

The Pandemic as Chrysalis

*How the Library at Princeton Theological Seminary
Emerged with a New Identity*

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Jorge Luis Borges, Argentinian polymath and eventual director of the National Public Library of Argentina, is credited with saying, “I have always imagined that Paradise will be a kind of library.” As librarians, we hope that our libraries will be a kind of paradise for our patrons; however, during the pandemic, our experience at Princeton Theological Seminary, with a print-heavy library collection serving a residential community, seemed less than paradisiacal.

The pandemic period of 2020-2022 radically transformed the Library at Princeton Theological Seminary (PTS). Prior to the pandemic, Princeton Theological Seminary Library, as it was then known, functioned as a traditional theological library, with a large, legacy print collection designed primarily to serve the needs of a residential community of approximately 320 students and 40 faculty at the more than 200-year-old institution located in Princeton,

New Jersey. The Library is housed in an inspiringly beautiful building. It is a heavily used resource, and is comprised of approximately 2.25 million print and electronic books and journals in its general collections, a digital library (called “Theological Commons”) of more than 150,000 resources, and a robust Special Collections and Archives department of rare books, manuscripts, archives, cuneiform tablets, art, artifacts, and digital archival collections. After successfully enduring the most restrictive aspects of the pandemic, the Library re-emerged with a new identity, most conspicuously seen in its new name: the Theodore Sedgwick Wright Library.

This multi-year period brought innumerable changes and opportunities for growth, which is the subject of this chapter. Many of these changes were already underway well before the pandemic, but the disruption accelerated them. The change can be grouped into three broad overlapping areas: 1) the Library’s community role, 2) collections and services, and 3) staffing.¹

This chapter will provide a critical reflection on the Library’s local experience taking on a new identity in the midst of a pandemic, sharing lessons learned and new traditions established that may be of interest to other libraries reflecting on their community role, collections and services, and staffing.

The Library’s Community Identity

Throughout the pandemic the Library operated within the context of the Seminary’s mandates, as well as its research and curricular needs. In 2020, the Seminary shut down its physical campus and transitioned to online education, working from home, stringent health care guidelines, reduced budgets, cross-campus coordination, and an affirmation of the Library as an essential service, both in its physical and virtual forms. Throughout, the Library’s role as a research and community site was continually defined and redefined in complex conversations with the administration. The result was a continual expansion of service in the most inclusive manner possible, all the while keeping the staff safe.

The Library Building as Campus Hub

The new library building was completed in 2013, replacing the 1956 Speer Library building after it proved inadequate for serving future goals. The modern, light-filled new building with ample public spaces gave the Library an enhanced profile in the life of the Seminary. For almost ten years, and during the first year of the pandemic, the new building would simply be called Princeton Theological Seminary Library.

As the newest and largest building on campus, bustling with people and activity, the Library had been central to campus life and learning, and it even served as the temporary site of almost every class for an academic year while the main classroom building on campus was being renovated. The Library served myriad purposes: people came to the Library to study, research, take seminars, consult with writing tutors, use digital labs, consult with experts, attend events, visit the cafe, find a quiet place for reflection, or just catch up with friends. In addition to serving as a campus resource, the Library was highly used by the local community, neighboring university students, and visiting scholars from across the globe.

The year 2020 was a remarkable year. The Seminary was in the midst of multi-faceted campus planning to align its vision and commitment to the future as a covenant community, where residential life and study were at the forefront. Phased long-term change to the campus footprint was discussed to support the vision. The Library was a participant in these conversations and was already well-positioned as the heart of campus.

Safety Protocols and Seminary Access

In early 2020 the Seminary administration watched closely as the global crisis began to unfold and a highly contagious and deadly virus spread to the United States. A campus emergency operation team was mobilized initially to plan for a two-week transition to off-campus work, life, and study. Ultimately, this short-term transition was followed by a longer-term campus closure along with a move to long-term remote work and study. It was assumed that planning would be for the short term to give time for the virus threat to be understood and managed. A defining characteristic of the Seminary

response was one of community, well-being, and care. Regular campus communications were distributed by the President's Office and then supplemented by personal messages from the president, which continued throughout the pandemic. Chapel services went virtual and people could join remotely to worship together. The Seminary steadfastly maintained a commitment to retaining staff, despite the economic challenges that the pandemic response produced.

