

**Maintaining Comics Programming During Times of Institutional Change: Hanging in There**

**During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

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### Abstract

This article outlines the comic and zine programming at Oregon State University's Valley Library before, during, and as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. It offers techniques for investigating pop culture events during times of institutional confusion, connecting with physically distanced patrons, and methods for maintaining joyful, sustainable relationships with stakeholders including library staff. The programming supported in this article touches on the literary and artistic aspects of zines and comics, but is primarily centered in pleasure, affinity-building, and self-directed, embodied learning.

*Keywords:* comics, zines, sustainability, change management, pandemic response, library programming, collection development, pleasure reading, embodied learning

## Introduction

Pop culture programming such as comic conventions and zine-making events are opportunities to build community and cultivate joy (Laddusaw and Brett, 2020). When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, Oregon State University Libraries and Press (OSULP) staff was in the early stages of expanding its comics programming. We adapted to the unprecedented changes by researching alternatives and strengthening our community relationships. Although we weren't able to sustain every element of our pre-crisis dreams, we pivoted to address unexpected circumstances and maintain elements of joy. Furthermore, the replacement programming and its resulting documentation will be invaluable in planning future events.

In February 2020, librarians were preparing The Valley Library for its first Free Comic Book Day, encouraged by the successes of a pilot game night, zine-making events, and Free Comic Book Day celebrations a new hire had overseen at his previous institution (Welhouse, 2020). As the primary library at a R1 research university of close to 35,000 students, the event had the potential to be pretty big. Volunteers were excited to connect their hobbies to our collections and engage with students on a different level than usual.

Although we cancelled Free Comic Book Day, we maintained momentum from a distance. We continued the comic collection development project and shifted zine programming to quaranzine-friendly take-home kits. We also stayed in touch with industry contacts and

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investigated online comic conventions. Although we decided the online convention model wasn't right for our community, the research provided us with ideas for future projects.

Adapting to the challenges of the COVID-19 and unrelated employee turnover has been difficult, but finding space within drastic institutional change for joyful activities has been helpful.

## Literature Review

Libraries are increasingly recognized as third places, community hubs that require no expense to visit and where everyone is welcome (Oldenburg, 1999). The pandemic has shown more than ever the significance of social interaction and supportive communities for resilience and overall well-being. Comics likewise serve many roles in libraries, including objects of academic study, pleasure reading, and art (Wood, 2018). Over one in four public libraries have hosted events based on comic books or related media (Schneider 2014). Jack Phoenix's (2020, p. 53) review of comic programming in libraries concludes, "Librarians are rarely asking anymore, 'Should we carry comics?' but, 'What can we do to make our comics even more accessible?'"

Zines have likewise seen interest from librarians, both for their content and as objects of art (Thomas, 2009; Buchanan, 2012; Creasp, 2014). There is a lot of crossover between zines and comics. A zine may be a comic, contain comics, or merely be shelved with the comics due to similarity in size and perceived social cachet. Even if a zine doesn't contain comic art, it may boast a juxtaposition of images and texts that make it a close relative of a comic.

Youth mental health is a topic of national concern, not only due to the pandemic, but from stressors including climate change, poverty, and social injustice. The American Academy of Pediatrics released a statement in October 2021 declaring a national emergency for youth mental health with suicide as the second leading cause of death (AAP, 2021). Any opportunity to address the mental health of communities, and youth in particular, should be at the forefront of libraries and library planning especially for academic libraries with student populations. Due to impacts of the pandemic, 75% of youth ages 18 to 24, the age range of the majority of students served by academic libraries, noted one or more negative mental health symptoms and nearly 25% have contemplated suicide (Czeisler et al., 2020; Bladek, 2021). Establishing services and resources to support the well-being and mental health of students is of increasing importance and should be integrated into academic libraries as a permanent, essential feature.

Comics offer patrons a chance to de-stress away from ubiquitous Zoom windows. Although any pleasure reading may be beneficial, studies on comics in healthcare suggest more direct links to promoting empathy and understanding (Anderson et al., 2016; Bradley et al., 2021). De-stressing and wellness activities can be offered by libraries through pop culture items, whether through casual displays, circulating collections, or hosting events. Collections also offer an opportunity to collaborate with local enthusiast organizations and comic book stores (Wood, 2018).

## Pre-Pandemic Comics Programming

Following the success of Welcome Week Game Nite, OSU librarians began planning in fall 2019 for Free Comic Book Day (FCBD) 2020. It would have been a pilot event that built on Game

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Nite's momentum. Plans for the event drew on the project lead's prior FCBD experience as well as lessons drawn from some of the "hundreds of libraries across the United States and Canada" that "now host or participate in a convention in some fashion" (Phoenix, 2020, p. 153; Slobuski et al., 2020; Wood, 2018).

As with other pop culture programming, student interest and volunteer capacity would determine which elements would be successful (Slobuski et al., 2020). The heart of the event would be a partnership with a local comic book store. The store would sell us at-cost copies of promotional comic books from Diamond Comic Distributors' nationwide Free Comic Book Day event, which we would distribute to patrons along with donations from publishers and community members. Many publishers provide contact options on their websites for soliciting donations. Diamond also provides free comic books to libraries without a local comic store through its Library Partner Program.

