Understanding Students' Experience of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Small Theological Libraries

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*T*he COVID-19 pandemic had an unprecedented impact on the world, affecting post-secondary institutions in difficult ways. Universities were forced to adapt to a variety of changes in order to adhere to public health and safety measures. Many universities closed their campuses to prevent the spread of the virus, and students returned home while faculty and staff worked remotely where possible. Universities quickly shifted to online learning, which posed a challenge for both students and faculty as they had to adapt to new ways of teaching and learning. The shift to emergency remote learning, "Zoom fatigue," isolation, and other disruptions to the educational processes were among the biggest stressors for faculty, librarians, staff, and students (Fruehwirth, Biswas, and Perreira 2021; Salim et al. 2022; Salvesen and Berg 2021; Taylor and Frechette 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic also posed challenges to academic libraries; described as a "seismic shift" (Salvesen and Berg

2021), academic librarians adapted their services to support online learning. Libraries required significant adaptation and investment to ensure continued support for teaching, learning, and research (Farne et al. 2021; Intahchomphoo and Brown 2021; McLay Paterson and Eva 2022).

The pandemic has especially taken a toll on the mental health of students. Anxiety, stress, and other mental health concerns, and a sudden shift to emergency online learning, have greatly impacted students' ability to engage with their courses (American College Health Association 2020; Aristovnik et al. 2020; Fruehwirth, Biswas, and Perreira 2021). The pandemic has also caused increased stress on faculty, librarians, and staff who have reported experiencing severe burnout (Salvesen and Berg 2021; Taylor and Frechette 2022; VanLeeuwen et al. 2021).

Over 45 percent of Canadian young adults (ages 18-34) admitted that their mental health worsened during the pandemic (Statistics Canada 2022). The factors associated with the dramatic increase of mental health concerns included lockdowns, social isolation, lack of support from family and friends, financial insecurities related to the loss of income, inability to exercise, and more (Fiorillo and Gorwood 2020; Moreno et al. 2020). These findings are consistent across academic literature. A British study of 1,173 university students found that over 50 percent of the students experienced increased depression and anxiety during the pandemic (Chen and Lucock 2022). A similar study in the United States (US) found that 71.26 percent of students experienced an increase in their stress and anxiety due to the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically due to stressors related to health and academic performance (Wang et al. 2020). These findings were also consistent with a study by Son Changwon and colleagues (2020), who found that students' stress and anxiety were related to health concerns, inability to concentrate, social isolation, and issues surrounding academic performance. These issues became more prominent due to the cumulative effect of COVID-19-related measures (Fiorillo and Gorwood 2020).

At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting emergency online learning greatly impacted students' engagement in online classes. For example, several studies found that students' levels of motivation and engagement declined (Daniels, Goegan, and Parker 2021; Hollister et al. 2022). Specifically, emergency remote learning negatively impacted students' social interactions in the

classroom and emotional engagement (Hajedris 2021; Hollister et al. 2022).

This chapter will discuss the case study of a small theological library in Canada, specifically the lived experiences of students at Saint Paul University in Ottawa during the COVID-19 pandemic, and their perceptions of the Library during these times. The research question which motivated this study is: how did students in a small theological University experience the COVID-19 pandemic and what effects did it have on their mental health and engagement? In order to answer this question, we will first describe the context of Saint Paul University, and discuss what challenges the librarians faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, we will describe the Student Mental Health and Engagement Study we conducted to shed light on students' mental health struggles during the pandemic. We will discuss the methods and results of this study as they pertain to our research question. We will then conclude with the lessons learned from this experience and address some considerations moving forward as the students are trying to adjust to a post-pandemic world.

Library Challenges During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Saint Paul University is a small, bilingual Catholic Pontifical University situated in Ottawa, Canada. The University has an enrollment of just over 1,200 students across four faculties: Theology, Canon Law, Human Sciences, and Philosophy. As the University is bilingual, all University programs and services are offered in both English and French. The University also enrolls many international students; 15 percent of students are international, with the majority coming from French-speaking countries. The Jean-Léon Allie Library is the only library branch of the University. It currently employs three librarians, four library technicians, and four part-time or seasonal support staff. Due to its small size, the facilities available on campus, and the unique demographic makeup of students, the Library adapted slightly differently during the COVID-19 pandemic than other academic libraries. After the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic in March 2020 (World Health Organization 2020), many academic libraries were forced to close their physical buildings, limiting access to their collections and facilities. With the closure of physical library spaces, academic libraries had to quickly

shift their focus to online resources to ensure continued access to their collections and services.