As the ad-hoc emergency operations team first met, it strategized planning in tiers of response. One early point of reference for its work was the World Health Organization's (WHO) document on *Getting Your Workplace Ready for COVID-19*. The team quickly drafted a prevention and response plan, including input by each campus department, which was built into the campus plan by a small working group with the larger ad-hoc group offering feedback. A core response team included the standing members of the campus group charged with ongoing emergency operations planning plus the Student Life and Academic Affairs departments. The plan was meant to be integrated with the campus emergency operations plan and address a future pandemic plan, not merely the current threat. This planning effort addressed three tiers:

- Tier I: This tier represented the prevention stage, where non-anxious communication and taking steps to hinder the spread of the virus were considered of paramount importance.
- Tier II: This tier considered what would happen if there were suspected or confirmed cases in the tri-state area impacting travel, gatherings, operations, etc.
- Tier III: This tier considered what would happen if there were suspected or confirmed cases within the local campus community.

For each of these tiers, department heads were tasked to think about: 1) what needs to be communicated to whom and by when? 2) What needs to be done, changed or halted, and until when? And 3) how will tier scenarios impact the community and departmental constituents?

At the Tier I stage in March 2020, communication was of paramount importance. It was necessary to quickly produce basic guidelines about processes such as handwashing and preparation (e.g., food, supplies, medication, basic needs). Communication audiences were broad and included students, family, colleagues, and the general public. Recognizing that the community was anxious, it was

noted that rapid communication about preventative measurements and safety protocols were needed. The campus facilities team set up hand sanitizing stations throughout the campus. Additional preventative measures included departments taking responsibility for wiping down all surfaces in their areas. The emergency team also debated whether to stop travel at this point. They discussed trips in progress and planned, as well as the timeframe for decision-making, risk assessment, and cost assessment. International travel was of particular concern. The Library instituted limited building access on March 12, 2020. Library doors were locked and only campus community members (students, faculty, and staff) could gain access via their campus ID cards. For a library that prides itself on open access to everyone, it was a difficult decision to implement this limited access.

On the afternoon of March 20, 2020, as the Library was closing for what was then thought to be two weeks, Library leadership sent a message of gratitude to the Library staff acknowledging that they had risen to the many challenges that came their way during this quickly planned and implemented transition. Library staff helped prepare to move the Library's service operations to an online environment so that the PTS community could continue their research and study endeavors. Library staff were creative in developing projects and approaches to work from home while maintaining communication with each other. With each of the ever-extending work-from-home developments, staff adapted remarkably well and used some of this time for extended training and collaboration. Leadership acknowledged that it was a challenging time and committed to move forward with support for each other as a community. Staff were encouraged to take time to rest and recharge.

The Information Technology (IT) department was an early and consistent key campus partner for the Library during the pandemic. Thanks to IT's quick action in mobilizing all available devices, staff went home with loaner laptops, which included VPN access to connect to desktops remotely for work and virtual meetings.

As the entire campus shut down, permission had to be secured from campus administration any time staff needed to return to campus to get to necessary resources to perform their work. Public service staff returned most frequently on a prescribed schedule to collect resources needed for reference and curbside book pickup. The cataloging team came to campus every three to four weeks to pick up new cataloging work. Mail deliveries for print collections had to be

curtailed at this time, which led to assorted book delivery issues and backlogs.

Throughout the pandemic, the Library was in touch with national organizations about emerging research and best practices on myriad pandemic matters. An early global concern involved safe handling of book surfaces as possible virus carriers, recognizing in those early days that there was not a full understanding of transmission. The Library administration relied on research developments from the Reopening Archives, Libraries, and Museums (REALM) project funded and conducted by OCLC, the Institute of Museum and Library Services, and Battelle. A disaster listserv established by the National Institutes for Health for libraries (“Disaster Information Outreach by Librarians”) was a regular source of information, as were other national library listservs (e.g., Atlantis, a list for religious studies and theological librarians and librarians of the American Library Association). The New Jersey State Library facilitated webinars with New Jersey state government at various times of pandemic developments and change, especially in relation to library openings, safety, public service, and available funding resources for libraries and their communities. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* was a regular source of information, including publications and webinars on conversations with campus and library leaders throughout the United States regarding pandemic practices, challenges, and resulting future changes (Diep 2020).

At the Tier II stage in late spring 2020, the Academic Affairs department, which includes the Library, quickly prepared to transition operations online to the web meeting software WebEx and course management system Brightspace. Training for students, faculty, and staff on these platforms and virtual academic activity commenced as soon as possible. The IT department quickly mobilized to make tools available to the community for the transition to offsite activity. The Library was positioned well to support the community through electronic collection resources and virtual reference and web chat. Library leaders re-considered the need to restrict the Library building to only the PTS community at this stage.