As event planning gained steam, we decided on an agenda: Board game demos overseen by volunteers from the comic book store, viewing a documentary on creating comics available through Kanopy, crafts, *Dungeons & Dragons*, a zine creation and sharing station, video game stations, cosplay, and a room filled with free comics.

Our internal workflow began with a proposal to the Library Administration, Management, and Planning group (LAMP). The proposal connected the programming to departmental goals, indicated preliminary staffing requirements (including volunteers), provided a timeline, and requested a budget. The budget included promotional comic books, snacks for attendees, and a list of measurable outcomes.

The organizing team agreed Valley's comic collection hadn't been updated in a while, and a comics-focused event would be the perfect time to engage in further collection development. As Francisca Goldsmith explains, "Collection development continues to be a professional activity that differentiates the library's mission from the missions of other agencies that deal with graphic novels" (2005). Our mission, in this case, was to diversify our collection and remind campus stakeholders of our openness to purchasing a variety of resources.

We polled seven campus cultural groups, as well as librarians and instructors on comics, graphic novels, manga, and similar visual works they would like to be in our collection. Purchases were tracked on a spreadsheet, with preference given to requests made by the OSU community, finishing limited series we had already started, and short series.

We also contacted publishers for prize support and tracked their responses in a spreadsheet. Many publishers offer library outreach through regular newsletters, making convention support a streamlined process. However, they never mailed any packages due to the frightening, confused early days of the pandemic, the temporary closure of the Valley Library, and the subsequent cancellation of Free Comic Book Day 2020, locally and nation-wide.

## Pre-Pandemic Zine Programming

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Like many universities, OSU has been unofficial home to cartoonists and zinesters for a long time. Zines first officially became part of Valley Library programming around 2015, as part of the Crafternoon drop-in crafting program. Crafternoons include zine-creation workshops and other low-stress creative activities like making buttons and painting rocks. For zine workshops, the library provides students with construction paper, magazine pages, clip art pages, scissors, glue, and a welcome environment for creation.

In addition to being a fun, thoughtful activity, zine programming supports information literacy instruction. It's one thing to say, "Authority is constructed and contextual," and another, more embodied mode to break out the scissors and glue to reify the statement (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2016). Laura Saunders' analysis of the ACRL "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education" invites librarians to view information literacy as an issue of social justice, where access and comprehension of information are tied to people's political power. Information exists within existing power structures, replicating them through supposed neutrality (Saunders, 2017). Many of the zines that pass through the Valley Library are on controversial or underrepresented topics, so they're excellent demonstrations of counter-narratives. Reading and creating zines invites students to identify and interrogate dominant narratives surrounding politics, their surroundings, and their own lives.

Zines appear frequently in the work of Outreach Librarian Kelly McElroy. Since 2015 McElroy has used zines in a first-year seminar, a long-running honors colloquium, outreach to the Campus Bridge programs, one-shot workshops, and internal library programs such as in-services (McElroy and Jackson, 2021). She also created a LibGuide, which has been helpful for guiding workshops and sharing the Library's work.

This successful programming led to circulation staff creating of a zine-creation kit within our circulating collection of maker kits. The zine kit includes several types of paper, a zine template, and clip art pages, as well as a swivel stapler, X-ACTO knife, rubber cutting mat, bone folder, Sharpies, inkpads, and sample zines. Circulation has been good.

## Comics During the Pandemic

By the end of March 2020, the Valley Library closed to the public and students shifted to remote classes. During the resulting budgetary uncertainty, the comic purchasing project was temporarily placed on hold. After non-essential purchases resumed, the FCBD team followed up on the purchase order intending to create a fun, welcoming display for returning students. Although students didn't return as quickly as planned, the comics circulated as part of our home delivery program.

Although the library was closed to the public, we continued to provide access to materials. Valley librarians suspended overdue fines and renewed extant items. Home delivery, a service we originally developed for students taking hybrid or online classes, was extended to everyone. If an item was available for checkout, we would mail it. It was a confusing time, where upper-level decisions changed daily. Many patrons contacted the library for updates and clarification, so our priority was supporting their needs.

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The Free Comic Book Day event was quickly rescheduled for “when things return to normal”, a concept fraught with competing notions of normalcy. Oregon’s mask mandate, which required individuals to wear masks in all indoor public spaces until March 2022, coupled with the prevalence of contagious COVID-19 variants, encouraged us to direct our programming moxie elsewhere for many years. Although “normal” remains a nuanced target, the FCBD team is exploring a game night celebration in late 2022 and a Free Comic Book Day celebration in 2023.

As part of the Valley Library’s investigation substitute programming, one librarian investigated online comics events. Through online fandom events (e.g. WisCon in May, 2020; Emerald City Comicon; San Diego Comic Con’s Comic Con Online; Manga in Libraries webinars) and one-off industry webinars, we got a feel for what was happening outside the academic sphere. These events were enjoyable, but didn’t capture the same atmosphere as in-person celebrations. The topics were creative and the speakers were delightful, but our students were already reporting reduced engagement and fatigue from virtual webinars. Adding more screens to the mix, even loaded with fun, didn’t seem like the way to go.

