

Minutes – virtual work – University Library Committee (ULC)
March 17-23, 2020; via Zoom

During our last meeting, the possibility had been mentioned of drafting a committee letter in support of full closure of the physical library spaces. After the meeting, a number of members expressed support for this idea, by email. A letter was drafted and sent to the Dean Walters. These minutes are a recap of the actions taken by email. These actions were taken via email in light of the unusual nature and urgency of the situation.

1. March 17, 2020: At the regular ULC meeting, conducted via Zoom, the idea was floated of writing a letter in support of the library's actions so far and recommending a revisit of the decision to leave the library common spaces open with restrictions. After discussion, no action was taken on this idea.
2. March 18, 2020: Several members expressed renewed support for a call to close the library common areas, and pointed out that other libraries in our area have closed their common areas. After some exchange of emails, a motion was made by email forwarded to all members and discussion was held. After discussion, the following motion was approved:
"Stefanie Metko, and others who volunteer, cooperate to draft a letter supporting immediate closure of the library common areas. The draft will be returned to this committee for approval or revision."
The motion passed (Metko motion, Kennedy second, vote passed by 10 yes, 0 no, 4 abstention).
3. March 19, 2020: A working group of Metko, Becker and Smith prepared a draft letter for the committee to review and make a recommendation on. After discussion, the letter below was approved for submission to Dean Walters. The motion to approve and forward the letter passed (Metko motion, Bogers second, vote passed by 10 yes, 0 no, 4 abstention).
4. March 23, 2020: On behalf of the committee, the chair forwarded the letter to Dean Tyler Walters. Dean Walters thanked the committee and acknowledged its receipt, as shown below.

LETTER FROM THE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY COMMITTEE:

TO: Dean, University Libraries, Tyler Walters

RE: Closing Newman Library and University Libraries' Branch Locations

Dear Dean Walters:

The University Library Committee is writing today to strongly advocate for the closure of Newman Library and all University Libraries' branch locations. As a committee, we recognize that this request is counterintuitive to the role that libraries traditionally play in times of crisis, but that keeping libraries open at this time puts our faculty, staff, students, and community in unnecessary risk.

On Tuesday, March 17, 2020, the American Library Association Executive Board (ALAE) made the [recommendation](#) that all libraries close to the public. This recommendation was made despite the important role that libraries play in their communities and the fact that libraries are often the only facilities to remain open to the public during times of upheaval, as was the case during the riots in Ferguson, MO in 2014. They made this recommendation based on guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other health authorities. They note that "keeping libraries open at this time has the potential to harm communities more than help."

Also on Wednesday, March 18, 2020, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) issued [this statement](#) where they "strongly urge the closure of in-person services at academic and research libraries."

From the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), 77 of 124 member libraries have now closed all of their physical facilities including, but not limited to: The University of Virginia, Harvard University, MIT, Columbia University, Duke University, Brown University, the University of Pennsylvania, and the Library of Congress, among others. Please follow [the ARL Member Libraries Status Sheet](#) for the most up to date information, as the numbers continue to climb on a daily basis.

A [public tracking site](#) for academic library response is available online. One of the early closures in the United States was at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Last Wednesday, March 15, 2020, Chris Bourg, Director of Libraries at MIT, wrote a [short piece](#) on her blog about why she chose to "close the libraries and suspend all in-person services." Her post addresses the argument that libraries need to remain open for reasons of equity "to support those students who have no access to computers, WiFi, or textbooks" noting that making "some students use shared spaces and resources while other students can safely participate in remote classes from well-equipped safe homes is not equitable either." Here at Virginia Tech, all students are required to have a laptop. [Comcast](#), [AT&T](#), [T-Mobile](#), and other wifi providers are offering their

services for free, and the library is scanning textbooks so that students have access to the material they need to complete their work.

We recognize that Newman Library is one of the few places where students, and sometimes faculty, staff, and our special community members, who lack at-home access to the internet, a computer, or a quiet place to study, can get what they need. We appreciate and acknowledge that the Libraries do need to continue to support faculty and students who are transitioning into online-only instructional environments, and we are committed to supporting these efforts. However, the building does not need to be open to continue providing necessary services.

The library also has robust offerings online. In fact, the majority of the research material in our collections is located in online journals and databases. Our librarians are actively working to help train instructional faculty on how to use Zoom and Canvas for delivering the high-quality instruction our institution is known for. These librarians are holding online consultation hours and helping many faculty move their courses online. During this global crisis, when all public health officials are advocating the closure of public spaces and strict adherence to social distancing techniques, we should follow their advice and close our public areas. We need to focus on supporting instruction through our online collections and virtual reference services rather than asking our staff and wage workers to report to work and staff a public services desk putting them and our patrons at greater risk for spreading infection.

The University Library Committee strongly advocates for the closure of Newman Library and all University Libraries' branch locations. Based upon the aforementioned sources and library closure data, we believe that the health and safety of our students, faculty, staff, and community need to be prioritized by following national health guidelines and the examples set forth by numerous other institutions/organizations.

Sincerely,

The University Library Committee (ULC)
Virginia Tech

Supporters:
Library Faculty Association Executive Board

RESPONSE FROM DEAN TYLER WALTERS:

Thank you, Creed, and everyone. While the Provost has asked me to collect any concerns about the Libraries during this time, I do respect the ULC's right to decide on any communications approach it wishes. I have a regularly scheduled meeting with the Provost this Wednesday. I will plan to review the ULC letter with him then, and any other communications I receive. Thank you for the good work the ULC is doing this year. I very much appreciate it.

Best,

Tyler

Tyler Walters
Dean, University Libraries and Professor
Virginia Tech

560 Drillfield Drive (0434)
Blacksburg, VA 24062-9001
Voice (540) 231-5595
E-Mail tyler.walters@vt.edu
<http://www.lib.vt.edu> [Twitter](#) | [Facebook](#) | [YouTube](#) | [Instagram](#)

On Mon, Mar 23, 2020 at 9:27 AM <crjones4@vt.edu> wrote:

Dean Walters –

Attached please find a letter drafted and approved by the University Library Committee in electronic coordination last Friday. I have copied the text of the letter below, for your convenience.

The original letter was addressed to President Sands and Provost Clarke as well, but we had some indication that the situation was rapidly changing and our recommendation may be overtaken by events. Thus, the latest view of the committee was to send the letter to you only, for you to use as you may see fit. If circumstances change in a material way, the committee may elect to send this, or a revised version, to the President and the Provost.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me on behalf of the committee.

Sincerely,

Creed Jones

Chair, University Library Committee