The Jean-Léon Allie Library is a unique space on campus that provides technology tools, physical study spaces, research and reference support, and community activities. When the Canadian government announced public safety measures to protect the health and well-being of students and staff, the first step for Saint Paul University was to close campus and shift instruction online. This closure presented the Library with various challenges due to the students' reliance on Library spaces and its technologies. The Library contains the only computer lab on campus, and does not have laptops or other tools available for loan. With many of our students not having reliable access to these technologies or internet access from home, the Library needed to adapt while adhering to public health measures. As a result, the Library remained open during the pandemic, including the lockdowns, with many provisions. Students could come to the Library to use the internet or the computer lab, but needed to adhere to public health guidelines such as social distancing, vaccination requirements, and wearing a mask. Our librarians and library staff worked mostly from home, but each came into the Library at least one day a week on a rotating schedule to perform various tasks and ensure that students adhered to the safety policies.

Many libraries had to also adapt their services to support remote learning and research. This shift included offering online reference and research support, digitizing materials for remote access, and creating additional resources for students. With a library collection focusing heavily on Theology and Canon Law, this situation provided a unique challenge for our students and staff. While the library did offer a scan-on-demand and contactless borrow and pick-up services for many of our materials, some problems needed to be addressed. Many of our print materials were not available to purchase online, and many students in Theology and Canon Law relied heavily on these print materials for their courses. Also, according to Library policy, materials published before 1950 were unavailable to loan, so students needed to come to campus in order to physically consult these materials. Special attention needed to be given early on to take into consideration the uniqueness of our collection, as well as implementing social distancing long before other universities began to reopen their libraries. Staff navigated a significant increase in student scan requests while also adhering to copyright agreements. This surge caused an increased workload and additional stress on our staff and

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our students who needed to use Library spaces and resources to continue their studies.

Libraries were impacted in terms of their ability to provide instruction and support for information literacy. Many had to shift to online instruction, which can be challenging for some students and staff. Librarians received numerous emails from students with concerns over participating and succeeding in online and hybrid courses. The Library not only provided online information literacy workshops but also increased the number and frequency of these workshops to try and reach as many students as possible throughout the first two years of the pandemic. These workshops focused on information and digital literacy to address students' needs, such as including workshops on digital collaboration tools. Unfortunately, with the shift to online courses and the ongoing uncertainty surrounding the pandemic, the Library received an influx of requests for academic integrity workshops because of a significant increase in academic fraud cases. Professors recorded higher cases of plagiarism, such as improperly cited sources or a lack of quotation marks and citations in general. The Library has begun to examine why the number of plagiarism and academic integrity cases has continued to increase throughout the pandemic.

Over the last three years, librarians and staff have witnessed how the pandemic has affected students. Many of our students communicated that the pandemic caused a dramatic decrease in their overall well-being and a significant increase in stress and anxiety. They expressed that the shift to online learning and the disruption to academic schedules has caused elevated levels of stress and anxiety, and many struggled with the adjustment. Social distancing measures led to increased feelings of isolation and loneliness, particularly for students who are away from home and their support networks. The uncertainty of the pandemic, academic pressures, and concerns about the future also increased anxiety and stress. Many universities, including our own, adapted their mental health support services to ensure that students can access the help they need.

At Saint Paul University, the Chief Librarian is also in charge of the University's Counselling Centre, where students have access to various mental health services. Due to the pandemic, the Chief Librarian modified this center by prioritizing mental health initiatives and offering online counseling and therapy services among other supports. In addition to the support that the University offers, the Library wanted to better understand the experiences of students

during the COVID-19 pandemic and the effect that mental health issues such as stress and anxiety had on engagement with their studies. We also wanted to understand how librarians can address student mental health issues and better support students through these unprecedented times.

