

RDAP Post: COVID-19 edition

Attending a conference while the world starts to catch on fire

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I'm starting the draft of this blog post on March 31, 2020. RDAP seems so long ago, like a different era and one now unfamiliar. As I prepared to leave, COVID-19 was just starting to be taken seriously. This was before most conferences had been canceled or universities starting banning travel; all that would change by the end of the conference three days later. What emerged on the other side of RDAP is the ever changing world that we now live in.



The trip itself started off somewhat normal and fun. Since it's easier to fly into Albuquerque than Santa Fe, I had made arrangements to meet up with two medical library colleagues, Melissa and Beth. We rented a car and stopped by the Petroglyph National Monument on the way to Santa Fe. It was while on this excursion that my colleagues and I first began to discuss COVID-19. Naturally we were all curious about how each other's institutions was responding.



The next day the situation changed quickly when my university moved all courses to online and told the students to not return from spring break. At my library, we were trying to figure out what this might mean for our facilities and staff. One interesting aspect of our medical library profession is our diversity in scope and reporting structure. My two colleagues are medical librarians, but support different environments. For example, my library reports directly to the health system and supports the medical center, School of Medicine, and School of Nursing. Melissa's library reports to the university library, but also supports a medical center and professional schools. Beth's library reports to the School of Medicine, but does not support a medical center. The differences of perspectives at each of our states and institutions meant that we all had similar yet different experiences while living through the emerging crises.

Throughout the conference we attended the sessions listening to speakers, while awaiting official statements from our institutions. We were all called away at different points to go attend emergency meetings with our respective libraries and began to develop contingency plans for an unknown future. Beth's library moved quickly to a modified staffing model that reduced the exposure of staff in the physical library, but kept the library open for medical students. My library began to imagine how the medical center might need to use our space and how our staff might work from home. Melissa's library was hosting a conference the following week and she was dealing with a multitude of speaker cancellations (ultimately canceling the conference). She was also pulled into a 3 hour library system meeting to discuss the crises and impact on services.

What struck me about this whole experience was the value of professional relationships. Each of us was listening closely to federal and state governments, our host universities, and our organizational superiors. Throughout the conference we kept each other up to date as information emerged from our individual institutions. Each of us could then factor in our own organizational needs with what we were

learning from each other. For example, I was able to inform my library about what I was hearing from our peer libraries and discuss with library leaders how we may or may not want apply similar measures at UVA. It was a quickly moving crisis and I was thankful to hear how other libraries were responding, even if it wasn't applicable at my institution.



Although stressful, it helped to be going through this together and to know that we were not alone. Since then I've stayed connected with Melissa and Beth and we have continued share updates with each other. It is also nice to know that each of us and our families remain safe. At the end of the conference I was reminded that library colleagues are all around us. A data librarian I knew needed a ride to Santa Fe to catch a flight, so we added her to the shared experience on the way home. I doubt that life will ever go back to the way it was.

COVID-19 and its impact will forever alter our American story. With that knowledge I take comfort that I am not alone, that we will get through this together, and that I have amazing colleagues who will share the experience with me.