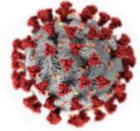*Keeping On:*
Maintaining Clear and Consistent Communication with Staff during a COVID-19 Work from Home Situation

THE SETUP: SUDDEN SHUTDOWN

After emerging in late 2019, the virus that causes COVID-19 appeared in the Unites States in January 2020. Miami University had to move rapidly to adapt to the health risks associated with the virus. On March 9, Governor DeWine (R-OH) declared a state of emergency. On the same date, the Miami University Senate authorized a possible transition from face-to-face to all-virtual instruction; at that point, it was believed that the transition would take place immediately before or after Miami's Spring Break, which was the last week of March. However, Miami had to end classes earlier than anticipated, on Friday March 13, and all Miami campuses subsequently closed. The libraries next opened for 8 hours/week of curbside delivery in mid-July and resumed summer hours on August 3.

A NEW NORMAL: STAFF LOCATIONS AND ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY

Library staff in the Libraries' Access & Borrow (A&B) Department were geographically dispersed over an area that includes Hamilton, Butler, Preble, Montgomery, and Warren Counties in Ohio and Franklin and Union Counties in Indiana.

The Libraries had begun the process of formatting what had formerly been circulating laptops for staff use. This process took longer than anticipated (and the closure came earlier than anticipated), so not all laptops were available until the day after closure. These were delivered to staff members by library administrators. One staff member lacked internet access or access to a smartphone.

A NEW NORMAL: STAFF PROJECTS

Staff from the technical services component of the A&B Department continued with projects from work, as processing of resources shifted to electronic resources or to physical items such as gifts which were brought home from the physical Library facilities. Circulation staff took on projects including: reviewing and adding to A&B Documentation; creating metadata for digitized items from Special Collections; and transcribing digital items from Special Collections.

KEEPING ON, KEEPING IN TOUCH

Working largely in isolation from staff (and in the early days of the epidemic, almost all contact outside of the household) created the need for multiple channels of communication.

PROJECT SUPERVISION

Many of the projects on which A&B Staff were working involved collaboration with staff from the Libraries' Special Collections Department. There were some face-to-face training sessions before the campus closed, but after that point, questions were monitored via email and telephone.

DOCUMENTATION OF WORK COMPLETED

Miami's hourly staff were not required to clock in because our Human Resources units entered a M-F 8 a.m. – 5 p.m. schedule into the University's time management system; however, because the Work-from-Home scenario was novel and unprecedented, the Libraries also tracked projects on which staff members were working in order to present a complete picture. Individual staff noted their projects and progress working on them in Google Docs, with some editing by supervisors to ensure consistency. Supervisors also contacted staff occasionally via telephone to monitor work progress, answer any questions, and in some cases, provide a social outlet for staff.

UNIT-WIDE MEETINGS

The schedule of meetings for the A&B Department, and various sub-sets of the department, continued, conducted using GoogleChat. For a considerable stretch of time, there was little news to be shared about the most prominent topic on the mind of staff members ("When will we return to face-to-face work?" "When will students return to campus"? "Will there be layoffs and/or furloughs?"). However, staff members were enthusiastic about the meetings, commenting that it was nice to see / hear from other people; also, while answers were in short supply for the first several months, the meetings at least provided a forum to ask questions, share concerns, and see that everyone was at the same level of knowledge about possible future developments. One staff member lacked a smartphone or home internet access, so we added her to meetings by phone.

SOCIAL INTERACTION

The libraries established a series of TLC (Tips, Laughs, and Connected Community) emails to share information such as:

- Photos of your workspace
- Your walk or at-home workout
- Your furry colleagues
- Tips on what has helped you adjust remotely
- Quotes, pictures, or anything that has made you laugh
- Do you have a hidden talent? Catch it on video!
- Anything that brightens your day

The Libraries also launched channels on Slack, which included recreational information, and in some units, sharing of work-related information.

LEARNINGS

- Having shared documentation of employee home numbers was a lifesaver!
- Employees value social contact, as well as the ability to interact with co-workers

- Multiple, overlapping forms of communication minimize chances that things will drop between the cracks
- Work-from-Home can be a dynamic period in which library staff are able to carry on with regular and specially-assigned projects

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