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Innovating During Times of Disruption: A Project Management Framework for Transforming a Student Research Symposium to Serve Virtual Communities during COVID-19

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Professional conferences and symposia are integral to scholarly communication for research communities. Symposia offer formal venues such as keynote talks and informal venues such as poster sessions, where researchers discuss preliminary findings and get immediate insights and feedback from colleagues in their field. More recently, the process of conducting and communicating research has become recognized as a high-impact practice in undergraduate education. As a result, many undergraduate students conduct original research as part of required coursework or directed independent research and present their findings via research poster presentations at their university's local research symposia.

In March 2020, due to growing concern about public health and safety from the COVID-19 pandemic, faculty across the United States were suddenly required to transition all of their face-to-face instruction to remote delivery. In-person events were either cancelled outright or converted to virtual events for the remainder of the semester.

At the University of South Florida's St. Petersburg campus, the Annual Student Research Symposium has been an in-person event for 16 years. When it became clear that an in-person symposium would not be possible due to the unexpected campus closure, the St. Petersburg campus Office of Research partnered with Nelson Poynter Memorial Library (NPML) to find a way to preserve this important educational milestone.

This paper documents a case study of one project team's experience with the process of transforming an in-person student research symposium to a virtual event during a time of rapid change and dramatic disruption. This project enabled the organizers to honour the original purpose of recognizing student research accomplishments, foster community engagement in a digital-only environment, and enhance the capabilities of the institutional digital archive. This case study uses a project planning framework taught at the Digital Humanities Summer Institute (DHSI) in Victoria, BC, to retrospectively assess and reflect on the ways that project management principles can be used to support innovation even during times of disruption.

Literature Review

Project Management for Academic Collaborations

Project management is a set of principles that can be used for effective management of outcome-focused work in a variety of organizational contexts (Knutson and Bitz).

Project planning principles as outlined by Lynne Siemens in her 2016 book chapter can be an effective framework for aligning goals among collaborators, who bring different institutional perspectives and disciplinary contexts together to implement new projects that enhance mission-critical university operations.

Principles of project management are widely employed in a variety of academic endeavours ranging in size and complexity. Brett D. Currier, Rafia Mirza, and Jeff Downing explore some of the differences among academic librarian skill sets related to digital humanities project management, highlighting the particular expertise and skills that librarians in various departments can bring to digital projects. Academic librarians in the technical services arena have used project management methodologies of various kinds to establish institutional repositories and digital collections (Abbott and Laskowski; Greene; Hartsell-Gundy et al.). Liaison librarians also use project management principles to effectively collaborate outside of the library with faculty and other partners, especially on digitally inflected projects (Burrell and Rowell; Ciccone and Hounslow; Lach and Pollard).

Project Management during Extreme Disruption

While the value of intentional project conceptualization, planning, and documentation has been established for projects varying in size and complexity, less has been written about how project management principles may be employed during major disruptions caused by natural disasters, or, as in this case study, an unprecedented global pandemic. In recent decades, natural disasters such as earthquakes and hurricanes have disrupted learning and damaged the physical infrastructure of academic communities across the globe from New Zealand (Wright and Wordsworth) to Louisiana (Sumner) and Puerto Rico (Weissman). Even in cases where physical infrastructure suffered extensive damage and university activity was forced to a complete halt for disaster recovery, the primary focus of faculty was to support students and help them resume their studies as quickly as possible.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, many universities in the US have taken drastic measures, including the following:

- Migration of all instructional activities to online delivery
- Mandatory work-from-home for faculty and staff in all academic units
- Physical closure or limited access to buildings, affecting all campus facilities
- Cancellation or conversion of in-person events and activities to virtual events