Student Mental Health and Engagement Study

In order to respond to the challenges described above, the Library sought to investigate what COVID-related factors impacted students' mental health and how the pandemic affected their ability to study and engage with course content, paying special attention to students' perceptions of emergency online learning and of library spaces during the pandemic. We sent out a mixed-methods questionnaire to all current students; the aim of the study was to investigate how students in theological schools experienced the COVID-19 pandemic and what role theological libraries have in supporting them during these turbulent changes.

Methods

We conducted a Student Mental Health and Engagement study at Saint Paul University in the context of a larger study that aimed to address the impact of mental health and disengagement on students' attitudes and behaviors with regard to academic integrity. The study contained an 18-item mixed-methods questionnaire in both official languages of the University (English and French) and was administered online. It was based on two verified assessment measures: University Student Engagement Inventory (USEI; Maroco et al. 2016) and Attitudes Toward Plagiarism Questionnaire (Mavrinac et al. 2010). In addition, we developed a third section of the questionnaire to understand how students experienced the COVID-19 pandemic and how emergency online learning impacted their engagement and mental health. This chapter will address a section of this study related to students' lived experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, and its impact on their mental health and engagement in their courses and overall academic career, which we have recorded through the qualitative questions of the survey (see the Appendix). The questions

related to students' experiences of the pandemic included the stressors that might have contributed to students' mental health issues (i.e. stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion), stressful events that students might have experienced (such as testing positive for COVID-19 or coming into contact with someone who tested positive for COVID-19), the impact of these stressors on their ability to study during the pandemic, and their University experience during the pandemic. In this chapter, we specifically focus on the qualitative responses from students about how their mental health issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic impacted their studies, and what impact these issues had on their engagement.

The research study received the approval of the Research Ethics Board of Saint Paul University (REB file number 1360.28/21) on March 9, 2022, and was carried out between March 14 and April 2, 2022. The timing of this study coincided with when Canadians experienced the end of the fifth wave of the COVID-19 pandemic and the gradual reopening of many businesses, including that of the University. The questionnaire provided students an opportunity to reflect on their experience during the first two years of the pandemic. We received a 10 percent response rate to the survey (n = 154), which was sent to all students in the University. The students who responded were eager to share their experiences and our survey was a channel to do so for many of them. However, it is also important to note that not all students answered every open-ended question in the questionnaire, since none of the questions were mandatory in order to complete the survey.

Students Lived Experiences During the Pandemic

Students' lived experiences recorded through the open-ended questions of the questionnaire provided insights about how students at our University have experienced the COVID-19 pandemic, and what specific challenges they have faced. It was important to us to capture how students felt about the changes brought by the pandemic, specifically how it impacted their mental health and engagement in their University studies. In this section, we will discuss the results of the study, capturing students' insights and responses to the qualitative questions, and focusing on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' mental health. Further, we will explore the pandemic's

impact on students' engagement, and later discuss students' perspectives on the role of the Library in addressing those challenges.

Impact of Mental Health Issues Related to COVID-19 Pandemic on students' Life

We asked if stress, anxiety, and/or emotional exhaustion related to COVID-19 impacted the students' ability to study. Many students reported experiencing high levels of stress and anxiety, and other mental health issues. Students also reported that high levels of stress and anxiety greatly impacted their ability to focus on their studies and their motivation to study and complete their courses. The main stressors students identified in their lives that impacted their concentration included overall stress and anxiety, fear for their own and their families' health and well-being, financial instability, and sudden changes in instruction. A small number of students mentioned health and safety measures and mandatory vaccinations as one of the main stressors that caused them stress and anxiety and affected their overall well-being. Some of the international students specifically mentioned that reading news and continuously hearing about COVID-19 was quite stressful for them. One student stated: "The overall general tensions and stress of society set a mood and sort of depressive state for everyone [which] I sensed from others and felt in myself. It was trauma for all of us and that affected the ability to concentrate and focus. My mind wandered to traumatic news and lockdowns which created an overall sense of fear while [I was] trying to read and write. Emotional heaviness affected [my] motivation as well" (Study participant, Ottawa, 2022).

