Come COVID or High Water: How Being an Online MLIS Student Prepared Me for Virtual Professional Participation During COVID-19

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MUSC Medical University of South Carolina
Changing What's Possible

Introduction

As a native Charlestonian, I am familiar with the disruptions to day-to-day activities that often come during hurricane season. The early days of the pandemic were reminiscent of that, with everyone rushing to stock up on supplies in preparation for weathering uncertain conditions. In fact, my graduate school experience began in exactly this way because we evacuated for Hurricane Dorian in September 2019. I distinctly remember attending the second week of my collection development class while staying with friends upstate, explaining the situation to my classmates in the Zoom chat.

The technology and communication skills I have developed as an online MLIS student helped me adapt to remote professional participation as necessitated by COVID-19. This will also help me navigate the future employment landscape, which will certainly look different when I graduate than it did when I began my degree. Here, I will share my experiences as well as my perspective on how to authentically connect with one another when we are physically distant.

Methods

- I am currently living in Charleston, SC while taking classes toward my MLIS in the online program at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC).
- I started my MLIS in the fall of 2019 and will be graduating in the spring of 2021.
- In August I attended the virtual MLA '20 conference
- I am working remotely as a student assistant at the Medical University of South Carolina Libraries.

Results

What I learned as an online library science student

Experience with technology

- At the beginning of spring semester 2020, UIUC began transitioning to using Zoom instead of Blackboard for synchronous online classes.
- Through my courses, I used Zoom to attend and schedule meetings, work in small groups in breakout rooms, brainstorm collaboratively using a whiteboard, and present both alone and with a partner.
- For example, I completed a group project in which we used the design thinking method to develop a plan for a public library to serve non-traditional undergraduate students. We met on Zoom regularly throughout the semester to complete the project and practice our presentation.

The value of virtual events

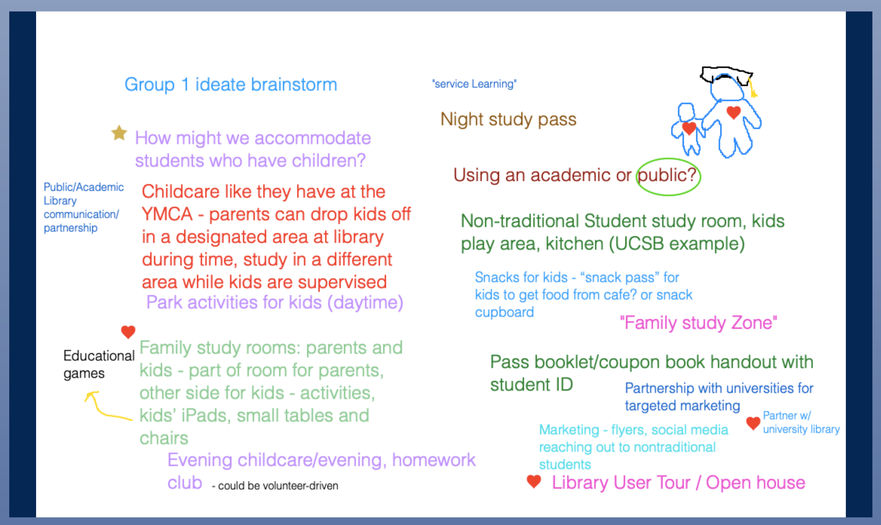
- Many of my fellow students appreciate the flexibility of online evening courses because it enables them to meet work and family obligations in addition to school.

MLA '20

- Because of my experience as an online student, I was comfortable using Zoom to attend the MLA social activities, such as the meet-and-greet following the Janet Doe Lecture.
- One way to make connections at a virtual conference is to follow up via email with people you interacted with for a more in-depth conversation or to learn more about their presentation.
- As a result of participating in MLA '20, I conducted six informational interviews, either with people I met during the meeting or those who were subsequently suggested as contacts.