Also during Tier II in spring 2020, the Library extended collection item checkout dates as a practical measure. As long as everyone was offsite and items were not recalled for use, patrons could keep their books. The Library enlisted the assistance of Security to safely phase students into the building in a socially distanced manner so that students could address their collection and research needs. Graduating

master's degree students who remained on campus had an opportunity to come into the building and return books while doctoral students had the opportunity to schedule time in their dedicated study suite to retrieve items needed for longer-term study.

Despite the pressing circumstances and uncertainty, the Library was completely closed (building and services) for a relatively brief period of two months. In June 2020, the front parts of the library building—the cafe, open spaces, meeting rooms separated from library collections by a security gate—were converted to socially distanced quiet study spaces that ensured six-foot distances between all individuals. This action provided those students who remained in Princeton a place to retreat for quiet study. A scanner and copier were placed in this space as well to meet the self-serve needs of both faculty and students.

In the summer of 2020, the Library introduced curbside book pickup to its faculty, students, and staff. The Security team became an integral and valued partner in the Library's curbside book pickup service to augment available library staffing. Service was introduced conservatively first to faculty and then scaled up to students as the Library tweaked processes, allowing for an increase in capabilities and response to a higher volume of requests. By thinking through processes carefully and developing clear plans of action, the Library was able to add service capacity in a consistent manner without having to scale back any offered service throughout the pandemic.

As an open campus, with an international community, it was not possible to know at that time whether someone who had the virus might come to campus or use the Library. The Library needed to determine when to put restrictive access into place, noting that the building was used not only by students but also by contractors, temp agencies, external cleaning crew, and Library partners such as the on-site Internet Archive Regional Scanning Center, located in the lower level of the building. We considered that collections arrived from all over the world—from approval plans, standing orders, and blanket orders—to be added to the collections and from institutions around the region for digitization. Difficult decisions needed to be made about how to manage these high-volume incoming operations, all of which were impacted by the campus closure.

The Library was part of weekly campus emergency operations meetings to discuss its role in the ongoing campus response. There was spirited conversation about whether Library staff should remain home working when the Library was a vital campus resource to the

academic enterprise. The balance between staff health and safety and making resources available was an ongoing tension well into the pandemic. At each phase of the pandemic response, the Library made calculated efforts to provide collection services and resources while prioritizing staff health. The Library building and collections are very large, yet its staffing is considered lean in relation to its size. Without redundant staffing, where multiple personnel are assigned to service points or operational tasks, impacts caused by COVID-19, whether a risk of staff member infection or the need for staff to care for an infected loved one, could have jeopardized the Library's ability to offer services at any time. With this in mind, the Library administration negotiated to keep most staff at home and maintain remote services.

The Security (eventually redesignated as Public Safety) department was a very close ally to the Library throughout the pandemic, as all communication and related security clearances regarding the coming and going of staff who worked in the building was managed by that campus unit. Security made regular rounds of the interior and exterior of the building, ensuring that interior systems in the facility remained functioning and that the building remained locked at all times. Thanks to their daily rounds, several water-related system disasters were detected and addressed before collections were affected. Additional key valued campus partners for the Library were the Auxiliary and Facilities Services campus units. Auxiliary Services ensured that the building was disinfected according to the prescribed schedule and manner while Facilities staff built custom protective clear shields for the public service stations in preparation for the Library's limited reopening in the summer of 2021.

Early in the transition to remote work, instruction, and study, a campus Health and Safety Team was established and remained in place until 2023. This team, consisting of executives, campus operations leaders, and health professionals communicated regularly with state and local health authorities, the neighboring university, and the local public school system, and followed national guidance provided by the WHO and the Centers for Disease Control. Distancing and isolation guidelines were developed, and protocols were established for reporting and managing individual outbreaks. Once vaccines became available, the Seminary mandated that everyone (staff and students) was required to be vaccinated and the Health and Safety Team established protocols for reporting vaccinations. This team was crucial for Tiers II and III of emergency planning and management; they carried

a heavy load for the campus throughout the pandemic. Their faithful planning, consistent communication, and steadfast commitment to community well-being ensured that the PTS community remained well below virus records in the surrounding areas.

Communication and well-being were persistent threads at PTS. As the pandemic worsened, the prioritization of community, along with the balance of personal safety, staff development, and service, reminded staff and students alike that all are here to help one another. As staff meetings went remote (via WebEx), people looked for ways to connect beyond virtual face-to-face meetings. For example, staff became creative with virtual coffee breaks over WebEx and small group team-building outings, such as socially distanced outdoor ice cream breaks. Additionally, staff participated in synchronous planned group social activities that they carried out individually (e.g., walking the beach in separate seaside towns, but at the same time). People were reminded, in this isolating and difficult time, that they were part of a community and they created paths to maintain that connection virtually.

