



EDITORIAL

Kelly McElroy
Robin Weis

Oregon State University

Distanced Engagement During COVID-19 Through Postcard Initiatives

Connecting with Communities

The Valley Library at Oregon State University (OSU) Corvallis operates as the main branch location of OSU Libraries, which includes the Guin Library in Newport and the Cascades Campus Library in Bend. As part of the University's land grant mission, OSU Libraries serve community members as well as students, staff, and faculty around the state. In the Teaching and Engagement Department, outreach is one of our main roles. Kelly McElroy is an outreach librarian and Robin Weis is the Student Outreach Coordinator, working 15 hours per week while also studying fine arts as an undergraduate transfer student.

While the OSU Libraries continually seek to better connect with our students, faculty, staff, and broader local communities, the challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic changed the scope and logistics involved in outreach planning and implementation. For example, the library building closed in March 2020. Robin was hired in the summer of 2020 to maintain a student-led collection of themed books, and to manage several other book displays. However, when the library reopened in September for the fall term with socially-distanced usage, we had to find other ways to connect with students. For the library's reopening, study tables were spaced 6 feet apart and required reservations to use, and many synchronous physical activities were moved to remote participation or canceled entirely.

“We expected that most students would be resistant to participate in synchronous events that would either place them in close proximity with others or would demand too much of their time, as they were already facing the stresses of re-acclimating to in-person courses.”

Postcards to Campus (PTC) started as a student-led outreach activity responding to the challenges of campus closures. PTC invited students and other OSU community members to share reflections on the pandemic through postcards, both print and digital, which were displayed in the library building and online. Before working on PTC, we focused on remote programming via Zoom. As students were already expected to attend all courses through Zoom, we reasoned that more synchronous online programming would likely just add to their stresses. Then, as courses moved mostly back to face-to-face for the Fall 2021

semester, we faced new challenges of meeting our community back, mostly on campus, fully masked and ready to engage. We expected that most students would be resistant to participate in synchronous events that would either place them in close proximity with others or would demand too much of their time, as they were already facing the stresses of re-acclimating to in-person courses. When campus shifted more onsite, we were able to adjust the framework of PTC by including more collaborators, a clearer call for action, and a more cohesive final outcome. The adapted project, Postcards to Public Healthcare Workers (PPHW), centers on allowing students to engage with the project in

accordance with their own interest and time. Both projects feature a call for submitted postcards created by the OSU community, and while the two projects may initially seem very similar, we wish to highlight the ways they reflect the challenges of remote engagement and the benefits to developing adaptable programs. Given that much of our outreach as a library has typically been face-to-face—whether through passive programming like displays, or in-person programming like tabling at campus events, these two projects have given us an opportunity to grow and to incorporate what we learned into other outreach projects.

Postcards to Campus

In Fall 2020, as many campus buildings were closed or had limited access, connection with the campus was a key concern for students. In his classes, Robin discussed with other students how remote programming negatively impacted his sense of connection with other art students on campus. Art students usually build community through shared studio space; in remote courses the closest approximation to shared studio space is a Zoom breakout room. Robin's classroom experience informed much of his interest in creating a sense of connection with remote students when physical and community connections were limited. Through brainstorming sessions, we reflected on various modes of distanced engagement and postcards came to mind. Post Secret (<https://postsecret.com/>), a call for anonymously-submitted postcards launched by Frank Warren, offered an early inspiration and model for submissions. However, rather than submitting secrets anonymously for exhibition in an online archive, we called on the OSU community to mail, virtually submit, or drop off their personal and OSU-specific sentiments related to the pandemic directly to campus for inclusion in a window display.

Working with the buildings team in our library, who manages the physical spaces, we chose the main floor rotunda—which has huge windows visible from the library quad—as a temporary installation site (see figure 1). Submitted postcards were shared through library social media, on the project's landing page, and then installed behind the windows. This window installation allowed for passersby to view the postcards from outside. (Although classes were largely remote, many students were still living on campus, and many workers remained onsite.) Then, the final home for PTC was the OSU Special Collections

and Archives Research Center) COVID Collecting Project (<https://guides.library.oregonstate.edu/COVIDCollecting>) archive. The COVID Collecting Project is a call for OSU community submissions of letters, documents, and any archivable materials related to the COVID pandemic. PTC fits perfectly into this archive because it



Figure 1: A photo from one of the promotional spaces. This window is at ground level, on a major thoroughfare through campus.

offers an intimate view of the OSU community during a distressing and isolated time.

To best reach OSU community members, calls for postcards were installed in the rotunda windows with a QR code leading to the project landing page (<https://spark.adobe.com/page/DoBPihuByIA4D/>). An accompanying window display, postcards, and submission box were installed at The Book Bin, a local bookstore. Beyond these physical displays, we promoted PTC through the Library's Instagram account (<https://www.instagram.com/valleylibrary/>), listings in OSU Today (a daily campus newsletter), by targeted emails sent to campus partners, and by word of mouth. The project landing page served as a hub with links to virtual and physical submission sites, the postcard archive, and an information resource about the creation of virtual postcards.