Unlike cases of hurricanes and earthquakes, the COVID-19 pandemic has left the physical and technological infrastructures of universities and colleges mostly intact. Faculty developer Rebecca Pope-Ruark reflects on how “[i]n our rush to remote instruction, we focused on the technological realities of that transition.” As with natural disasters, however, disparities in available technologies can create obstacles to establishing an effective remote work flow for many faculty, staff, and students. In a 2011 article, Siemens explores the benefits and trade-offs of digital and in-person collaboration tools that can be leveraged to foster collaboration and communication even in a virtual environment. Video conferencing has emerged as a key mode of communication for many shelter-in-place work processes. But this shift to video conferencing requires, at minimum, access to laptops or computers equipped with adequate microphones and cameras, stable internet service, and safe, quiet work areas. Furthermore, the stress of suddenly teaching or learning in a home environment while simultaneously dealing with isolation, loss of income, or caring for other family members who may be ill, unemployed, or out of school has contributed to increased anxiety and lowered productivity for faculty and students alike (Anderson; Gruber et al.).

Continuity of High-Impact Student Learning and Engagement in a Virtual World

Undergraduate research programs have become central to curricula at colleges and universities across the United States, in part due to research led by George Kuh demonstrating that undergraduate research is a high-impact practice that increases student success across diverse demographic backgrounds. At the University of South Florida (USF), undergraduate research is one of several high-impact practices that are considered essential to the undergraduate curriculum (University of South Florida). Additionally, colleges and universities have been adding undergraduate research to institutional repositories as a way to promote the quality research these students have been conducting. Libraries have worked with research offices and other academic units to add undergraduate research posters, presentations, honours theses, and creative works to digital repository collections (Barandiaran et al.; Boock and Zhang; Rozum et al.).

Working collaboratively to implement new, innovative academic programming to replace in-person campus events may seem impossible in the midst of a global pandemic; however, preserving academic continuity in order to ensure student success has been a central priority of USF. This message of strategic focus on student success,

innovation, and growth was set from the university leadership, as communicated by USF President Steve Currall: “Our mission is not to maintain the status quo, but to explore new frontiers. To grow. To adapt.” Because it is uncertain when the COVID-19 threat will abate, academic continuity planning and future reliance on technological tools that allow for social distancing are likely to continue at least through the 2021–2022 academic year (McMurtrie).

Along with examples of how project management principles can be leveraged to implement outcome-oriented collaborative academic projects, the literature offers models that can be applied to accomplish mission-critical goals in changing circumstances. In an edited volume, Colleen Boff and Catherine Cardwell apply John Kotter’s 8-step change framework, a management model widely applied in many industries, to a collection of case studies documenting major changes in 23 academic libraries. They found that rapid change in university settings is feasible when there is an established sense of urgency and a project team united in vision and comprising members with the appropriate institutional positions and technical abilities.

Case Study

Background & Setting

During the 2019–2020 academic year, the St. Petersburg campus of USF was an independently accredited master’s level educational institution, serving approximately 4,500 students studying in academic programs within three Colleges.¹ The Student Research Symposium was meant “to showcase the innovative research and creative work” that students have produced during the academic year with the guidance and support of faculty (University of South Florida).

The annual symposium was open to all undergraduate and graduate students on the St. Petersburg campus, and participation has steadily increased over the years. In 2019, 159 students submitted research posters resulting from coursework, directed individual study, honours theses, and lab research conducted during the fall and/or spring semesters. All submissions were accepted, provided they met the approval of the faculty mentor listed for the project. Faculty were invited to make recommendations to recognize exemplary posters.

The campus Office of Research planned and implemented the symposium in collaboration with other academic units on campus. For example, the Nelson Poynter Memorial Library maintained and updated a webpage providing poster presentation

resources for students, and the Honours Program provided staff to assist with event registration and supplemental funding to defray catering costs. The Office of Research maintained project documentation such as budgets, vendor contacts, and student participation data (John Johnson, personal communication, May 5, 2020).

