing the risk of disease transmission. However, staffing decisions were often made on a case-by-case basis in conversation with employees rather than strict adherence to specific policy. Two interview respondents mentioned exceptions being made to allow pregnant employees to continue working from home after library facilities had reopened, while another stated:

> With the coming of the fall term [my co-worker] and I are back to working in the library almost full time... We have some employees with compromised health or family members with compromised health who really can't afford to be out in the open, so it's okay if they stay at home; the seminary is giving us a good deal of flexibility with that.

While several respondents' institutions sought a return to in-person instruction during fall 2020, this did not translate into a return to pre-pandemic modes of interacting with patrons at library facilities. One respondent mentioned that the library was forced to reduce their physical collection in order to make space for socially-distanced classes in the library. Another respondent framed their situation as, "The library is open, but not the entire building; browsing is not available." At another library supporting an institution with in-person courses, many staff were allowed to work from home, leading to a reliance on student workers. Additionally, managing staff during the pandemic continued to be a concern: "At what point do we have some contingency plans for if enough people get sick? We're going to reduce our hours or change our service model."

Increased awareness of personal space and social distancing recommendations led some to remark on the divide between patrons and library employees. One interviewee said, "We have very different comfort levels with PPE (personal protective equipment)... one of the librarians wears a mask outside of the library office but inside we tend to not wear masks with each other... I think we moved into feeling like we're somewhat of a bubble with the three [library employees]." Another respondent noted a feeling of increased community between library employees over the course of the year: "We spend time in meetings with devotions or prayer of some kind... which was new to

us and hadn't been part of our practice before... We've tried to make space to acknowledge how we experience this as human beings, not just as employees of the library."

One area which remained uncertain for interview respondents was the financial outlook at their institutions: staff budgets and finances are of continuing concern. These issues tended to be complex and highly dependent on institution context. Several of these cases are discussed in more depth later in this article.

Online Resources and the Pandemic

One director described the transition to an online learning environment in spring 2020 in frank terms, stating, "it was a bit ugly, but we got through it." This sudden shift necessitated re-envisioning how to connect patrons, especially students, with library resources. With campus and library closures, interviewees found that they could not provide access to physical materials, yet, creative problem solving and new workarounds emerged. One director spoke specifically about the challenges of mailing books, especially across borders, but emphasized their commitment to providing information stating, "we'll do whatever we can to get people the information." Many interviewees discussed their efforts to scan and digitize physical materials they already own and obtain materials through interlibrary loan, and another mentioned their efforts to collect reserve lists from faculty and purchase e-copies of those texts if available. One director emphasized the sense of urgency and the extent to which they expanded their digital offerings:

> So we doubled our database subscription almost right away within like a couple of weeks because we couldn't actually get books to students to finish their papers. There were a lot of assignments due right away at the end of March, beginning of April.

At another institution, another library director echoed this and reported that the divinity school students relied heavily on e-books to finish their assignments. They employed a demand-driven acquisitions model to meet patron needs. Indeed, other directors spoke of the importance of "targeted acquisitions" during this time, and their reliance on the pre-pandemic faculty-led collection development strategy, where faculty requests drove purchasing. As faculty began teaching in an online environment, there was a natural shift towards using electronic materials and library decision-making to prioritize purchasing e-books.

While collecting efforts in spring 2020 generally focused on urgent needs and electronic resources, library deans and directors also made important decisions about the future of their print collections. Several institutions described a transition away from print where they no longer collect print serials and how they moved from almost exclusively collecting in print to almost exclusively collecting in e-format. One director identified that they, too, had decided not to collect print serials, but this decision was made just prior to the pandemic. Another director acknowledged the shift to e-format as necessary but worried about the level of agency over licensed e-book content compared to their print holdings. They said:

> So I'm willing to [transition to e-books] because it's what needs to be done and I believe in serving patrons' needs, but we have a level of control over our print collection that we don't have over licensee book collection.

Even before the pandemic, some institutions were adding or expanding their online course offerings, including offering online-only degrees. For libraries, this meant acknowledging that digital resources were needed and purchasing more of these for the collection. Some interviewees ac-

knowledged that they already had administrative support for this increase in digital content and one director stated that "even the president of the college really believes that we should have most of our library digital."