When students considered the shift to online courses, the results were mixed. Few students mentioned moving courses online as being a significant stressor in their lives but they identified Zoom and screen fatigue as factors that contributed to their difficulties concentrating. One student stated, "I experienced the extended screen time with the need to concentrate. It was exhausting" (Study participant, Ottawa, 2022). However, some students mentioned that the shift to online courses had a positive impact on their stress and anxiety levels, as they felt safer completing their courses at home and appreciated the flexibility of online courses, such as having synchronous and asynchronous class time and alternative methods of assessment. One student stated, "I was extremely thankful for online classes,

otherwise, I would not have been able to continue [my education]" (Study participant, Ottawa, 2022). Another student said: "Being able to do my school work from home took off a great amount of stress and anxiety from my life. I could do my work comfortably, most of the time at my own pace, and I was more attentive than I have ever been. I believe I participated better in some cases as well" (Study participant, Ottawa, 2022).

While some students welcomed the flexibility of online courses, others mentioned how these courses contributed to their feelings of isolation and struggles to connect with their peers and professors. One student stated: "The online format had an isolating effect. Professors took a very long time to return emails and the lack of interaction with other students impeded my learning. No teamwork, no opportunity for growth" (Study participant, Ottawa, 2022). Another student confirmed similar feelings by stating that "the isolation increased my stress levels and it was difficult to concentrate, read, and write" (Study participant, Ottawa, 2022).

Particularly, the shift to fully online courses negatively impacted international students who attended synchronous online courses, as the time zones between where they lived and where the course was taught were different. This shift caused significant stress in these students' lives, impacting their ability to focus on courses and motivation to attend synchronous lessons. Stress, anxiety, and exhaustion also impacted students' motivation, with many students expressing how they struggled with motivation to attend classes, complete assignments, and even continue their studies as a whole. For example, one student wrote, "Isolation created apathy and depression, which took a huge toll on my motivation and clarity of focus and ability to complete my schoolwork to the best of my ability" (Study participant, Ottawa, 2022). Yet another student stated, "It was hard to focus. I had little motivation to do anything school-related, [it] felt like a waste of time" (Study participant, Ottawa, 2022).

An interesting discovery in the responses was that some students enjoyed online courses because they were able to find more motivation being at home and less distracted by things around them: "I thrived in the remote work/learn environment. Not having to commute or meet anyone allowed me to hold multiple part-time jobs while completing my studies with high quality and quantity. This digital/remote environment has been a blessing for me and my skillset/mindset" (Study participant, Ottawa, 2022). These students did not mention whether they had any family or dependents living with

them. Students who did mention having to take care of family members or children highlighted the struggles of constantly living in close proximity with others and the related distractions and impacts to their motivation.

During the first wave of the pandemic, one student contacted a librarian for help as they were struggling to complete their courses because they lived with their two other siblings all attending university at the same time and their internet was not strong enough to support them all, which caused significant connection issues. They tried to make a schedule for "internet time," where only one of them would be on the internet at a time to ensure the fastest speed possible. But that didn't always work, and it resulted in these students being unable to access online classes or use the internet for their schoolwork, which caused stress and anxiety. This example is one of many equity issues that increased stress and anxiety for students during the pandemic shift to online learning.

Within the questionnaire responses, we found that stress and anxiety due to isolation varied by person, and the impact on a student's ability to study varied depending on their experiences with online learning and their family or living situation.

The Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Students' Engagement

Study participants were also asked to describe their level of engagement in class during the pandemic, and if they felt their engagement had been impacted directly because of the pandemic. Once again, the results varied based on students' personal experiences and their experiences with online learning. The majority of the students stated that the overall pandemic along with subsequent sanctions, health and safety implementations, and changes to mode of instruction negatively impacted their engagement with their studies. For example, one student mentioned, "While interested in my studies and the subjects, I find it more difficult to engage and remain focused with online learning due to distraction, and disengagements" (Study participant, Ottawa, 2022).

A few students stated that the COVID-19 pandemic improved their engagement due to the shift to online classes with more flexible class times and assignments. One student stated, "I think that the fact that I was able to attend class online positively affected my engagement and attendance ... I was also able to do virtual study groups and

in-person groups when possible" (Study participant, Ottawa, 2022). In general, the majority of students stated that the pandemic impact on their mental health was directly correlated to their engagement and participation in class.

A little over half of the respondents (n = 78) mentioned that they felt generally engaged in class. Among those respondents, some students stated that the main reason they were able to stay engaged in their courses during this time was because all of their courses were offered online (n = 19). They also mentioned that having a good professor who was able to adapt their course content to an online environment was a significant factor in their engagement with the course. Having interesting and meaningful online discussions with their professors and their classmates along with offering alternate assessment options generally helped students stay engaged and actively participate in these discussions.