For many years, the library has maintained the university's institutional repository, which was migrated to Bepress' Digital Commons platform in 2017 (University of South Florida). The Digital Commons comprises a number of digital collections dedicated to faculty and student scholarship, as well as community engagement projects such as the *Weekly Challenger*.² The library began hosting exemplary student research posters on the Digital Commons in 2019, when 15 student posters were added as a pilot project. Thus, the library and the Office of Research have an established collaborative relationship in terms of organizing the Student Research Symposium.

Project (Re)Definition

The original recurring project, implementing a successful Student Research Symposium, had an established purpose and scope with defined roles and responsibilities. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the project needed to change rapidly, re-imagined as a digital platform to serve a virtual community, while accomplishing the original purpose to the fullest extent possible.

Planning an institution-wide event is a long-term endeavour, and planning began in August 2019 for the 17th Annual USF St. Petersburg Student Research Symposium. The project team included the university staff and faculty who had participated on the project team for the previous year's symposium:

- Associate Director of Office of Research
- Office of Research staff member
- University staff member with institutional knowledge about the Symposium
- Science Librarian from the Research & Instruction Department

At the first planning meeting, the symposium schedule was established and possible improvements were discussed. One new addition was the use of online course modules in Canvas originally developed by the Office of Undergraduate Research on the Tampa campus and adapted for the St. Petersburg campus to streamline the submission process and improve guidance to students. The Office of Research staff used these course modules to coordinate all communication with student participants, including

poster submission. Two librarians, including author Burrell, participated in the development of these modules by serving on the planning team, as well as contributing content and resource guides to help students create high quality poster presentations. Development of the course modules and other resources as well as logistics planning for the in-person symposium continued through the fall and first part of the spring semester.

On March 2, 2020, the first two COVID-19 cases were reported in Florida, and USF leadership began regular communications with the university community about planning for academic continuity. On March 12, the Associate Director of Office of Research proposed cancelling the in-person event and suggested transitioning to a virtual event. After brainstorming via email, the team agreed to organize a virtual event, and the academic community (e.g., students and faculty) was notified of the change in event format and extended deadlines for submission on March 13, the day that students and faculty left campus for the week of spring break.

During the week of March 16, guidance to the entire university was updated daily. Most faculty, staff, and students were required to quickly transition to remote work. On March 17, the library closed its doors to the public. By the end of the week, students and all non-essential personnel were advised to not return to campus for an indefinite period of time.

The team met remotely via Microsoft Teams on March 30 to discuss the revised project scope and timeline, including consideration of potential digital platforms suitable to host a virtual symposium. The revised project scope included the following goals:

- Additional option for students to provide supplemental audio or video file of themselves describing their digital research poster
- Digital poster and video/audio galleries
- Promotion of the virtual event to the academic community
- Capability for community engagement with student posters through online comments

To implement these new goals, a modified project team was needed. The new team members now included:

- Associate Director of Office of Research
- Office of Research staff member
- Marketing & Communications staff member
- Three librarians from the Research & Instruction Department, including

- The Science Librarian
- The Scholarly Communications Librarian who manages the institutional repository's digital collections
- A librarian who handles marketing and social media for the library

Ultimately, the additional project components together with the compressed timeline resulted in the need for more support and technical expertise from additional librarians and staff. Because the Student Research Symposium aligns with university strategic goals and is a high-impact practice that is central to the students' educational experience, library leadership approved the allocation of additional personnel on an as-needed supportive basis. Consultation with the Systems Librarian was necessary to add and implement a new interactive comment component to the digital collection, and additional librarian help was needed to upload posters in one week. More on this will be detailed below.

Revised Project Planning & Schedule

Once the project scope was redefined and the team modified, the planning took on new urgency. To encourage students to continue their participation in the symposium despite the transition to remote instruction, the poster and supplemental audio/video submission deadlines were extended. However, the entire project needed to be implemented and completed by May 8, the end of the spring semester.

