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Postprint on COVID-19 Response Strategies of Libraries at “Double First-Class” Universities in Wuhan

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] The emergence of the novel coronavirus has significantly impacted various industries and sectors, while also testing the emergency service capabilities of university libraries. Using the COVID-19 pandemic as a case study, this paper examines the innovative service capacities of libraries in unconventional contexts, with the aim of providing references for improving university libraries' emergency service capabilities going forward. [Method/Process] Through web-based investigation, online interviews, and case analysis, this study systematically reviews the emergency services implemented by university libraries in Wuhan's "Double First-Class" institutions during the pandemic, analyzes existing problems, and explores corresponding solution strategies. [Results/Conclusion] University libraries' emergency service capabilities face challenges including insufficient attention to electronic teaching reference development, limited professional features that reflect the strengths of library and information science expertise, constrained channels for online training and consultation feedback, and inadequate librarian competencies and resource remote access systems. Enhancing awareness and planning for emergency service and management, improving remote access capabilities for digital resources, providing comprehensive multi-level service support, developing consultation platforms based on user needs, and strengthening the development of librarians' new service capabilities will constitute important measures for improving university libraries' emergency service capabilities.

Full Text

Strategies of “Double First-Class” University Libraries in Wuhan During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] The outbreak of COVID-19 has profoundly impacted all sectors of society and challenged the emergency service capabilities of university libraries. Using the pandemic as a case study, this paper explores new service capabilities of libraries under abnormal circumstances to provide reference for enhancing university libraries’ emergency service capacity in the future.

[Method/Process] Through network investigation, online interviews, and case analysis, this study examines the emergency services implemented by “Double First-Class” university libraries in Wuhan during the pandemic, analyzes existing problems, and explores corresponding solutions.

[Result/Conclusion] University library emergency service capabilities face issues such as insufficient attention to electronic teaching reference construction, limited professional features reflecting library and information science advantages, constrained channels for online training and consultation feedback, and inadequate librarian competencies and remote access systems. Key measures for improvement include raising awareness and planning for emergency services, enhancing remote access to digital resources, providing comprehensive tiered service guarantees, building user-needs-based consultation platforms, and strengthening librarians’ new service capabilities.

Keywords: emergency service capability; university library; COVID-19

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The emergence of the novel coronavirus in 2019 has significantly affected all walks of life. To maintain a critical front in epidemic prevention and control, the Ministry of Education issued the “Notice on Postponing the Spring 2020 Semester” on January 27, 2020 [1], which received positive responses from provinces and municipalities. During this special period, although libraries were not on the front lines, their regular operations and services were substantially impacted. For university libraries, providing emergency services represents not only a social responsibility but also an opportunity to address reader needs and expand new services. How university libraries can enhance their emergency service capabilities to handle both foreseeable and unforeseeable future emergencies while ensuring stable delivery of regular services, and how they can identify

key issues and seize opportunities for service transformation and upgrading during major public events, are important practical questions worthy of in-depth discussion.

2. Related Research Status

Research on library emergency services has primarily focused on five areas. First, emergency prevention and contingency planning. Classifying and grading library crises forms the foundation for emergency services. Kong Fanchao constructed a classification and grading system for library crises based on quantitative calculations and model analysis [2][3]. Yang Min, Liu Yongmei, and Xie Xiao employed network surveys to investigate the status quo of emergency prevention management in university libraries from perspectives including website columns, content, equipment, and contingency plans [4]. Second, emergency service strategies. Chen Youzhi, Liu Ping, and Li Chen proposed macro-level strategic positioning and resource allocation for library emergency services during emergencies [5]. Third, emergency service systems and mechanisms. Ke Ping argued that emergency services require establishing guarantee mechanisms, linkage mechanisms, and information sharing mechanisms [6]. Wei Yongli et al. constructed a public health emergency response mechanism for libraries covering organizational systems, contingency plans, team building, emergency drills, monitoring and early warning systems, and information reporting [7]. Liang Yiming and Xie Xiaoyan advocated building a public health governance and service system for university libraries to strengthen their responsibilities and functions in public health education and effectively respond to various public health emergencies [8]. Fourth, specific emergency service practices. Yang Jixian chronologically described the operations of Hong Kong Lingnan University Library during the SARS outbreak [9]. Zhang Jing systematically reviewed and summarized the disaster emergency information service practices of the U.S. National Library of Medicine [10]. Tan Huan analyzed the electronic resource services of 42 “Double First-Class” university libraries during the pandemic from hardware, software, and feature perspectives [11]. Tian Yunxiang and Wu Wenjun examined the management measures of university libraries in Taiwan during the pandemic [12]. Fifth, emergency service capability evaluation. Lu Mingfang and Zhu Bei constructed a library crisis management capability evaluation index system from three dimensions: crisis prevention, crisis handling, and crisis recovery [13].