Although we passed on hosting an online Free Comic Book Day event, we continued to read vendor newsletters, participate on comics librarian Twitter, and monitor the ALA Graphic Novels and Comics Round Table (<https://twitter.com/libcomix>) for opportunities. The results have been shared at staff meetings and in informal conversations to maintain enthusiasm and signal engagement to library administration.

## Zines During the Pandemic

During the early days of the pandemic, our zine strategy focused on providing materials. Kelly McElroy’s honors colloquium switched to zine kits patterned on the ones from earlier Crafternoons. When the Valley Library reopened with limited access to the public, student workers and the Crafternoon team sprang into action with take-home craft kits for patrons. Each zine kit contained construction paper, magazine pages, clip art pages, a blank zine template, and two zines with creation and writing prompts. Other kits highlighted lightweight crafts like origami and bracelets.

The zine kits proved especially popular, often running out before other kits, paving the way for subsequent programming. Their popularity continued even when the library fully reopened. In June 2022, the Crafternoon team attended a zinefest hosted by the Pride Center. As a result of this relationship, OSU librarians are now working with the Pride Center on future zine events, including workshops and a guest speaker

Zines demonstrate and maintain community. As we’ve supported zinesters, we’ve receive strong positive feedback and repeat visitors to our zine programming. Alison Piepmeier attributes this type of connection to the embodied aspect of zine creation and consumption, which highlights ease of participation and the physicality of the medium. In this analysis of third-wave feminist zines, Piepmeier focuses on “mobilizing particular human experiences that are links to the body [...] these zines leverage their materiality into a kind of surrogate physical interaction and offer mechanisms for creating meaningful relationships” (2009, p. 59). It’s little wonder that students

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who often feel stressed and isolated see value in personalized, easily sharable methods of communication and self-expression.

Our community's continued interest in zines, especially during a confusing time, has greatly increased the number of zines in the library. Student workers provided material for a Zine Month book display. Building on the display's success, several librarians are now working with an interested instructor to establish a circulating zine collection. The initial topics match student interests from previous events: the OSU community, BIPOC identities, punk, sci-fi, and comics.

## Takeaways

Through adapting and reflecting on the ongoing pandemic, our library has developed new awareness and practices regarding our pop culture resources and events. These lessons can be extended to other academic institutions and used in tandem with additional reflective tools for assessment:

- Research how other libraries are responding. You don't have to do this alone!
- Evaluate areas in the budget that can be aided by grants. While regular funding is more sustainable, a one-time grant can give a weak comic collection the jolt it needs to thrive.
- Create online alternatives and supplemental options for physical collections, such as guest speakers, reading groups, craft projects, and online socialization.
- Get materials to patrons, even if it means figuring out new processes as you go. Are your collections providing information to your community during unprecedented times? Then you're doing outreach! (Farrell and Mastel, 2016)
- Host informal staff events to aid morale. Even if joy is unlikely, you can still create moments of fellowship.
- Communicate changes briefly, but in as many ways as possible. For example, consider social media, posters, displays, signs, e-mail, word of mouth, and community listservs. Not every method will work (see below), but it's easy to miss communicating with a community because of differing ideas of the best form of communication (American Library Association, 2012).
- Not everything is going to work. Don't take it personally. Be gracious and understanding if there isn't capacity.

The benefits of detailed documentation and formative note-taking cannot be overstated, especially during times of great change. Shifting staff roles coupled with the hardships of the pandemic illuminated many gaps in our procedures. Nevertheless, these policies often provided starting places, contact information, and other workable data. Moreover, as the workload subsided and routine began to reassert itself, these policies became important tools for reflection. Even quick notes on what worked and what didn't work provided assessment data.

We ended up refocusing a lot of our programming energy into research and strengthening existing relationships. Free Comic Book Day led to a collection development project that drew on input from student groups. Likewise, student workers dove into the distance zine programming. Contributing to these larger efforts aided the library as a whole as well as contributing to students' experiential learning goals (Everett, 2021). Student coordinators have unique insights into what grabs other students' attention, whether it's for a zine display, adding

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comics to a library display, or more active programming. Celebrating these insights celebrates the students' value to your organization and provides them with open-ended experience.

### Conclusion

The Valley Library explored creative alternative solutions to its comics and zine programming during a difficult period of COVID-19 uncertainty, reduced physical access, and staff turnover. Experience from navigating impacts of the pandemic on library resources and services has provided insights into establishing sustainable collections.

The future of libraries is in “holding a community together. Librarians have shifted from caretaking a collection to truly caretaking the community itself” (Lankes, 2021). Community response to the library during the pandemic has illuminated the breadth of resources libraries can and should offer. Comics and zines provide not only entertainment, but rich tools for facilitating communication, political engagement, learning, and joy during difficult times.

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