However, a little less than half of the students (n = 54) stated that they felt it hard to engage in their courses or they stopped engaging altogether. Some mentioned distractions at home as being a factor contributing to their lack of engagement along with general stress, exhaustion, and increased levels of anxiety. One student shared, "I think I have been feeling very isolated, that it has been hard to engage. My room is the place where I do everything, and I just feel overwhelmed about that" (Study participant, Ottawa, 2022).

The biggest factor that they identified affecting their engagement levels was their experiences in online courses. As seen above, students with higher engagement mentioned how their professors were a big contributing factor, and this was similar for students who felt low levels of engagement. Students mentioned that professors who didn't adapt well to online courses and didn't offer alternative assessment methods or alternative solutions to students who struggled to attend synchronous courses as significant contributing factors to their low levels of engagement. One student stated, "I think a lot of the professors struggled to use technology and to be engaging in that environment when it was completely new" (Study participant, Ottawa, 2022).

Another factor was Zoom or screen fatigue. The majority of students mentioned how staring at their screens or being in an online class on Zoom for hours at a time gradually affected their engagement and concentration. One student mentioned that they eventually stopped attending synchronous Zoom classes and only relied on

course notes, PowerPoint slides, or any other materials available on the course management system, Brightspace.

In the fall 2020 semester, the University offered hybrid options for some courses where students could attend class either in person or virtually. A few students who completed the survey mentioned participating in these hybrid courses. Unfortunately, they did not have a positive experience and identified issues with these hybrid courses as having an impact on their engagement. All the students who mentioned participating in a hybrid course, whether they were in class or online, struggled with engaging in those courses. Specifically, they found the hybrid model to be very distracting, as professors needed to focus on two groups at once, which affected the pace of the course. Technical issues, fielding questions from both in-class and online students, and lack of cohesion between the online and in-person students were all reasons they gave for feeling less engaged in the course.

Overall, the responses gleaned from the survey suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on students' mental health and well-being, which directly impacted their ability to participate in class and actively engage in their studies. What is interesting is that even if the students identified having high levels of stress and anxiety, and had a positive experience with their professors, their engagement in their courses did not change. Professors who were engaging, those who offered different forms of assessment, and professors who were flexible with class time and discussions helped to diminish students' overall anxiety and helped them stay engaged with the course content. However, Zoom and screen fatigue and overall exhaustion still led to problems with concentration and motivation when participating in online classes. While hybrid courses can help reach the most students, they are not generally favored by our students as a preferred course model. This finding was highlighted not only in this survey but was a general comment we received informally from other students who participated in the hybrid courses. After the fall 2020 semester, the number of COVID cases increased; the campus once again closed and courses shifted back online. The campus did not officially fully reopen and bring students back to the physical classroom until the fall 2022 semester. The University currently has no plans to re-introduce hybrid courses into the curriculum University-wide, but it has kept a few online courses.

Students' Experience of the Library During COVID-19 Pandemic

The Library services and spaces underwent significant transformation during the pandemic. The Library's priority was to help address the digital divide and support students with limited access to computers and internet by remaining open throughout the pandemic. While we did not specifically ask students about their experience with the Library, some students directly referenced the Library in their responses. In general, the comments were positive, with many students mentioning the online workshops and continued access to the physical Library spaces as being helpful to them and their academic performance. For example, one student said that the negative effects of the pandemic were minimal due to most of their work being in the Library, "which was open all the time" (Study participant, Ottawa, 2022). Another student mentioned how thankful they were that the Library remained open during the pandemic while other local schools were closed, as it enabled them to finish their thesis and complete their program. Without the Library being open, that student felt they would have dropped out of the program. Another student mentioned that the Library spaces were an important resource for their studies during the pandemic and allowed them to maintain concentration and motivation, which they felt would not have been possible otherwise. While some students appreciated that the Library had been open during the lockdowns, many did not visit it (due to those same mandatory lockdowns) and they instead took advantage of its virtual services. Most students relied on the virtual reference chat, which they felt supported their online learning and helped them adapt to the virtual learning environment. Many students appreciated the online support of the librarians during these times, since even in the face of challenges related to the pandemic, librarians adapted their services to continue supporting students' academic endeavors in a variety of different ways.