In the fall semester of 2021, the Wright Library, as it had been named, was positioned to open to the entire campus community on swipe card access. Wright Library also began accepting applications for temporary access for special external visitors. On March 14, 2022, about two years after campus transitioned to remote learning, key card access was lifted and the Wright Library reopened fully to everyone without restriction. The pandemic's effect resulted in some lingering Library challenges, including reduced reliance on print material, greater expectation that materials will be available digitally (especially for courses), less foot traffic, and shorter hours. The one reversal that the Library has seen in the full year of unrestricted access is that the Library is becoming populous with patrons and campus activity once again.

Collections and Public Services Identity in Transition

In the second area of major impact, Collections and Public Services, the Library embraced a new integrated library system, new forms of content delivery including curbside pickup and scan-on-demand, and a renewed commitment to expanded digital access to meet the needs of researchers and students who were suddenly learning

and working remotely. For a time, most of the Library's print book shipments were interrupted. Focus shifted to digital content delivery, which included new digital models such as Evidenced-Based Acquisition and Controlled Digital Lending with new and established partners like HathiTrust and the Internet Archive. Increased digital access made the Library's collections more pandemic-proof and flexible.

The Library has historically held a rich legacy print collection, totaling approximately 660,000 print monograph volumes in early 2020. The Collection Development Policy continues to prioritize print over digital access for books, primarily for three reasons: publishing models, the historic focus on the seminary's residential community, and researcher preference. The Library's goal of collecting research-level theological literature necessitates that it collects in print since it is impossible to collect as widely in digital format with so much literature still published only in print. The Seminary has also gone against the trends of other theological seminaries to place a greater emphasis on its residential community. This means that a print collection has served the community well, historically. Finally, again and again, researchers in the fields served by the Library have consistently stated a preference for print, at least for their own research needs; they are "print bound," as they have said. When the staff left for "two weeks" in March 2020, there was no thought yet that this legacy print collection would soon be largely inaccessible to the local community, and that its loss would be felt especially acutely.

Shifting Collection Strategies to Meet Emerging Needs

The Library orders the bulk of its print books through approval plans. Vendors select and send titles on the basis of an approval profile developed by the Collection Development Librarian using certain criteria, including publisher type, subject parameters, special collecting interests, format, collection level, budget, language, and genre. For certain book series, the Library places standing orders, meaning that each new publication within that series will be sent automatically without the Library's individual approval for each volume. In a few instances, the Library initiates blanket orders, meaning that all titles from a specific publisher or vendor will be sent automatically. As examples, the Library has blanket orders established with publishers such as Orbis Books, WJK Press, Fortress Press, and

Wipf and Stock, and with vendors like Hogarth, which specializes in African materials.

In early 2020, due to budgetary restraints, working from home, and other disruptions caused by the pandemic, the approval plans, the primary source of book acquisition, were suspended. In some instances, these books were selected and held by the vendors; in others, the vendors kept track of what they would have sent so decisions could be made at a later point; and in still other instances, no selection took place during the period when the approval plans were inoperative.

Softening this blow somewhat was the increased licensing of digital resources in the years leading up to the pandemic. As late as 2015, there was only minimal access to ebooks at Princeton Theological Seminary, with a few collections purchased to supplement the print collection. Longstanding collecting strategies focused on print books over e-books and discouraged the acquisition of e-books if the print format was already held for those titles. This intentional desire reduced redundancy in the collection and stretched the budget by acquiring titles in only one format. Thankfully, in the years leading up to the pandemic, large e-book collections were added as the budget allowed, even if these additions duplicated what was available in print. The ability to search full text and to access these titles from off-site, coupled with the steep discounts for already owning the content in print, made the acquisition of these collections sensible. Another major decision made before the pandemic that lessened the negative side effects of decreased access to the physical library collection was PTS's participation in Evidence-Based Acquisition (EBA) programs. EBA programs generally allow an institution to have access to a full catalog of e-books for an upfront deposit. Access is provided for a full calendar year and then, at the end of the year, a library can use that deposit to purchase titles (usually the most frequently used) in perpetuity. In 2020, PTS was already participating in EBA programs with Wiley, Bloomsbury, Project MUSE, and Brill. In fact, PTS was Brill's first EBA partner, and this partnership is still a valued resource for our community.