To best coordinate distributing, collecting, and archiving the postcards, we received cooperation from departments across the library. From within the Teaching and Engagement Department, Robin stocked and maintained postcard drop boxes inside and outside of the library, printed postcards, and created Instagram posts. Resource Sharing and Collection Maintenance agreed to insert postcards and instructions in shipped outgoing materials (which was a larger part of their work while courses were largely remote). Circulation workers kept an eye out for postcards which were returned along with library materials through the book drop. We invited all library employees to share the project with their liaison areas. Special Collections agreed to include the postcards in their COVID collecting archive, as noted above.

As we continued planning submission and distribution sites for postcards, we considered the submissions related to mental wellbeing that flooded Post Secret and decided to reach out to Counseling and Psychological Services on campus for guidance. They suggested including contact information listing their services and other local mental health services. This resulted in including the following statement on the blank printed postcards: "if you or a loved one is facing thoughts of self harm or suicide, contact 911 immediately. For non emergency mental health issues contact: the Benton County 24/7 Crisis hotline at: 1-888-232-7192 OSU's Counseling and Psychological Services at: 541-737-2131." This statement and variations of it were also included in the project's landing page and all related social media posts.

Collection sites included library material book drops, the main entrances of the library, the Memorial Union, the Corvallis-Benton County Public Library, The Book

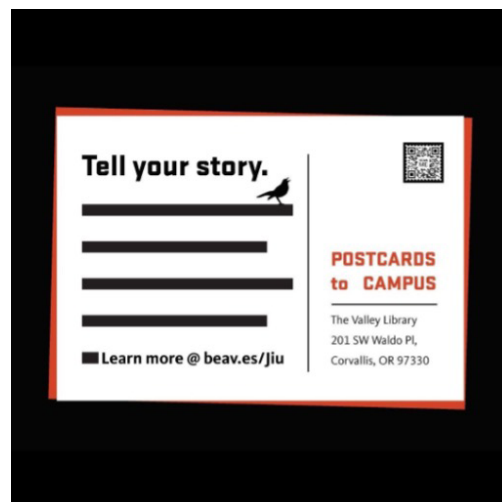


Figure 2: The call for postcards, posted on Instagram and shared as a poster



Figure 3: The backside of the blank postcards we printed for Postcards to Campus, including the updated language pointing participants to mental health services.

Bin, and Interzone (a local coffee shop). However, most submissions came through the mail or digital submission, rather than use of the drop boxes; this is perhaps to be expected, given that the only people present on campus at that time were student employees, faculty, and staff. Postcards were formatted with the Valley Library's return address to assist with ease of submission. We did not include postage, but there were many local submission sites. The library distributed over two hundred blank postcards in total. Ultimately, 37 physical cards were submitted and 27 were submitted virtually. Robin scanned postcards and shared them through Instagram and for several weeks, OSU Today featured postcards from this project at the top of each daily edition.

We deemed this project a success as measured against our initial goal to affirm connection to campus while courses were almost entirely remote. We did not know what kind of engagement we would get, and while the numbers are fairly small compared to the size of our overall student body, we had participants from all over—including Cleveland, Ohio and Omak, Washington. We were able to share the exhibit broadly, through a widely-read campus newsletter, through social media, through the physical display, and ultimately, as part of our permanent special collections. As we will see, this project also was well-received by library staff, which led to our next collaboration.

Postcards to Public Health Workers

Months after Postcards to Campus wrapped up, Kelly received a note from a librarian colleague who had recently been contacted by a faculty member in the College of Public Health and Human Sciences (CPHHS). The faculty member had shared an article about the challenges to public health workers as the pandemic stretched on, and asked if the library would be interested in partnering in some way to share gratitude to public health workers across the state. The librarian connected us to the faculty member, along with the liaison to the CPHHS. In the initial conversation, the library liaison brought up the Postcards to Campus project as a possible model to work from. While we had not originally thought of PTC as something we would repeat, it was immediately clear that the structure could be re-purposed well for this project.

This project—Postcards to Public Health Workers (PPHW)—differed from PTC in several notable ways. First, it was a collaboration with another unit on campus, CPHHS. This introduced new people with whom to coordinate and make decisions. We ultimately wrote up a program agreement which outlined the responsibilities of each partner team. Within the library, this included Robin largely taking on similar tasks as he had for PTC (e.g., creating the project landing page, coordinating social media posts, scanning postcards). The library liaison to Public Health worked with the Student Public Health Association to put together a LibGuide with relevant information (<https://guides.library.oregonstate.edu/public-health-workforce>). The students involved with the Student Public Health Association also made drop boxes, placed them around campus, and regularly collected physical postcards from those boxes. The Guin Library, which serves OSU's campus in Newport, hosted a box to get cards specifically for their local county. Our partners in CPHHS took on producing the postcards, and had an extensive



Figure 4: One postcard submitted to Postcards to Public Health Workers

campaign through student organizations and courses to engage students in participation

As opposed to PTC, this project targeted its audience to public health workers in the 32 local public health agencies in Oregon. While sharing completed cards publicly was part of the overall project plan, our ultimate goal was to have a polished product to share with each local public health agency. Robin worked with our CPHHS partners to think through what might work well, focusing on what would be easiest for health workers to view in their workplace or breakroom, without taking up too much time or space to install. Ultimately, we landed on sharing the postcards as a photobook, one printed for each agency. Special attention was paid to personalizing the photobooks by featuring postcards specifically made for each county.

