

The Digital Toolbox: Case Studies, Best Practices and Data for the Academic Librarian – Reflecting on a Year of COVID and the Impact that will Carry Forward



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Marking twelve months (and counting!) of navigating through the COVID pandemic, we are exploring some of the changes wrought by the virus that are here to stay. As one of the leading providers of eBooks to academic libraries, OverDrive Professional is particularly interested in the impact on physical spaces and librarians themselves. We're also analyzing circulation data and trends of digital content usage against pre-COVID numbers.

As the acute peaks of COVID restrictions subside and there is a return to "normal," there will be changes to where the work is expected to be done. How will this affect your library and workforce? According to Cushman & Wakefield's "Workplace Ecosystems of the Future" report, employees' expectations for increased remote work in the U.S. has reached 72%. The "new" workplace ecosystem will include office, home and third places.

- Full-time work remote will double from 5-6% to 10-12% of the workforce
- 50% of the workforce will become agile or flex working across the total workplace ecosystem.
- 90% of Gen X, millennials and Gen Z prefer flex work-space.

With these new workforce expectations, academic libraries and institutions of higher education now must prepare for an agile workforce, which means having the ability to work effectively on or off campus as well as creating the type of work environment that your workforce needs to be productive. In addition, they must budget for PPE (personal protective equipment) and additional protocols that were not a previous concern.

Students are also affected by these new protocols. Academic institutions are still finding a safe balance between remote and in-person learning. As a result, the impact on libraries is obvious. The ability for students to visit the physical library is often limited. On one hand, this provides challenges for the library, of course, but as work-from-home trends continue across various industries, this new balancing act will prepare students for life after college. Many will graduate into a world where these remote work policies dominate in ways they never have before.

Digital Content Usage Data Shows Increased Remote Learning

In addition to COVID's impact on our physical workspaces and workforce, students' interest and reliance on digital materials have also been profoundly changed. Just as we saw in OverDrive's other key markets — public libraries and K-12 schools — usage of eBooks and digital audiobooks in academic libraries grew exponentially in 2020, accelerating a trend that began in the mid-

2010s. This data is aggregated exclusively from the OverDrive network of more than 500 colleges and universities worldwide (most of which are located in North America).

OverDrive Professional data from 500+ Colleges & Universities

	YoY Growth 2018	YoY Growth 2019	YoY Growth 2020
Ebook circulation	22%	16%	47%
Audiobook circulation	35%	27%	14%
New Users	19%	13%	51%
Unique Users	16%	17%	32%

The most interesting stat is the increase in eBook growth compared to audiobook, which is counter to the trajectory pre-COVID. For the past decade, audiobooks have consistently seen annual growth from all OverDrive-supplied markets of 25 to 35% growth annually. While OverDrive has consistently seen strong double-digit growth in all formats and markets leading up to COVID, the pandemic has expedited both use and adoption across academia.

And the trend continues this year. In 2021, the growth in New and Unique Users from last year is translating to increased use. Checkouts are up 22% YoY and Holds are up 29% YoY through the first week of March 2021. New Users continue to flock to the digital collections as evidenced by an increase of 57% YoY from January 1 through March 4, 2021.

Genre Circ Data Reflects Social Trends

Digging deeper into the data, we see more of COVID's impact on the subject matter of the increased digital checkouts. The chart below shows the top 25 circulating genres (BISACs) across all of OverDrive Professional-served academic libraries. It is truly remarkable to note the meteoric growth of the Social Science/Discrimination genre. Increased social awareness around race and diversity was highly topical across media for the past year; still, this type of YoY growth from an already popular genre is almost a phenomenon.

Interestingly, fiction usage also increased significantly. In one major trend, institutions in 2020 shifted to offer digital campus reads which typically centered on fictional stories corresponding with timely social issues. Fiction also rose because of COVID. In early 2020, colleges were shutting down their physical libraries and access to fiction collections. OverDrive Professional provided a

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new way for them to offer a robust and deep fiction collection that was not available through other providers that specialize in databases or academic content.

Other outstanding performers that might not be expected from academic collections and collectively circulated in strong numbers: Religion-related titles grew 153% and Comics & Graphic Novels were up 283% in 2020.

OverDrive Professional data from 500+ Colleges & Universities

Subject	YOY Growth 2018	YOY Growth 2019	YOY Growth 2020
Social Science/ Discrimination	34%	46%	386%
Fiction / Classics	26%	22%	56%
Fiction / Coming Of Age	21%	70%	40%
Fiction / Literary	22%	23%	32%
Fiction / General	12%	20%	29%
Biography & Autobiography / Personal Memoirs	40%	39%	28%
Psychology / Social Psychology	56%	32%	26%
Fiction / Historical / General	18%	17%	18%
Fiction / Contemporary Women	47%	37%	17%
Juvenile Fiction / Fantasy & Magic	22%	5%	15%
Fiction/ Family Life / General	49%	17%	14%
Self-Help / Personal Growth / Success	43%	39%	12%
Young Adult Fiction / Romance / General	47%	3%	12%
Fiction / Thrillers / Suspense	19%	5%	10%
Juvenile Fiction / Action & Adventure / General	29%	13%	8%
Young Adult Fiction / Fantasy / General	25%	8%	7%
Self-Help / Motivational & Inspirational	65%	47%	7%
Fiction / Romance / Contemporary	17%	26%	5%
Young Adult Fiction / Action & Adventure / General	21%	9%	4%
Self-Help / Personal Growth / General	52%	37%	4%
Fiction / Fantasy / Contemporary	10%	11%	3%
Biography & Autobiography / Women	101%	109%	0%
Fiction / Fantasy / Epic	16%	27%	-3%
Fiction / Science Fiction / Action & Adventure	21%	11%	-7%
Fiction / Action & Adventure	14%	14%	-11%

Looking Back and Looking Ahead

COVID is not the first nor the last seminal event to bring about changes that will be delineated by life pre- and post-event. The Internet, 9/11 and the smartphone also each have that distinction. COVID abruptly forced academic libraries to serve students in a virtual state without warning or a clear

guide, yet it also showed how nimble libraries can be, rising to meet that challenge. Indeed, one of the positive outcomes of the past year's changes was being able to meet students' need for content regardless of location, which increased the value and utility of the academic library.

Now, what comes next? The overarching lesson from 2020 is clear. Academic libraries will be expected to apply what was learned to the next inevitable challenge, fully prepared with resources and protocols in place. Of course, libraries also must face any new challenge with a higher degree of difficulty caused by the fact that many of their budgets have been cut significantly. With this in mind, libraries have to get more out of the investments they are making in serving their students, both in person or virtually.

Based on the significant events of the past year, it is expected that the shift from print to digital content will continue to ensure students have the same access to the materials they need when they need it. The wondrous thing about digital is that it is not dependent on a crisis to meet student needs or provide the most value. Investing in digital is not like a car-boat that serves a highly niche need, nor Y2k prep or hurricane insurance, only useful in a worse-case scenario. OverDrive was seeing strong double-digit growth in digital content adoption for years before COVID for two compelling reasons: it solves access challenges and is cost-effective. Providing a wide range of digital resources for students is akin to having an energy-efficient home: You reap the rewards on both a day-to-day basis and over the long term.

References

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