In January 2019, the Library System Task Force, an internal group composed of Library staff members, began investigating a new integrated library system (ILS) as its contract with Voyager was set to expire. By July 2019, the Task Force unanimously recommended Innovative's ILS Sierra. While most other academic libraries were transitioning to Alma, Sierra promised to be easier to implement and

manage the collections. The go-live date was June 2020, when the Library was still physically closed to its local researchers. As it happened, the pandemic allowed the Library to have a soft launch of the ILS where circulation staff were able to interact with the system apart from in-person patrons, which decreased stress and pressure for a perfectly functional ILS.

*New Technologies and Partnerships Expand Accessibility:
ILS, HathiTrust's ETAS, Internet Archive's CDL*

The Library had been planning to join HathiTrust for some time as part of its overall collection development strategy and commitment to digital preservation, as well as access. This strategy held the Library in good stead during the pandemic. By October 2020, the Library received requests from faculty about access to HathiTrust's Emergency Temporary Access Service (ETAS). By November 2020, PTS was a member. ETAS allowed the Library to gain digital access to all digitized titles in HathiTrust that the Library already owned in print. This new membership meant that 111,000 in-copyright works were "unlocked" and suddenly made available digitally to our researchers. The Library leveraged the investment made in the print collection to make digital access available. While access increased tremendously, there were also unintended consequences. The system was meant to operate on an owned-to-loaned ratio, where digital access was only granted for titles owned by the Library and only if the Library agreed to remove them from circulation. Therefore, patrons could not have access to both the print and the digital formats simultaneously. Since some patrons already had books checked out from before the pandemic and others checked out books through curbside pickup, the Library was legally obligated to recall any books that were currently checked out that could be accessed through HathiTrust. Despite these hiccups, from November 2020 through April 2021, 1,450 books were used: almost 1,000 by students, 150 by faculty, 120 by administrators, 100 by alumni, 50 by staff, and 30 by adjunct faculty.

Emergency Temporary Access ended on June 11, 2021, in time for the Library to reopen. The Library continues to partner with HathiTrust by contributing to its growing digital library with books scanned by the Seminary. More than 40,000 public domain titles remain available in the catalog via the link "Connect to HathiTrust

Digital Library”—a positive lingering legacy of the emergency program.

In addition to HathiTrust’s ETAS, the Library expanded its title offering through the Internet Archive’s Controlled Digital Lending (CDL) program. The Library began an in-house CDL program in 2019 in expansion of a long-standing partnership with Internet Archive, which includes a regional scanning center located on-site. This ongoing partnership has resulted in the digitization of tens of thousands of out-of-copyright books and bound periodicals from the Library’s collection, all freely available for searching and reading through the Library’s Theological Commons website at <https://commons.ptsem.edu> as well as through the Internet Archive at <https://archive.org/details/Princeton>. While out-of-copyright materials from the Library’s collection are digitized in partnership with Internet Archive and posted in Theological Commons, and newer digital publications are licensed through the publisher or vendor when possible, CDL provided digital access to texts that fell between those two periods. During the pandemic shutdown, the Library had already digitized and made accessible more than 5,000 books published between 1927 and 1989 following certain criteria:

1. Books must be published in the United States.
2. Books must be non-fiction and of a scholarly character, e.g., academic monograph, edited volume of academic essays, biblical commentary. No fiction or poetry will be included.
3. Wright Library must own multiple copies of the book.
4. For every digital version of a book circulating under CDL, the physical copy of that book will be taken out of circulation and stored securely such that users will not have access to it.

By the end of 2023, more than 8,000 books have been added to the CDL program. The Library also employs a Takedown Policy, should rights holders prefer that the Library not lend their books through CDL.

Reconfiguring (Again and Again) Public Services: Circulation, Reference, Reserves, ILL

In spring 2020, Seminary instruction switched almost immediately from in-person to online. This abrupt transition dramatically impacted traditional services. The Reference and Circulation Desks sat empty, and like most other libraries, the Library deactivated ILL service. Although the Seminary had reciprocal borrowing privileges with nearby libraries, including Princeton University, access to those physical collections was also suspended. No physical reserves were kept behind the Circulation Desk. Faculty were asked to select course readings from electronic resources already in the catalog or selections that could easily be scanned and added to the learning management system, Brightspace.

The Reference Desk debuted a chat service via the commercial platform LibraryH3lp. The hope was that LibraryH3lp could supplement the reference services available through phone and e-mail. Ultimately, the Library's experience throughout the chat pilot program is that it did not serve the needs of our community, as most reference questions are quite in-depth and needed a proper, lengthy, in-person reference interview.