Before the pandemic, domestic research primarily focused on theoretical explorations after major events, lacking specific measures during events. Therefore, this study examines the services of university libraries in the epicenter during the pandemic, analyzes existing problems, and explores solutions to provide reference for improving emergency service capabilities and supplement theoretical research with practical cases.

3. Current Status of Emergency Services in Wuhan’s “Double First-Class” University Libraries

Since Wuhan’s lockdown, university libraries in the area have closed and suspended all offline services. Facing massive online service demands, libraries had to overcome practical difficulties such as dispersed staff, equipment shortages and aging, and missing data, while urgently addressing the contradiction between limited online service capacity and surging demand. Compared to other regions, Wuhan’s university libraries faced the most severe emergency service challenges, making their decision-making, confusions, and solutions particularly enlightening. As “Double First-Class” universities represent China’s top-tier institutions with demonstrative library service capabilities, this study selected seven Wuhan “Double First-Class” university libraries [14] as research subjects: Huazhong University of Science and Technology Library, Wuhan University Library, China University of Geosciences (Wuhan) Library, Wuhan University of Technology Library, Huazhong Agricultural University Library, Huazhong Normal University Library, and Zhongnan University of Economics and Law Library. Through network investigation, online interviews, and case analysis, this study comprehensively reviews their emergency services during the pandemic (survey period: February 1–May 31, 2020). The findings reveal five main service types: digital resources remote access, academic resources integration and push, online lectures and training, reading therapy, and social services for reading-based epidemic response. Specific service items are shown in Table 1 .

3.1 Digital Resources Remote Access Service

Digital resources constitute the primary source of teaching and research information for university faculty and students [15]. During the pandemic, demand for remote access surged dramatically. To ensure normal access, Wuhan’s “Double First-Class” university libraries implemented multiple measures: (1) Virtual Private Network (VPN), where users connect to the internet, locate VPN servers, and access campus network resources as a springboard [16]; (2) Proxy servers, where users configure browsers to send requests through proxy servers that convert off-campus IPs to on-campus IPs for resource access; (3) Shibboleth-based cross-domain authentication, where users access Shibboleth-protected applications, obtain institutional authentication, and gain resource access based on authorization; (4) Short-term off-campus roaming accounts, where users access digital resources directly through account credentials provided by database vendors or obtained via campus email registration; and (5) Restricted free access, including limitations on usage time (e.g., until February 29, 2020), content scope (partial resources only), and access methods (online viewing without download permissions).

3.2 Academic Resources Integration and Push Service

During the “suspended classes, ongoing learning” period, universities actively promoted online teaching. To minimize pandemic impacts on faculty instruc-

tion and student learning, Wuhan's libraries continuously pushed academic resources through WeChat official accounts and websites, including: (1) Collection and push of free digital resources. Some libraries emphasized timeliness with "one-database-one-push" approaches (e.g., Huazhong Normal University, Huazhong Agricultural University), while others pushed resources in phases and categories. Wuhan University Library established a "Winter Vacation Teaching and Research" column, organizing 21 thematic resource recommendations by resource type (academic journals, patents, statistics), discipline (law, economics), and purpose (learning, testing, leisure, career planning, thesis writing) [17]. (2) Electronic teaching reference push. None of the seven libraries had self-built e-teaching reference systems. Some temporarily launched e-teaching references during the pandemic. For example, Wuhan University of Technology Library initiated a "white + black," "5+2" work model from February 5, leveraging student volunteers to complete e-textbook registration. With publishers closed and unreachable by phone, librarians contacted publishers and e-book suppliers through official websites, emails, WeChat, and QQ, compiling a 693-page guide for accessing course e-textbooks, achieving 82% coverage for undergraduate courses within three weeks [18]. Others relied on professional teaching reference databases, such as Huazhong University of Science and Technology Library providing access to iTextbook, iAcademic, and Founder Apabi discipline teaching reference databases. (3) COVID-19 related academic research push. Libraries actively contacted publishers and research institutions to collect OA and free resources on the novel coronavirus, including The Lancet's special issue, Springer Nature's 2019-nCoV resource center, JAMA's free "Novel Coronavirus" content, Wiley's open coronavirus-related academic content, and Clarivate's free BioWorld news coverage.