Results of a group brainstorming session for an MLIS course project using a Zoom whiteboard.

Special thanks to Angela Arroyo, Ashley Batchelder, Courtney Malcolm, and Josiah Peralta for their work on the project *Design Thinking: Family Study Room*, including this brainstorming image.



Strategies for Connection

Based on my experiences as a student and at MLA '20, I noted strategies that helped me to feel more connected to my fellow students and get to know people in the field of health sciences librarianship.

✔ Put faces to names

- Always upload a profile picture if possible. Our brains are particularly attuned to recognizing faces, so including a photo of yourself can help you stand out and be more memorable.

✔ Do a little background reading

- As applicable, read a person's introduction forum post in a class or their biographical information in a meeting attendee directory.
- Also, fill out your own profile so that people can learn about you.
- This can help you start getting to know people you have never met in person as well as remember who you have met after an event.

✔ Show up

- Just as with in-person events, if you go to enough virtual events, you will start to see familiar faces.
- For example, in September I attended a workshop as part of the Critical Librarianship and Pedagogy Symposium. There, I said hello to another student from my program who I had met at a virtual student game night.

✔ Send a direct message

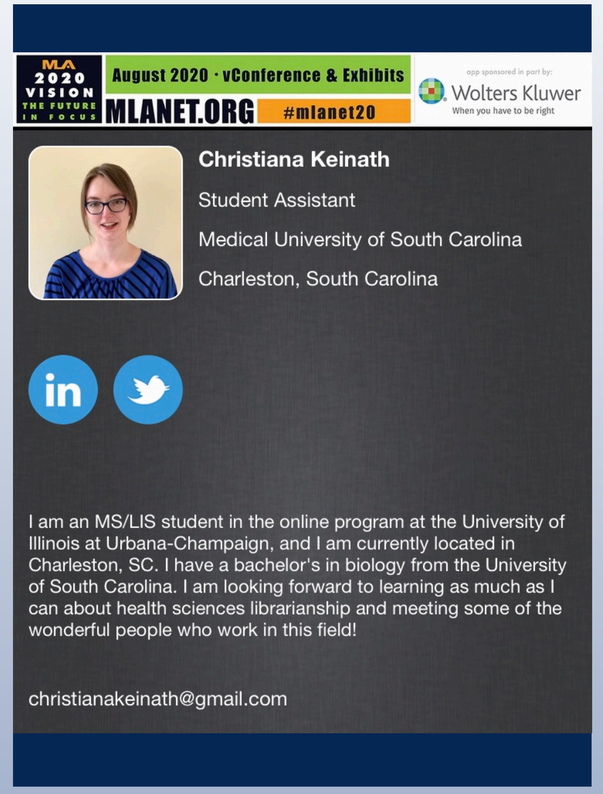
- If you see someone else in a group event, send them a direct message to say hello.
- This is one way to make up for the fact that we cannot greet the person sitting next to us or wave at someone we recognize across the room.

✔ Use the microphone

- When we are not interacting in person, any effort to make yourself more visible (or audible) affects how much people remember you.
- If you are able to and it is permitted by the event host, consider using the microphone to deliver your comment or question to give it more emphasis.

✔ Arrive early and don't skip small talk

- While arriving at online events early is not always possible, the small talk before my classes start has been very valuable in creating a sense of community among students who are spread out around the country. "How's the weather" is a much more interesting question when you are all experiencing something different.



Conference attendee profile from MLA '20, including social media links.

Conclusions

Now that I am working remotely as an assistant at an academic health sciences library, I will apply the skills I have learned to collaborate effectively with my coworkers in a virtual setting. In addition to becoming prepared for future remote work, as a result of my experiences I believe in the potential of online education to increase access to information, and I aim to learn how to provide high-quality virtual educational experiences. In order to continue building my skills in this area, during the spring 2021 semester, I will be taking UIUC's E-Learning course to learn about best practices in online pedagogy.

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