Resources to Support New Optional Student Presentations

The library's resource guide "Research Posters: Toolkit" was expanded to include tips for creating audio and video presentations (Nelson Poynter Memorial Library). This guide was available to students via the Canvas course, as well as the library website. The Canvas course developed earlier in the year included requests for all students to complete consent forms necessary for submission to the digital archive. This allowed the project team to expand the poster gallery in the archive to include all student submissions.

Digital Platform

The Scholarly Communications Librarian led the evaluation of digital platforms, assessing what other institutions were using and considering the tools immediately available on the university campus as well as external social media platforms. Criteria for platforms included multiple factors related to team control and security, engagement, and archiving, but the technical aspects of this project are outside the

scope of this paper. Ultimately, the USF St. Petersburg campus Digital Archive was chosen to be the platform for the active event as well as the final archive. Due the success of the 2019 pilot project, it was a natural next step for the archive to host the complete 2020 collection of Student Research Symposium posters. Each poster would have a page with metadata, including information about the student and their project.

However, the posters themselves could not emulate the in-person experience students would have had if the research symposium had occurred in person as planned. During a typical in-person symposium, students explain their project to attendees as they walk through and view the displays. In fact, the act of communicating their research beyond the creation of a research poster is an integral part of what makes participating in a research symposium a high-impact practice. Therefore, the students were invited to submit a video or audio recording to complement their poster, discussing their project as if they were presenting to a symposium attendee.

Because of the compressed timeline, a formal work breakdown structure was not established during the planning stage. However, as the tasks in the project were laid out in more detail, it was determined that assistance would be needed in order to get the anticipated number of student projects and associated files and metadata downloaded from Canvas, where the files were initially submitted, and uploaded to the repository on time.

Original & Revised Schedule

The project planning originally began in August 2019 and was scheduled to close at the in-person event on April 16, 2020. Student submission deadlines were extended, in part to acknowledge the disruption that the students were likely experiencing during their transition to remote learning. Some instructors no longer required their students to participate. Therefore, the anticipated student submission and participation rate was expected to decline from previous years. Figure 1 shows the original student submission and event dates, along with the compressed timeline implemented for the re-envisioned digital project.

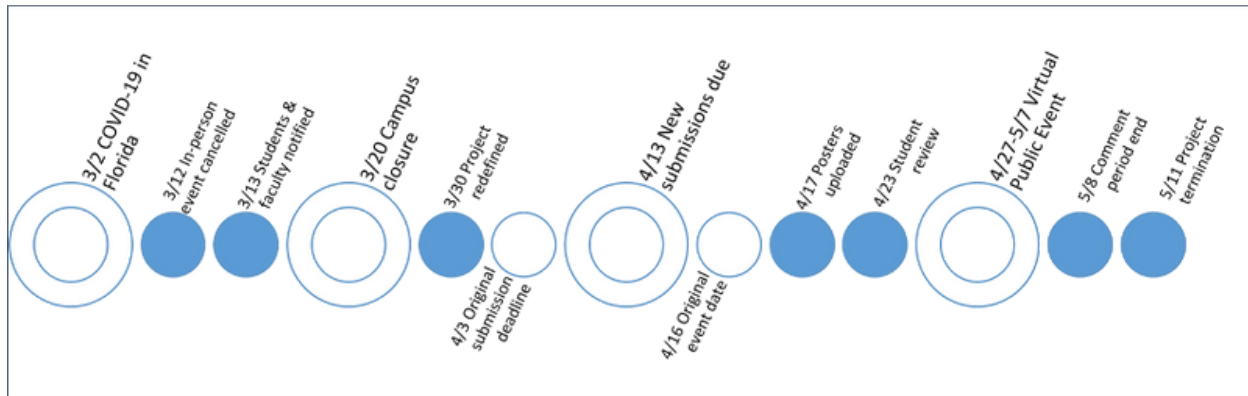


Figure 1: Highlights of the original and revised schedule

Project Implementation & Termination

The project was successfully implemented and terminated within the abbreviated timeframe. Completing the necessary implementation tasks entailed creativity and a flexible workflow in ensuring consistent quality and solving technical challenges. Timely dissemination of student promotional materials and open lines of communication among team members also proved to be essential.