3.3 Online Lectures and Training Services

Table 2 shows online lectures and training services provided by Wuhan's libraries, comprising regular online courses and specialized pandemic-related training. Regular courses focused on resource usage, literature retrieval, patent search, and thesis writing. The eight staff members of Huazhong Normal University Library's "Literature Retrieval and Utilization" course team overcame challenges of no computers, unbacked-up materials, and needing to revise courseware, successfully delivering three core general education classes to undergraduates using only mobile phones [19]. Specialized training primarily addressed information literacy education for identifying false information. As COVID-19 spread, an "infodemic" erupted, affecting public psychology and emergency service order. Improving information literacy to quickly identify misinformation became crucial. Wuhan University Library used its mobile library APP to create an epidemic prevention column, collecting authoritative information and popularizing prevention knowledge to help readers distinguish truth from falsehood. Huazhong Agricultural Library launched original "Epidemic Battle Express" information literacy debunking specials [20].

3.4 Reading Therapy Services

Major public events cause psychological anxiety while creating opportunities for reading therapy and promotion. Reading therapy solves personal psychological or behavioral problems by guiding targeted reading of relevant materials, with selection based on therapeutic goals, intervention levels, disease types, and patient characteristics—a critical process determining effectiveness [21]. Wuhan’s libraries provided two main services: (1) Reading promotion during the pandemic. Libraries in the epicenter emphasized psychological counseling. Table 3 shows reading promotion services. Huazhong University of Science and Technology Library immediately issued a “Stay Home and Read” initiative on January 23, the day Wuhan locked down. Wuhan University Library invited teaching experts, psychology professors, music professionals, and librarians to recommend professional books on medicine and psychology, plus soothing music and leisure films for epidemic periods. (2) Online activities to alleviate anxiety. Table 4 presents these activities, divided into one-way output (thematic exhibitions, art shows, book/film reviews, reading works) and two-way interactive activities (reading check-ins and knowledge contests).

3.5 Social Services for Reading-Based Epidemic Response

Beyond participating in university epidemic response, Wuhan’s libraries responded to Hubei Provincial University Library Committee and Library Society initiatives by donating books to Fangcang hospitals. Huazhong University of Science and Technology Library selected over 140 types of popular reading materials (3,240+ volumes) from 10,000+ target publications and donated them to frontline medical staff and patients. Wuhan University Library donated 270+ types of literature and art books (nearly 10,000 volumes) to Fangcang hospitals in Qiaokou and Wuchang districts, and shared free e-book resources with the Hubei Library Society’s epidemic support group [20]. The donations were praised for materially supporting epidemic response and boosting morale [22]. Libraries also responded to medical team needs—Wuhan University Library promptly delivered borrowing services, magazines, and Wuhan University cherry blossom postcards to Hubei medical team members upon receiving their inquiries [23].

4. Problems in University Library Emergency Service Capabilities

4.1 Insufficient Attention to Electronic Teaching Reference Construction

As academic institutions serving teaching and research [24], libraries rely fundamentally on literature resources [25]. During “suspended classes, ongoing learning,” e-teaching references became critical. Libraries with established e-teaching reference systems could proactively meet urgent needs, while those without could only passively respond by pushing time-limited free resources, trialing

databases, or launching emergency platforms. Although Huazhong University of Science and Technology Library quickly pushed 32 teaching-related databases and contacted iTextbook and iAcademic providers, limited online work conditions, security testing, and communication needs created time lags, resulting in “people waiting for books.” This reflects unbalanced literature resource system construction—overemphasizing disciplines and research while neglecting teaching, particularly lacking comprehensive e-teaching reference service systems.

4.2 Limited Professional Characteristics Reflecting Library and Information Science Advantages

University libraries’ educational and knowledge service functions provide ample space for specialized deep services in information management, data mining, and intelligence analysis. As vital components of higher education, libraries bear responsibility for advancing information literacy education to cultivate abilities in retrieving, screening, utilizing, and evaluating information. The COVID-19 infodemic created opportunities for practical information retrieval and screening services. However, libraries showed insufficient attention to the infodemic, failing to recognize their inherent advantages in controlling it. Wuhan’s libraries didn’t release information screening techniques promptly. While providing resource push services, most remained at the level of simple forwarding or basic categorization, with limited deep disciplinary services combining LIS expertise, disciplinary characteristics, and social hotspots for dynamic tracking or research topic services. This superficial information push reflects inadequate deep disciplinary service capabilities.