Library deans and directors spoke about online resources beyond content normally found in libraries. We noted an increased use in Zoom, where some institutions were already using this video conferencing technology prior to the pandemic but relied more heavily on this platform when the pandemic hit. One director noted that "the upside has been, we were able much more easily to move into this world of pandemic because we already had a system in place, you know—the system that the entire world was using."

Networks of Support

Throughout the interviews, library directors shared the breadth of resources they consulted to inform their decisions. These information sources included networks of colleagues within and also external to their institutions.

Interviewees reported a large range of engagement with institutional stakeholders and their involvement in decision-making. One director was frustrated that they were not consulted at all and told by administrators that the library would close, yet others were either invited to join committees planning for safe operations or they were consulted about their institutions' plans for inviting students to return to campus. A director who was consulted over the course of planning stated that they "felt heard" by administrators who carefully considered their input. Others emphasized their relationships with faculty, especially older faculty faced with transitioning to online learning, and their close community of colleagues. Some described feeling supported by administrators and having warm relationships with their supervisors who were oftentimes administrators with a broader view of institutional priorities.

Library deans and directors strengthened relationships with known colleagues outside of their institutional networks, and they also expanded upon these networks. Several librarians connected with regional groups and described how other libraries in the same geographic area were coping with the pandemic. A few librarians also noted how technology had actually given greater access to people and shared that the pandemic is an opportunity to connect and network with more librarians online, stating "...something like this wouldn't have happened without the pandemic: this ability to interact." These networking opportunities were notably distinct from conferences in which colleagues may have in-depth conversations over the course of a few days but limited contact with one another throughout the rest of the year. One library director described the camaraderie that these virtual connections afforded, saying that it's "almost like we're more together because we're apart. I'm talking more with people that I would never have called or gone for coffee with, but I chat with them for half an hour or something." In addition to colleagues at other libraries, external resources that informed decision-making and provided support included library systems vendors, local physicians, local health departments, and government bodies.

Challenges and Opportunities

As part of the interview process, we asked each library leader what they saw as challenges and opportunities for the future of their libraries and theological librarianship.

CHALLENGES

In response to the interview question, one interviewee admitted, "I'm feeling a little bit glass half empty about some of this." This person was not alone. Challenges and concerns weighed heavily on the minds of interviewees, even when they also noted more positive opportunities. Several library deans and directors were concerned with the economic fallout of the pandemic, especially acknowledging that institutions were already vulnerable. Specifically, they named budget and staffing as two concerns, and one interviewee stated that colleagues at other institutions are concerned about these same issues. This interviewee was also concerned about the impact of refunds granted to students who left campus residential halls early in spring 2020. Another director at a seminary admitted that their institution has been "on the edge financially" and the decrease in the international student population may negatively impact finances further. The uncertainty around enrollment meant that at least one director was still waiting to receive their budget for the year. This delay impacted collection development to the extent that they were only spending money on what they "absolutely have to buy."

Other commonly expressed challenges centered around employment. Some of these concerns were rooted in trends prior to the pandemic where libraries experienced a number of budget cuts over the past five years, positions were eliminated through attrition and libraries relied heavily on work-study students instead of staff to maintain operations. Additionally, several libraries have interim leadership, which places a strain on effectively maintaining library services and overall functioning. These transitions and temporary roles lead to an overall lack of leadership capacity at a particularly sensitive time when it is important to be thinking about and communicating adjustments to services to patrons. Some of these interim leaders also experienced a shortage in their staff, resulting in increased responsibility beyond their leadership role and "wearing three or more hats" in order to accomplish work that needed to be done.

Many interviewees described affective impacts related to a loss in their "embodied community." Even while some library deans and directors have found a different or new sense of community through their connections with other colleagues, they are also grieving a loss of community, especially derived from campus. One interviewee recalled their institution's communal meals, which are now an impossibility during the pandemic. Interviewees also noted how, although faculty are teaching effectively online, there is still a loss of community in confining learning to a virtual space. This sentiment was echoed by a library director who found it challenging to lead a virtual library instruction session for new students. They shared how different and less engaged it felt to connect with students in a Zoom room compared to a physical room in person. Another interviewee described the work environment at their institution as "tight knit" and lamented that they no longer see colleagues in person, only via occasional Zoom meetings where there are no hallway conversations or chance encounters. One library director pondered the future of community at their institution and described its impact on their work:

> I really missed the foot traffic and in-person interactions, and I hope that those aren't gone for good, but have some fear that things have changed, at least semi-permanently, because I think those kinds of in-person interactions really fuel our sense of purpose and joy in our work.