The Library juggled multiple concerns when trying to determine how and when to roll out services aimed to increase public services. Expanding services needed to be done in coordination with Library staff, the Seminary's Health and Safety Team, and the Security/Public Safety department. There was a desire to ensure that researchers had access to the materials they needed, but concerns arose about the virus and the lack of information available about how best to protect against it. Protective gear, masks, gloves, and sanitizer were ordered, and Circulation and Reference staff were on-site to prepare for the new services. The Library offered curbside services on June 1, 2020, to current faculty and PhD students, focusing on those patron groups who most needed research materials for the summer months. In designing new curbside workflows, Library staff wanted to make sure they could meet the demand without scaling back in the future or unnecessarily endangering the health of staff or patrons. Doctoral students and faculty submitted book requests, circulation staff would pull and process them, and the Seminary's Public Safety team would meet the requesting faculty and doctoral students at the loading dock behind the Library with the books. In March 2021, the

Library also implemented scanning services as an additional way of making resources available to faculty and students.

In July 2021, the Library reopened its doors only to the current Seminary community, students, faculty, and staff. Eventually, an application process was created to allow visiting scholars to request special permission to access the Library. One of the biggest challenges at this time was how to restrict access to authorized people. The exterior doors of the Library were programmed for card swipe access, which should have only permitted authorized users, but at times the doors would not shut fully behind the person entering, or the door might actually be held (likely out of politeness) for someone to enter. A secondary ID check was implemented at the Circulation desk where faculty and students needed to show their seminary ID to gain further access into the building. While it was necessary that every ID be checked every time to ensure fairness, this requirement became a point of tension when it was clear that both the Library staff member and the faculty or student knew each other. Although tempting to relax this requirement, doing so would mean that this policy would be unevenly enforced.

The Evolving Identity of the Library Staff

The third area of major impact on the Library during this period was a sweeping changeover in staffing. From late 2019 and throughout the pandemic, three factors caused a dramatic change to Library staffing: 1) a new campus-wide incentivized retirement program; 2) the filling of key vacancies; and 3) the urgent creation of new positions necessitated by pandemic workflows. Ultimately, over half of the Library's present staff was hired during the 2020-2022 period. By late 2022, the Library staff emerged with a wholly different composition and group identity. The physical and conceptual shape of the Library's work also changed with new positions and new personalities added to the team. Finally, the pandemic period also provided the Library Management Team with important insights in the areas of onboarding, training, and acculturation enriched by the experiences and perspectives of new staff members.

Changes to the Library Staff

The first significant change to staffing began just prior to the pandemic, when the Seminary created a new incentivized early retirement program across campus, ultimately leading to vacancies in key roles among the Library's approximately 16 positions. Five long-serving members of the Library's staff retired in mid-to-late 2019 as part of the program, with another two staff members resigning to move to positions in other organizations that year. Even while honoring and celebrating the contributions of departing colleagues, remaining staff began to wrestle with the extent of this sizable loss: decades of unparalleled service, institutional knowledge of the collections and generations of patrons, and an understanding of the origins and deeper meaning of idiosyncratic local practices. Saying goodbye to this group of talented, dedicated professionals in late 2019 underscored one reality: no new hire, however wonderful, is a replacement.

By the time the pandemic began to impact daily life in New Jersey in March 2020, about half of the vacated positions remained open, including positions in critical Public Services areas like Reference and Special Collections. Like many other institutions attempting to continue providing service in an uncertain future (Atla 2020), the Seminary initially implemented a partial hiring freeze before transitioning to a new model of position evaluation, approval, and posting. This new review process was undoubtedly financially prudent, but it did slow the filling of key vacancies in a dramatically reduced staff in the early stages of the pandemic just as the implementation of work-from-home practices and new expectations for accessing the Library skyrocketed.

Pandemic service – curbside pickup, responsive cleaning and isolation protocols, the transition to fully remote reference, and the increase to digital content – all helped highlight the value of Library staff and services to students, faculty, and the administration in very tangible ways. This recognition of value ultimately allowed the Library to continue hiring replacements for key roles and, in some cases, to create new positions to meet demand. Ultimately, nine staff members were hired during this period, including crucial positions in Public Services, Cataloging, and Special Collections and Archives. Some of these new staff members needed to be both interviewed and onboarded remotely. They then acclimated to the Seminary culture and performed work remotely which had traditionally been done

on-site. Finally, some staff were hired specifically to offer essential services to the Seminary community while the physical library space remained closed.