Quality Assurance

Because the team was unsure what kind of technology students had available, the submission requirements for the audio and video files did not specify file types. As a result, some audio files had no video associated with them, whereas other audio files were recorded with accompanying visual slides. This resulted in the collection having an uneven appearance. As a way to provide a more consistent look and feel in the gallery pages, thumbnail images of each poster were created and associated with audio-only files.

As team members sorted through student submissions to upload abstracts, posters, presentations, and consent forms, they noticed some missing files. Some students had not submitted abstracts or consent forms, and those projects could not be published in the digital collection. As the Office of Research coordinated the Canvas course, they determined which students were missing parts of their projects and contacted each of the students. As the missing pieces were submitted, the library team members uploaded the additional files and updated the digital collection to reflect the changes.

Another issue arose because some students had multiple poster submissions that were not transferred properly because of a technical issue with Canvas. While learning

management systems such as Canvas are efficient in collecting many types of data and files, it can be extremely challenging to find and export data efficiently. To accommodate multiple poster submissions from a small subset of students, manual cross-checking and assignment retrieval was necessary. To ensure student privacy, all file names and metadata were cross-referenced and updated to align with name preferences as reflected on the posters themselves, rather than relying on automated system information.

Change Requests

During a meeting to discuss the development of the digital poster gallery, the Office of Research asked if a chat function, or a way for virtual attendees to ask the students questions about their projects, could be implemented. Although Digital Commons, the Bepress platform hosting the repository, does not have an integrated commenting function, the Digital Commons representative suggested some possible third-party platforms. Thanks to the goodwill and expertise of the Systems Librarian, several commenting platforms were evaluated. A WordPress plugin called IntenseDebate was chosen to enable faculty and student interaction, such as posting comments, questions, and responses, within each individual poster record. Throughout the two-week period of the virtual research symposium, members of the committee monitored a group email inbox that received email notifications for new comments. As comments were posted, committee members monitored them to check for inappropriate or spam messages that were then removed. The 55 posters received about 25 comments from faculty members and students, ranging from congratulatory comments to more in-depth interactions about the research.

Promotion & Marketing

As the technical aspects of the project were implemented, the project team communicated with the student participants as well as the broader faculty community. The Office of Research staff provided multiple schedule and informational updates to the student participants. Communications & Marketing staff created flyers and announcements that were disseminated via campus-wide email distribution lists as well as through the weekly e-mail announcement about campus activities from the Regional Chancellor. The librarian in charge of marketing for the library disseminated these materials on the library website and social media channels in a complementary campaign. During this timeframe, the Regional Chancellor also created a video of introductory remarks that was placed on the front page of the digital collection website.

A Virtual Symposium

The 17th Annual USF St. Petersburg Virtual Student Research Symposium was held from April 27–May 8, with a digital gallery displaying 55 posters representing original research conducted on many diverse topics (University of South Florida St. Petersburg campus). Table 1 provides key points of comparison between the 2019 in-person event and the 2020 virtual symposium. Student participation declined in 2020, which was expected under the circumstances, but engagement with the digital poster collection increased, which increases the reach and impact of student research. Notably, the number of views of the posters in the 2019 symposium collection also spiked during April 2020.

Comparing 2019 with 2020 download metrics for each year’s symposium collection for approximately one month after each collection was published yielded interesting results. 84 PDFs were downloaded from the 2019 Student Research Symposium collection for the period of May 19 to June 30, 2019. For the period of April 15 to May 12, 2020, 482 poster PDFs and supplemental files were downloaded from the 2020 Student Research Symposium collection. For that same period, the 2020 collection statistics reflected 322 media streams for audio or video files. Metadata associated with file downloads included general geographic information. While that data was not specifically analyzed, metrics showed downloads from across the globe, indicating that the audience was broader than local community members who would have normally attended the in-person event.