In initial conversations, our partners in CPHHS were keen to get the project out and completed quickly. Our experience with PTC allowed us to encourage them to allow some extra time, and it ultimately stretched from late November 2021 through the end of January 2022. Ironically, this coincided with the surge from the omicron variant, and included the highest numbers of the entire pandemic to that date in Benton County, where our main campus is. While there are times when urgency matters, this project and its timing resonate with adrienne maree brown's (2017, 30) reminder to work at the speed of trust. The crucial goal at the heart of this project, to raise awareness of the struggles of public health workers and to remind us to share gratitude, remains timely and we can take the time we need to build the relationships to get us where we are going.

PPHW was a quantifiable success with over 150 physical postcard submissions and over 500 visits to the project landing page (<https://spark.adobe.com/page/btLhIE7O3OxVI/>). Much of this is due to the placement of postcard drop boxes in the library and across campus. While these additional sites made participation with PPHW easier, the maintenance of the drop boxes was simplified following PTC. While working with Circulation and Collections Maintenance to distribute and collect postcards for PTC, these methods did not have high submission outcomes. Our CPHHS partners took on the tasks of checking drop boxes, replenishing postcards, and sending submitted postcards to the library for documentation and social media posting.

The outcomes of this project reflect the benefits of performing at least some in-person outreach activities. Classes were largely back to in-person by the time PPHW launched, and members of the Student Public Health Association were able to go to classes to promote the project. Drop boxes posted in the library, in the College of Public Health and Human Sciences, and elsewhere on campus received greater numbers of submissions. Ultimately, it removed the barrier of having to find a stamp and mail in a card as many participants would have had to do for PTC. It is also worth noting that no virtual cards were submitted, while the virtual cards were quite popular for PTC.

Over the course of PTC, Robin noted that Instagram posts sharing project information often resulted in newly submitted postcards. Because of this, he suggested that a coordinated social media campaign should be used by all collaborators, with the ability to repost across platforms. As submissions filed in, a shared Google Drive with tailored social media posts, blurbs, and hashtags made virtual promotion much smoother. Throughout PTC, Robin had created social media posts, signage, and other promotional materials on an as-needed basis to encourage participation. By beginning PPHW with a shared drive for social media content, posting updates about the project was less time consuming and more of a natural part of the process.

While the landing page for both projects feature similar content (such as links to free design resources), the PPHW page includes specific suggestions about what to write to healthcare workers. Specific suggestions include “words of praise for healthcare workers,” and a visit to the Current State of Public Health Workforce Libguide (<https://guides.library.oregonstate.edu/public-health-workforce>) for further direction. While PTC offered a blank slate for personal reflections, PPHW invited a more targeted type of participation, specifically in recognition of healthcare workers.

Conclusions

In considering these two projects, Robin and Kelly both learned valuable lessons. For Robin, PTC offered an initial foray into project planning, goal-setting, and logistics for outreach, particularly in a digital format. PPHW expanded his view of outreach, incorporating additional collaborators and highlighting the need for shared goals, clear project frameworks, and open communication. As a student employee, he had very little experience coordinating with groups outside of the library beyond providing basic assistance. With PPHW he was able to use the project framework of PTC that he had helped develop, and share new insights based on his experience. This familiarity gave him the confidence to have substantive feedback and play a more active role in this and other collaborations.

For Kelly, these projects highlighted the importance of relationships in outreach. The PTC project started from a strong foundation within the library, seeking internal support in a way that fit into the workflow of multiple departments. Within the library and among broader community participants, the goal of connection during a time of isolation shone through. Without realizing it, the success of this initial project built a pathway for future projects. Not every email inquiry turns into a major outreach initiative, but in this case, the fact that our colleagues had been well-informed about PTC allowed us to find fruitful partnerships and reuse relevant materials. Finally, it provided an opportunity to build relationships both within the library and around campus through these projects. Making opportunities for student workers to truly lead outreach projects has benefits for the library, for the students, and for the campus community.

As we write this, our county faces its highest-yet COVID infections. The pandemic is not over, and we expect that academic libraries will be facing the shifting spectrum between “fully in-person” and “fully remote” for a long time to come. Libraries will do well to consider adaptable programs to serve changing needs, but also to recognize the limitations of an ongoing crisis: on time, on energy, and on capacity. Projects like the two we have discussed, which can iterate and evolve and be reused, and which build on and strengthen relationships, can be a part of any library’s meaningful outreach work.

Acknowledgments

We wish to thank our colleagues in the OSU Libraries, as well as our partners in the College of Public Health and Human Sciences. We are deeply grateful to Sandi Phibbs, who reviewed a draft and provided useful feedback.

Authorship Note: Both authors contributed equally to this piece. Our names are listed in alphabetical order.

References

brown, adrienne maree. 2017. *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*. Edinburgh: AK Press, 2017.