Another director echoed the possible long-term impacts to the community and questioned if "it's going to be economically feasible to keep doing in-person education."

Issues of work/life balance presented challenges to library deans and directors who acknowledged concern both for themselves and for the team that they lead. One director commented that it has been hard to commit to a new routine, especially when their previous work schedule facilitated relationship building with colleagues and regular recreational activities. Another director in a library that was short-staffed with interim leadership felt overwhelmed and overworked. They expressed grave concern about the sustainability of their 70-hour work week, which included on-site work in addition to "always working from home," well beyond a typical workday. This director, handling multiple challenges inherent to the pandemic as well as those associated with ongoing library work, asserted, "If I get sick, this falls apart." While we noted fatigue facing library deans and directors, one director also discussed their concerns for their staff. This library director acknowledged the real burnout and emotional toll faced by librarians, which is exacerbated by the pandemic. They described the challenge of being in a service profession while also striving for work/life balance:

> Schools sometimes also can push and push, or there's such a focus on 'we want to serve our students' and what our students need, but we don't always give a lot of thought to what the staff need.

Opportunities

The pandemic represented an opportunity for positive change for some deans and directors. One interviewee explained that now is a great time for innovation and to "let some things go." Shifts in focus and perspective were identified by other interviewees, as well. Many librarians found it necessary to let go of on-site work when they were required to work from home. This led to an opportunity for more project work to be completed. Instead of processing physical books, one library director found themself working on lingering metadata projects stating, "It hasn't been hard to be productive from home." Another library director secured government funding for students to work on projects remotely. These projects, although not part of the typical workflow of onsite work, still benefit libraries, ultimately making information more accessible to patrons.

For some, the pandemic has provided greater access to their patrons. Others saw an opportunity to garner institutional support and investment, particularly for e-resources, and to renew or build partnerships with disciplinary faculty, especially with a focus on information literacy. Others approached their physically distanced circumstances with a growth mindset. In particular, one interviewee said that the pandemic provides an opportunity to learn to better serve people at a distance, which benefits students already enrolled in distance education as well as students who suddenly find themselves to be distance learners because of the pandemic. They summarized this sentiment by saying, "When you have almost everyone working at a distance, somehow, then it exposes how we can better help students at a distance." Another affirmed that this is an ideal time to grow communication with students and faculty. Even beyond the institutional setting, one librarian saw the pandemic as an opportunity to consider ways to share resources. They considered the value of partnering with other institutions through a consortium, stating that doing so "would make a huge, huge difference for theological libraries."

Value of Libraries

Many interviewees discussed the importance of communicating the value of the library to administrators, faculty, and students. The pandemic provides an opportunity for library deans and direc-

tors to connect with stakeholders and to demonstrate relevance. Yet, as in the pre-pandemic world, communicating the value of libraries can be challenging.

One interviewee expressed how challenging it can be for administrators to see the value of the library apart from its physical setting, stating that "they don't value [virtual work] in the same way as they value walking into the building and seeing students in the commons," and questioning, "so how do we communicate that value that is somewhat invisible to administrators?" Another interviewee posited a potential answer to this question while describing their own strategy for communicating their library's value. Describing how they can be persuasive and communicate with administrators on common ground, they "talk about the values that… theological librarians would have and how the alignment of those values with what the seminary wants to achieve are both really the same thing." Some interviewees found it challenging to communicate the value of electronic resources that are expensive and that historically suffer price inflation. Another interviewee expressed feeling "as if we fall between the cracks." Yet, even this interviewee described the pandemic as an opportunity to "make ourselves as indispensable as possible." Other opportunities to communicate value included sharing "what we're here for, and what we can do for the students." This interviewee stated that "communication is key," especially to convey new acquisitions and upcoming events.