The Physical and Conceptual Shape of Library Work

All personnel, new and long-serving, had to reimagine their roles throughout 2020-2022, adjusting the shape, performance, and delivery of their services and output as public health and safety requirements continued to shift rapidly at the national, state, and institutional levels. This time also created an environment that was open to change, innovation, and experimentation, sometimes accelerating the adoption of pre-pandemic workplace trends. During the pandemic, the Library was able to explore several pre-pandemic workplace issues impacting the physical and conceptual shape of work broadly, including remote and hybrid work models, the sustainable design of and ongoing service reliance on part-time positions, and the growing attention to mental health in the workplace.

Prior to the pandemic, the Library had no formal remote or hybrid work options for staff. Culturally, the Seminary has always highly prized its commitment to residential theological education and community building. Historically, this commitment was embodied by a visible and engaged on-site faculty and staff presence across campus. The realities of the pandemic challenged the Seminary to reimagine community, engagement, teaching, learning, and working in ways it had never explored before – transitioning quickly to remote/hybrid learning for faculty and students and mandatory remote/hybrid work models for most staff (Hinchliffe and Wolff-Eisenberg 2020).

Like many academic and theological librarians during this period, Library staff members readily adapted to remote/hybrid work through the rapid redesign of individual and departmental workflows and services, the development of new processes to meet new needs, and the acquisition of improved project management and technology skills. By the time the Library fully reopened in mid-2021, the staff had become more sophisticated in its collective ability to organize work for both on-site and remote settings, increasing efficiency overall to meet continuing, post-pandemic demand for multi-modal services (De Groote and Scoulas 2021). The Library simply works differently now.

The sustainable design of part-time positions is another issue that Library staff explored during the pandemic. From November 2020 through August 2022, the Library created three new part-time staff roles in Circulation to meet the increased demands on public services. While these part-time roles have been crucial to keeping the Library staffed for essential services, the turnover of part-time staff has been significant – five people have occupied the three new part-time roles to date. Of the original three part-time hires, one moved to another full-time position in the Library and two have left for full-time positions or positions offering more hours in other institutions. This challenge to retain employees suggests that potential applicants and new staff are looking for different models beyond traditional part-time arrangements to meet their own personal or professional needs and expectations (McClure 2021). This pattern reflects wider trends in the higher education workforce; even as post-pandemic staffing is restored to pre-pandemic levels, the challenges of shaping meaningful positions to eliminate employee-retention problems – from engagement to burnout to attractive and sustainable salary levels – remain (June 2022). The Library is now reviewing the sustainability and meaningful design of future part-time positions.

Finally, the Library and the Seminary are giving new levels of attention to the important issue of mental health in the workplace – one strong imprint from the pandemic that seems to have impacted most sectors. The Seminary is grappling with ways to provide additional support and services to its faculty and staff, from lectures, workshops, and additional health benefits encouraging work-life balance and stress reduction. Librarianship – and theological librarianship in particular – with its long history of vocational calling, is a field that will be served well by this attention. The Conversation Group Discussion “Continuing the Conversation: Reflecting on Our Pandemic Experiences” at Atla Annual 2022 asked participants what they are working on now. Some described a need to focus on “morale, healing, and building community” (Welsh et al. 2022, 120-125). The spate of professional literature on both librarian burnout and the issue of mental health across higher education since 2020 testifies to increased attention to this issue in the academy. The literature also makes clear that this is work of shared responsibility. Modern, responsive organizations are responsible for designing jobs, work cultures, and practices that promote and protect healthy staff engagement. Staff members are individually responsible for undertaking

self-care practices that ensure both their joy and their job readiness (Holm, Guimaraes, and Marcano 2022).

Lessons Learned: Employment Communication and Acculturation

The pandemic period also provided the Library with three particularly important lessons learned alongside its new staff members in the areas of communication regarding hiring, onboarding, training processes, new acculturation challenges, and the value of immersive space for new staff members.

Centralizing and clarifying communication around the employment experience as a whole, including interviewing, onboarding, training, and campus acculturation, is one area that the Library and its parent seminary need to improve. The experiences of new staff members hired during the pandemic highlight pre-existing gaps in communication and processes. New staff members each had slightly different experiences, but most used terms like “confusion” and “chaos” to describe communication during both the pre- and post-hire periods. New staff struggled to get information about benefits, start dates, the location of documentation and policies, technology needs, and a wider sense of understanding the community. Two new hires moved from out of state to New Jersey during the height of the pandemic, when unclear communication and a complex and shifting public health situation impacted start dates, move dates, house sales, and the local real estate search. Several new employees mentioned the potential value of a new (not yet existent) centralized human resources system to improve the communications gaps and help potential and new staff get a better, more cohesive sense of Library and Seminary identity from first contact.