Symposium Components	2019	2020
Event Type	In-person	Virtual
Introductory remarks by Regional Chancellor	In-person	Video
Event Duration	3 hours	2 weeks
Presentation format	In-person	Video/audio with text comments
Signed consent forms required	Yes	Yes
Posters submitted	159	55

Digital posters added to repository (PDF file)	15	55
Digital poster downloads - all time	571*	482**
Digital audio/video files submitted	0	43

*From May 19, 2019 to May 12, 2020

** From April 15 to May 12, 2020, including posters and supplemental files

Table 1: Overview of symposium components in 2019 and 2020

Project Termination

As with many library and archival projects, the project termination had multiple phases (Currier et al.). The first key termination date was May 8, the end date of the event, at which point the commenting features were disabled in order to remove the need for monitoring the individual poster pages. The second termination was in early summer, after completion of post-implementation tasks such as the distribution of poster awards and other technical tasks, and a final project team debrief meeting. Once these tasks were completed, the project reached its second termination date. Because the digital archive hosts collections permanently, this new collection will join the other permanent collections of the Digital Archive. Therefore, a final termination date is not applicable.

Discussion

This case study explores the implications when applying project management principles to re-envision recurring activities as new projects in order to accomplish strategic goals in cases of extreme disruptions to the academic community.

Project Redefinition

The global COVID-19 pandemic and the need to ensure the health and safety of students and faculty while preserving academic continuity was a focus of universities across the US. This event established a shared sense of urgency among the Research Symposium planning team (Boff and Cardwell). Although the student submission deadlines and the event start date were extended slightly, the project completion date aligned with the end of the semester and could not be modified. Time was of the

essence. Discussion at the project redefinition meeting covered the problem statement, the redefined scope of the project, completion criteria, assumptions, impact, and risks. The team agreed that it would be a challenge to meet the greatly compressed timeline, and considered the possibility of cancelling altogether. After discussion among the team, the group also agreed that it was a worthy goal, worth the risk of failing.

As mentioned in the Project (Re)Definition section of this case study, the initial decision to transition the event to a virtual venue occurred on March 12, before the reports of skyrocketing deaths in major metropolitan areas and well before the full extent of the disruption, tragedy, and sustained impacts of the pandemic were felt across the country and in Florida. The project team acknowledges that going forward with the project under the existing conditions may have precluded some students from participating, potentially exacerbating inequities faced by students who may have been responsible for caregiving of family members or other issues. At the same time, anecdotal reports of students feeling isolated from faculty and peers were also of concern, and preliminary reports of student experiences during 2020 have shown that students and faculty have struggled with their mental health and feelings of alienation as a result of the shift to remote work (Anderson; Burke; Gruber). These concerns contributed to the decision to provide a virtual community interaction that centred on recognition of a core educational activity--research--that students completed earlier in the spring or previous fall semesters.

While the recurring, annual, in-person student research symposium would not fit the definition of a project, the redefined virtual student research symposium was a “relatively new or unknown undertaking” in that an active collection with comment functionality had never been implemented on the library archival platform (Siemens, 2016, 345). Further, the redefined project had specific start and end dates and entailed “coordination of skills, tasks, [...] and cross organizational boundaries” and required “innovation, flexibility, collaboration, communication, negotiation, [and] planning” (345). However, formal project start documentation was not drafted, and planning began before all of the resource requirements (e.g., additional staff hours with various specific skills sets) were known. Carrier agrees that, in digital projects, “[i]t can be difficult to identify all important stakeholders at the origination of the project” (282). Further, like collaborative digital scholarship projects, the “scope and nature of a project may need refinement,” and this may require additional expertise and time (282). With full agreement among all stakeholders as to the overarching purpose and scope of the project, the second necessary ingredient of a shared vision and strategy

was set in place to propel the team forward towards the project goal (Boff and Cardwell).