A few librarians already felt that the value of their libraries was well known and appreciated by campus stakeholders, especially administrators. These librarians tended to express positive relationships with their institutional administrators, and they did not struggle to demonstrate value. One interviewee described their library as a special place in the heart of campus, both as a physical reality, but also an intangible sentiment. Another interviewee contrasted their library with others that exert a lot of effort in demonstrating value:

> I think that I'm in a really fortunate library. I think there are definitely a lot of academic libraries that feel they have to prove their value. And I've just inherited this. The value is just assumed. Everyone just thinks that what I do is so amazing and the services I provide the students is so incredible and I have information literacy instruction opportunities that my colleagues fight tooth and nail to get and I have my profs coming in and asking me.

CONCLUSION

Throughout 2020 and into early 2021, institutions of higher education and their employees and students have been forced to continuously readjust their plans due to COVID-19 outbreaks across the United States and Canada. This study was designed to investigate the impact of that pandemic on theological libraries and on individuals working in these libraries: to engage with librarians and academic administrators and to understand how these individuals and institutions have wrestled with the pandemic and its impact. Interview data indicate that theological libraries, already subject to the numerous challenges experienced by theological education, are addressing the complexities of the pandemic with innovation and a commitment to their patrons. Although specific approaches may vary across institutions, research suggests similar experiences and shared struggles. Even as theology libraries and librarians are often forced to work in relative degrees of isolation, separated from either their resources, their colleagues, their constituents—or all of these—they have much in common and are not alone in their struggles. Further, the aggregate of this data suggests that theological libraries and librarians are responding with resilience. Despite clear anxieties and

frustrations, library leaders have demonstrated a growing confidence in handling the uncertainties of an ever-evolving situation as they navigate changing circumstances and various degrees of institutional support.

As of this writing, the pandemic remains an ongoing concern, its long-term impacts not yet known. Although research has presented a snapshot of current pandemic stressors and how librarians and institutions are responding to these stressors, there is more to be learned. Many of the themes discussed by interviewees warrant further investigation. More research needs to be conducted on how the pandemic will affect theological libraries and the institutions that they serve. Additionally, questions posed by interviewees, such as how best to communicate the value of theological libraries and how to sustain a sense of community in dispersed working conditions, should be explored in depth. The long term impacts on the wellbeing of theological librarians and administrators also deserve additional attention. Incorporating questions about these issues into internal assessment cycles and research projects would be prudent, particularly in the case of examining methods of communicating the value of theological libraries in remote learning settings.

Grounded in comments from theological library deans and directors, remote meetings composed of networks of colleagues should be recognized as important, both as social supports to cope with challenges posed by the pandemic and as professional tools for developing potential strategies and best practices that can serve future library professionals. Similarly, professional organizations should address how library administrators can advocate for their libraries and their employees in light of the various exigencies created by the pandemic. Theological librarians must continue to document their experiences, and share and discuss shifting needs, emergent strategies, effective methods of providing access to materials, and consequences of changed workflows in order to support their institutions and each other in response to the extraordinary social, financial, educational, and personal challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic whose impact continues to unfold.

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APPENDIX A: SURVEY INSTRUMENT FOR LIBRARY DEANS OR DIRECTORS

Thank you for participating in this research study! The researchers are interested in learning about the impact of the pandemic on theological libraries throughout the United States and Canada.

Is your institution located in the United States or Canada? (Y/N; If No - end survey)

Are you a Dean or Director of your library? (Y/N; If No - end survey)

Pandemic Impacts on Theological Libraries

This first set of questions asks you to consider your institutional context and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on your library.

1) Thinking about your institutional context, what has been the biggest impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on your library? [open response]
2) How has your library been affected by the pandemic? (check all that apply)

    a) library facilities have been temporarily closed

    b) library facilities have been permanently closed

    c) some patron services have been temporarily suspended

    d) some patron services have been permanently decreased

    e) library employees are working from home

    f) library employees have been furloughed

    g) library employees have been laid off

    h) library funding has decreased

    i) my library is temporarily closed

    j) the library is permanently closed

    k) my institution is permanently closed

    l) other: _____

3) What is the impact to your institution beyond the library? (check all that apply)

    a) my institution has moved courses online

    b) my institution has closed its physical campus

    c) my institution has enacted social distancing protocols

    d) my institution has suspended some operations

    e) my institution has suspended all operations

    f) institution faculty and staff are working from home

    g) institution faculty and staff have been furloughed

    h) institution faculty and staff have been terminated

    i) unsure

    j) other: _____

4) Has the pandemic affected your library's hiring practices?

    a) yes

    b) no

5) If you answered 'yes' to the above question, please describe how your library's hiring practices have changed in response to the pandemic. (open response)

6) How informed have you felt when making decisions regarding services and staffing during the COVID-19 pandemic?