Discussion and Recommendations

This study provides some important findings that illuminate students' lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, the results of our research have been consistent with the findings

of other studies about students' mental health (Chen and Lucock 2022; Son et al. 2020; Wang et al. 2020). At Saint Paul University, students experienced similar stressors that were identified by Son and colleagues (2020) and Wang and colleagues (2020), which included health concerns specifically about loved ones, social isolation, and difficulty concentrating during their studies. The results of this study are also consistent with the findings of Appleby and colleagues (2022), who found that the pandemic has adversely affected the plans of some students to pursue further education at a university level. It is important to highlight that even though our study was completed in 2022 and many of the studies we have examined were completed earlier, we note a consistent theme of the negative impact the pandemic had on students' mental health.

Regarding online learning, our results echoed the findings by Salim and colleagues, who stated that consistent use of "video conferencing in educational settings throughout the pandemic has drastically increased Zoom fatigue" (2022, 13). The stress from long synchronous online sessions added extra fatigue to our students. While the emergency online learning experience was challenging for students, many have also expressed strong positive attitudes toward the shift. While some studies have found little or no positive attitudes among students toward emergency online learning (Aguilera-Hermida 2020), others have confirmed our findings that students had some positive experiences related to the switch during COVID-19 pandemic. For example, Elham Hussein and colleagues (2020) found that the convenience of switching to online learning was one of the satisfaction factors, along with time-effectiveness and the feeling of safety. Our study results indicate similar findings. However, we also found that students' preference toward online learning during the pandemic was directly related to their family circumstances and living situation. This correlation indicates that students' need for a quiet space to study is an important element that can contribute to feelings of stress and anxiety when it is lacking. Library spaces also played an important role in this study, since many of the students indicated that they would not have been able to finish their degree if they did not have access to technology, internet, or spaces provided by the Library during the pandemic. The importance of access for our students mirrors the access needs expressed more broadly throughout society. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted already existing inequities, especially with access to technologies and the internet, and social inequities due to family situations and other social conditions.

The lack of technology and access to a reliable internet connection placed tremendous stress on students by hindering their ability to participate in the classroom and completing their assignments. As a result, our study demonstrated that the pandemic highlighted the need for higher education to continue to address these inequities and provide equal access to educational opportunities in order to ensure students' success in a university setting.

We found that students' engagement plays a pivotal role in student success in the university. Our study suggests that a link between mental health and student engagement exists. When students experience high-stress situations like the pandemic, their ability to engage with course materials, to feel excited about their studies, and their feeling of belonging is highly impacted. The factors that impacted students' engagement suggest that social inequalities could play a role in how students engage with course materials. However, student responses also highlight the role of instructors in supporting student engagement, illuminating the impact of those who were not properly prepared to switch to emergency online learning. This finding was consistent with those of Tharapos and colleagues (2022), who found that instructors can positively impact students' engagement and satisfaction during stressful times like the COVID-19 pandemic. This result indicates that instructors need to consider asynchronous course activities in their design of online courses. They should place more emphasis on self-directed learning as students manage the stress and disengagement associated with Zoom and screen fatigue, and their inability to focus during the extended time in online meetings. In addition, the role of instructors in supporting students during stressful times is crucial, whether by extending the deadlines for some assignments, providing additional support during office hours, or offering support and understanding during classes. These supports can help ease the impact associated with potentially stressful events and maintain students' engagement in the classroom.

While the experience of our students during these times was heightened by the uniqueness and gravity of worldwide disease, this study offers some important lessons that can be applied now that the WHO has officially declared the pandemic to be over (World Health Organization 2023):

1. **Consider the whole student.** Students' personal stressful experiences in life are important to consider when it comes to their ability to study and engage with the course material.

Providing mental health resources to support students and being open, proactive, and understanding can help students feel supported by the library, and not only appreciate the services but also look at libraries as a resource for resilience in a time of need. Librarians at the Jean-Léon Allie Library taught online credit-bearing information literacy labs during the COVID-19 pandemic and, in our personal experience, the support for students' mental health and flexibility with deadlines, especially when students struggled with other stressors, was a great catalyst for students feeling cared for and supported. In turn, students demonstrated stronger engagement with the information literacy materials.