Communication & Collaboration

A reimagining of the core and ad-hoc members of the planning team needed to occur in order to include personnel with the appropriate organizational and technical skills (Boff and Cardwell). Because the Science Librarian was continuing on the project team from the prior year, they initiated the project redefinition meeting with the primary stakeholders and then played the role of de facto library contact as the project team grew to include additional librarians and library staff members. As Currier says, “Public Service Librarians are good at the initial phases of project planning, as helping people identify and scope a goal is very similar to how they complete reference interviews” (274).

The modified project team met via video conferencing two to three times throughout the planning and implementation of the project; email was used as well, but chat and one-on-one calls were used rarely. The authors agree with Siemens’ 2011 assessment that face-to-face meetings are “particularly important at the beginning stages of a project [...] where ambiguity and potential conflict are greatest” (6). However, all stakeholders were able to join video conference meetings via Microsoft Teams, which helped mitigate the inability of everyone to meet in person.

Ensuring that team members have the necessary technical expertise is critical to effectively implement digital projects. The Scholarly Communications Librarian played a key role on the new project team. As technical lead, they consulted with external vendors and their network of other institutional repository managers, and led the creation, uploading, and quality assurance of the digital collection. Additionally, a sub-team of librarians and staff met separately to handle some of the technical issues once the planning and implementation phases of the project were underway. Project members within the library used a wide variety of formal and informal communications to collaborate on this project, often taking cues from one another regarding preferred methods of communication. Email and chat were used for resolving questions quickly. Video conferencing was helpful to share screens, but also to make more personal, visual connections, such as introductions to family members, pets, and even gardens.

Previous collaboration among this group made it easier to maintain positive relationships while communicating virtually, despite the stress and uncertainty. All meetings were virtual, but as Siemens notes, “[a] greater use of digital tools may be

possible on a research project in which participants have an extensive history of collaborating with each other” (2011). The long-established relationships and strong culture of collaboration carried the team through the project despite the unexpected shift to exclusively virtual communications including video meetings, email, and chat.

Flexibility & Adaptability

Perhaps the biggest challenge of the project was the compressed timeline, which resulted in overlapping of the planning and implementation phases of the project and the need for allocation of additional personnel to be added to the project team. Siemens’ advice to “take a practical approach and accept that problems will happen” is reassuring (2016, 348). Library administration supported the allocation of additional personnel to the project in part because the Student Research Symposium is an integral part of students’ educational experiences. The shift in allocation of work was also feasible because it could be completed remotely. Other tasks that librarians might normally be engaged with during this time of the semester, such as a major weeding project, in-person library tours, and orientations and events were cancelled or modified to accommodate changing work structures. While virtual library chat requests increased during this time, drop-in research consultations and requests for in-person instruction declined.

On technical issues, the librarians learned to be flexible and adapt as best they could. For example, items in the collection initially looked visually unappealing, with the records displaying only the metadata and link for downloading posters. Recognizing that a Research Symposium is a visual celebration of student research, the team created thumbnail images of the posters that could be displayed on each summary page. The records now included a prominent display of the posters or embedded video, along with the metadata and document links.

Another challenge of the project was the snowball effect, or scope creep. Boff and Cardwell also emphasize scope creep, noting that “the danger of scope creep on projects involving technology is evident” (2020). For this project, the original goal of hosting the student work products in the Digital Archive aligns with the library’s strategic goal of increasing the impact and reach of university scholarship. The challenge was in finding a digital solution that would expand the capabilities of the archival platform, which is inherently intended to be a static resource, to facilitate active interaction. Creating active engagement to closely approximate an in-person symposium was not built into the Digital Commons platform. However, the pilot collection developed in 2019 provided a stable technical foundation, and the ability to

draw on the expertise of librarian colleagues inside the organization as well as the vendor and network of institutional repository managers allowed the team to quickly identify, test, and implement a digital solution, the commenting feature. As a result, the virtual event was that much richer with active student-audience engagement.