The Library also faced acculturation challenges for new staff, particularly as new staff’s exposure to existing staff, the Library’s collections, and the PTS campus were physically limited. Pandemic restrictions prevented two new staff members from coming on-site until several months after their start date. All new staff were enthusiastic about the practical value of holding initial interviews via web conferencing as an efficient preliminary introduction between the applicant and the Library. Most new staff agreed that it is also ideal for both parties to host final interviews on-site when possible; candidates can be exposed more directly to both the campus culture and the collections, and the Library can more easily determine if

a candidate's online presentation and energy matches their on-site personality. New staff are hugely enthusiastic about the hybrid work model, with several noting that hybrid options were an essential feature in their job search. Still, all recognize that campus hybridity has made integration into the Library and wider campus culture slower. Even by early 2023, some Library staff members had still never been in the same room with each other, some had never been in many buildings on campus, and some had only been able to attend a small number of wider Seminary events. While the Library staff identity has changed, it is still learning who it is now.

One unexpected and positive result of this period has been a rediscovery of the value of sustained immersion for new staff. Pandemic restrictions offered many new staff members an extended, highly focused time of exploration at the beginning of their tenure. New staff often received a huge amount of valuable solo training time with new supervisors, building relationships and job understanding. They also reported the enduring value of the opportunity to spend months extensively exploring the collections, buildings, services, and policies in a silent building. One new staff member described how transitioning back on-site to a partially-opened library building allowed her to make intellectual and practical connections with the physical collection following the remote period where, she said, the "collection was still just an abstraction." New staff also prized the opportunity to dig deep into policies, workflows, documentation, and standards relating to their new position, identifying it as both an ideal situation for a new employee but also a luxury that the pressures of the modern work world does not easily allow. The Library is challenged to explore how it can replicate this immersive experience going forward, post-pandemic, structuring time and space for new staff members to think, read, and train deeply (Newport 2016) at the start of a new role.

A New, Post-Pandemic Identity

This period of intense collection and service disruption, but also innovation, was only made possible through the flexibility and commitment of the Library's staff. Throughout the pandemic, pressure remained on the Library to provide access not only to its core campus community but also to community neighbors and scholars

who made regular pleas for access to specific collections needed for their research. This was an ongoing and delicate issue. As a research library, providing access and expertise is at the heart of the mission. Yet the balance of mission in concert with a closed campus, staff well-being, and insufficient resources to manage a large building during a pandemic was a difficult matter. The Library building and collections behind the security gates remained closed to the Seminary community until the start of the summer session in 2021. That summer, the Library piloted return-to-building use with faculty and doctoral students who have their own dedicated suite in the building with personal study spaces and offices, and an assortment of rooms to meet specific research, personal, technology, and collaboration needs.

In the spring of 2021, in concert with the Board of Trustees meeting and alumni reunion, the Library was named the Theodore Sedgwick Wright Library after the Seminary's first African American graduate. Wright was a member of the class of 1828, who became a prominent abolitionist, pastor, and preacher. The naming of the Library felt like the culmination of an identity shift that was happening throughout the pandemic.

The Wright Library was formally dedicated on October 13, 2021, with a rich program of speakers referencing history and hope for the future. The dedication's event program included this prayer:

"We give thanks to God for the examples of courageous faith that Wright demonstrated in the midst of perilous times. Each time we enter this building that is essential to our scholarly endeavors, let us reflect upon the grace and power granted to Wright and find strength and hope knowing that we serve an impartial God who is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow."

When Wright Library fully reopened to the public on March 14, 2022, a full two years after its doors first closed, it had a new name, a new ILS, new access models, new policies and procedures, new relationships with existing campus partners, and many new staff members. The campus looked forward to a bright future of well-planned change, which, for the Wright Library, included extensive experience in remote onboarding of new staff, new ways of working, and different collection development practices, including enhancing digital collection purchases, access, and partnerships. While Borges's hope has yet to be fully realized, Wright Library is perhaps a little closer to

paradise than it was at the start of the pandemic, and certainly much closer than it was during the pandemic.

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Notes

- 1 The Library's Special Collections will only be mentioned briefly; for a full treatment of the department during this time, please see Head of Special Collections Brian Shetler's chapter in this volume, "The Changing Realities of Special Collections and Archives: Facing the Future with Confidence and Confusion."