[Not informed at all <----------> Fully Informed]

7) How would you rate your library's administrative autonomy during the COVID-19 pandemic?

[Fully dependent on others' choices <--------> Completely autonomous]

8) How would you rate your confidence in the decisions made by yourself or other administrators in your institution regarding services and staffing during the COVID-19 pandemic?

[Not at all confident<--------> Fully confident]

9) Please add any reflections you might have about your institution's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. [open response]

Professional & Institutional Context

This final set of questions asks you to describe your professional and institutional context.

10) Where is your library located?

    a) United States of America
    b) Canada

11) Does your library serve an ATS-accredited institution?

    a) Yes
    b) No

12) Is your library an institutional member of Atla?

    a) Yes
    b) No

13) Please choose the answer which best describes your institution below:

    a) College/University
    b) Stand-alone

14) With which, if any, religious tradition is your institution affiliated:

    a) Protestant (Evangelical Tradition)
    b) Protestant (Mainline Tradition)
    c) Protestant (Historically Black Tradition)
    d) Roman Catholic
    e) Other Christian
    f) Unitarian Universalist
    g) Jewish
    h) Muslim
    i) Buddhist
    j) Hindu
    k) Other Faith: _____
    l) Not applicable

15) What is the total enrollment at your institution?

    a) Under 101
    b) 101-250
    c) 251-500
    d) 501-1,000
    e) Over 1,000

16) Which degrees are granted by your institution?

    a) Associates

    b) Bachelor's

    c) Master's (e.g. MA, MDiv, MTS, STM, MPhil)

    d) Advanced practical degrees (e.g. DMin)

    e) Advanced research & teaching degree (e.g. PhD, ThD)

17) Do you have any additional comments about your professional or institutional context that you would like to add? [open response]

18) We would like to ask a set of follow-up questions in Fall 2020. Would you consider responding to additional questions at that time?

    a) Yes

    b) No

19) [If yes to #18] Thank you for being willing to participate again in the future. Please provide your email address so that we may contact you in fall 2020:

_____

Thank you for completing this survey!

[Submit button]

If you would like to receive a summary of the survey results, please enter your email address below. Note that all email addresses will be kept separately from survey responses and they will not be used to identify your answers to our questions.

Email address: _____

Resources for supporting mental health during a pandemic:

For those in Canada: www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/mental-health.html

For those in the United States: www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/managing-stress-anxiety.html

APPENDIX B: LIBRARY DEAN OR DIRECTOR INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Thanks for speaking with us today. We have a few questions for you, some of which may be related to your responses from the survey we sent in the spring.

Context

The first set of questions talks about your libraries and institutional context.

1) Which best describes your institution: are you at a college or university, or a stand-alone seminary?
2) How many students are enrolled at your institution?
3) Please briefly describe the patrons who use your library (e.g., undergrads, grads, clergy, public, etc.)
4) Describe the relationship between your library and your institution, e.g., a small library within a large university library system.
5) Could you please describe your current work situation? (e.g., working from home, staffing the library a couple of days a week)
6) Please describe your relationship between your library and the institution's administration.

Follow up from themes that emerged from open-ended questions from the survey

These next questions ask about the impact of the pandemic on your library.

7) How has the response to COVID-19 changed at your library or institution between spring 2020 and this current term?
8) Could you describe the employment outlook in your library?
9) Could you tell us a bit more about your library's shift to a remote environment?

   a) How did you facilitate patron access to library resources? What does this look like now?
   b) What support were you able to provide to patrons in a remote environment? What does that look like now?

10) We had a few questions in the survey about confidence in administrative decision making. How do you feel about your administration's decision making process?

   a) If interviewee mentions government decision making, ask: How do you feel about governmental decision making?

11) As you think about the course of the pandemic and your role in theological librarianship, what is your biggest concern for your library?
12) As you think about the pandemic and your role in theological librarianship, what opportunities do you see for you or your library going forward?
13) What information sources inform your decision-making as a library administrator?
14) Anything else you would like to add?