Future Considerations

At the time of writing this and as the project team wraps up final details, we have only begun the process of reflecting on our work and determining future directions. As of May 2020, the state of Florida relaxed its stay-at-home directives; however, our academic community continued to work hard in planning high quality online courses for the summer semester and beyond (McMurtrie), keeping a laser focus on ensuring student safety and a high-quality educational experience.

Steve Mintz asks, “How can campuses provide some semblance of the campus experience in the age of social distancing?” Because opportunities for research and presentation help students at all levels “develop the planning, analytical and communication skills that higher education values,” it is important that our cross-campus project team build on this year’s experiment and continue innovating and improving the virtual symposium.

To that end, the team recommends that an instructional designer be added to the Research Symposium planning team if the learning management system is used for any component of the event. This would help to ensure smooth transfer of files from the learning management system to the archive platform. This year, because the pandemic required the rapid transition of face-to-face courses to remote instruction, the university instructional designers were otherwise critically engaged and not able to join the revised project team. In addition, the team recommends requiring that student submissions use standard video and presentation file formats and ensuring that submission requirements specify technology that is accessible to all students. The team provided flexible guidelines and did not require particular file formats because of the interest in encouraging all interested students and uncertainty about which technologies students may have access to. Identifying particular technologies that are available to all students and providing the requisite support and training would be ideal in future events.

Participation in the 2020 student research symposium was lower than in previous years. In part, this allowed the project scope to expand. Additional conversations will clarify how to improve workflows in order to scale up to the extent of a “normal” year

of participation, which assumes that the number of poster submissions could triple. Other future initiatives might include:

- Continuing the virtual component of the event in order to expand participation to online-only faculty and students. If an online presentation venue is available, faculty who teach online courses may want to redesign courses, integrating project-based assignments that culminate in symposium posters and presentations.
- Increasing opportunities for students to develop born-digital research products, or multimedia visualizations and presentations to enhance their research posters, modelling researcher practices of creating born-digital research products and submitting datasets and interactive visualizations to enhance peer-reviewed publications.
- Increasing live virtual events to showcase student research and creative activities. This project did not tackle that type of virtual engagement. However, many graduation ceremonies across the country were held virtually, with Facebook watch parties, and this is an area that can capitalize on the project team's collaboration with the Marketing & Communication Department.

As always, academic libraries and the academy more generally must constantly make decisions about how to deploy scarce resources, and adding any one of the above initiatives to the university's permanent portfolio of activities will require trade-offs of time, expertise, and budget resources.

Conclusion

This case study uses a project management framework to retrospectively assess the transformation of an in-person student research symposium into an interactive digital event and archival collection that served a virtual community. The purpose of the project was to recognize and disseminate university student original research, a high-impact student success practice that is core to the university's curriculum and strategic mission. Although the project team experienced some challenges related to the quickly evolving response to the pandemic, the project was largely successful, in part due to the project team's culture of collaboration, adaptability, strategic alignment, and overall perseverance toward a common goal.

Ultimately, regardless of how long the pandemic may require social distancing and remote workflows, the lessons learned from our virtual Student Research Symposium will be used to improve and augment future symposia. Future considerations include expanding the range of allowable student presentations, expanding our core team to

include an instructional designer, and finding the balance in staff and resources necessary to scale the project up to support a greater number of student participants. We look forward to these challenges, and a project management approach can provide a framework to propel us forward.

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Footnotes

1. As of July 1, 2020, the University of South Florida officially began operating under a single accreditation that encompasses the Tampa, St. Petersburg, and Sarasota-Manatee campuses. ↵
2. The *Weekly Challenger* newspaper has documented the history of the African American community of St. Petersburg, Florida, US, since its establishment in 1967 (<https://theweeklychallenger.com>); the digital archives of this publication are hosted by Nelson Poynter Memorial Library at University of South Florida (<https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/challenger/>). ↵