2. **Create welcoming library spaces.** Library spaces are important for student success in the university. When these spaces are not available, students struggle with the lack of the physical areas to study, and the lack of support that usually comes with it. This lack of space and support can negatively impact their motivation and engagement in their courses. As a result, creating welcoming and open spaces for students who might be struggling due to different mental health stressors is essential to promote their sense of belonging in the university community. In addition, it is crucial to create an atmosphere that is welcoming and engaging so that students can feel comfortable developing their intellectual curiosity, interacting with their peers, and fostering a learning community.

3. **Promote a sense of belonging in both physical and virtual spaces.** Since engagement and a sense of belonging are extremely important for student success, it is essential to promote belonging by offering students the services and support that allow them to feel at home in their libraries, especially during stressful times, both in person and online. Some of the ways to foster this sense of belonging include taking proactive measures on the part of the library. Active outreach strategies are important to offer supportive learning environments that facilitate student learning, foster engagement, and support students' mental health. While our library implemented more activities related to mental health and overall well-being, such as refreshments during exam times, pet therapy in the library, a "color out your stress" coloring wall, and exams survival guides, all of these measures focused on in-person activities and were not available to students online during

the pandemic. Some of the supportive proactive measures available in virtual environments could include a personal librarian program (specifically with an opportunity to provide mental health resources for students), online programming at the library, and video tutorials. It is important to create outreach channels for students via the student union, in-classroom visits, outreach to faculty members, and being present where students are. In addition, adopting a university-wide approach to supporting students' mental health and well-being that includes the library as a partner is crucial. Such a comprehensive approach would foster proactive measures to cultivate students' sense of belonging across the university and play a pivotal role in establishing a supportive virtual and in-person atmosphere. Active outreach strategies are essential to providing students with the necessary mental health support that can support their engagement and a sense of belonging. These strategies can benefit student success by improving learning outcomes; consequently, they also benefit the larger academic community as a whole.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic taught librarians about not only students' information needs but also their mental health needs. Our study has shown that even during times of high stress and poor mental health, instructors and librarians play a significant role in student engagement. When instructors are active, open, prepared, and engaging, students are able to actively participate in class. By embracing technology and utilizing online platforms, instructors can create interactive and immersive learning environments that cater to different learning styles and preferences. When students actively participate and connect with the content, their overall learning experience is greatly enhanced. However, it is important to acknowledge that fostering engagement requires a shared responsibility between instructors and students. Instructors need to design and deliver courses that are engaging, relevant, and meaningful, employing various pedagogical strategies and instructional techniques. On the other hand, students must be proactive and self-motivated, take advantage of the opportunities provided to them, and actively participate in the learning

process. This shared engagement was difficult for both instructors and students to achieve during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially given the associated stress and anxiety.

While many universities offer mental health services to their students, stress and anxiety still impact students' ability to concentrate on their studies and their research. Research suggests that a "whole university approach" is needed to adequately address students' mental health and well-being, which includes the library (Brewster and Cox 2023). However, it is still unclear how academic and theological libraries can actively contribute in a "whole university approach" to directly address mental health and transition from having a more supportive role to a more active role in mental health services (Brewster and Cox 2023). The Jean-Léon Allie Library implemented several techniques to help foster a sense of well-being and promote positive strategies and activities to improve mental health, but studies suggest that students might require long-term support as the future effects of the pandemic are hard to envision (Chen and Lucock 2022). Academic libraries will need to implement more creative ideas and strategies to help address students' mental health needs and ensure student success, retention, and an overall positive university experience. If instructors and librarians can prioritize and nurture engagement while also addressing mental health challenges, they can help create an environment that promotes academic achievement and personal growth, preparing students for success in their future endeavors.

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Appendix: Partial Questionnaire
(Questions focused on COVID-19, mental health, and engagement)

How did stress, anxiety, and/or emotional exhaustion about COVID-19-related health issues impact your ability to study?

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Please describe your level of engagement in class during this time (interest in the subject matter, attention to course material, professor's ability to hold your attention, etc.), especially during the COVID-19-related changes to your course(s).

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In your opinion, has COVID-19 impacted your engagement? Please explain how:

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Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience as a student during the last two years?

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