4.3 Limited Channels for Online Training and Consultation Feedback

Training constitutes the main pathway for information literacy education. In the mobile learning era, library education has gradually shifted from literature retrieval courses and lectures to a “dual-drive model” of on-site plus online education. Most libraries had already launched “micro-lectures” and “micro-courses” before the pandemic, but the shift to “closed offline, flourishing online” revealed problems. Using Huazhong University of Science and Technology Library as an example: online training primarily relied on one-way website and WeChat text/video pushes, lacking interactive elements like Weibo, short videos, or mini-programs. Reader consultation mainly used asynchronous methods like email and WeChat message replies, resulting in one-way communication channels and poor feedback mechanisms. Although subject service QQ groups, WeChat groups, and micro-campus platforms were used to improve information dissemination and consultation, real-time publishing and interactive feedback remained limited, failing to meet expectations for synchronous consultation.

4.4 Inadequate Librarian Capacity and Remote Access Systems

The pandemic tested libraries’ rapid response capabilities, with digital resource remote access directly affecting reaction speed. Remote access has long been the

most consulted issue during holidays, yet libraries often relied solely on VPN. Wuhan University Library had provided three off-campus access methods before the pandemic and, anticipating increased demand, actively collected database account information, contacted vendors for access, monitored database operations daily, and resolved failures. Collaborating with the university IT center, it successively applied for CARSIBibliothek services for nearly 40 commonly used databases like CNKI and WoS, and provided account-password access for 51 databases, ensuring barrier-free off-campus usage [26]. Libraries not in the CARSIBibliothek alliance before the outbreak faced forced service reshaping challenges. Huazhong University of Science and Technology Library's experience shows: after Wuhan's lockdown on January 23, the library responded on January 26, deployed CARSIBibliothek access, established a working group on January 27, completed testing by February 3, and notified readers. New methods and platforms required coordination between resource acquisition, information consultation, and technical departments to resolve browser incompatibility and mobile access issues, plus support from university network management. The lengthy process from deployment to resolution indicates librarians' integrated resource, information processing, and coordination capabilities need improvement.

5. Strategies for Enhancing University Library Emergency Service Capabilities

5.1 Improve Awareness and Planning for Emergency Services

Although emergency services are temporary, they naturally reflect comprehensive service capabilities under abnormal circumstances. The end of a major public event marks the transition of emergency services back to regular services but doesn't mean abandoning crisis awareness. Effective emergency services integrate emergency management into daily operations, forming normalized management concepts that actively adapt to new situations and explore transformation paths. Concrete actions include: (1) "Preparation beforehand"—incorporate emergency service management into future development plans and daily deployments, revising contingency plans. Current publicly available plans mostly address safety issues like fires and floods, lacking reader-oriented emergency services, necessitating clarification of emergency service content, forms, and requirements. (2) "Evidence-based actions"—include emergency service management systems in regular regulations, clarifying goals, key content, organizational structures, and coordination mechanisms with flattened operations and special working groups. (3) "Post-event summarization"—summarize work content, implementation effects, and problems, continuously refining emergency service mechanisms as library operations evolve.

5.2 Enhance Digital Resources Remote Access Capacity

During the pandemic, most libraries faced intense demand for off-campus digital resource access, making enhanced remote access capacity urgent. For subscribed

resources, libraries should negotiate with database vendors to include diversified remote access services in procurement agreements, specifying VPN permission, CARSII alliance membership, and remote access tools like MyLoft to protect user rights regardless of time and space. When major events occur, libraries should immediately contact vendors through formal letters, emails, and calls to negotiate alternative access methods like expanded IP authorization, increased concurrency, and roaming accounts to ensure normal resource usage. For unsubscribed resources, libraries should integrate and reveal OA resources, collecting and organizing resource lists supporting discipline construction and teaching services, and actively contact vendors for trials after evaluation.

5.3 Provide Comprehensive Tiered Service Guarantees

Tiered services help libraries prioritize, allocate resources rationally, meet personalized needs, and extend service precision. At the research support level, improve digital resource accessibility by communicating with Chinese and foreign database vendors to open special-period remote access methods and trial one-stop service platforms (e.g., MyLoft by IGROU) for pushing thematic, free, and trial resources, and publishing off-campus usage guides. Provide deep disciplinary services around social hotspots, including dynamic tracking, SDI, and intelligence analysis. Improve online commissioning systems for paid services like novelty search, citation search, and patent services, with proper identity authentication and financial management. At the teaching support level, establish comprehensive e-teaching reference service systems embedding library resources into teaching processes and integrating digital teaching reference services into classroom learning, transforming from traditional resource services to high-end knowledge and learning services [27] to enhance teaching literature support. Develop information literacy online courses using library websites, WeChat, and third-party platforms like Chaoxing Xuexitong, DingTalk, and Rain Classroom to improve users' retrieval and resource acquisition abilities.

5.4 Build User-Needs-Based Consultation Platforms

Reader needs are the logical starting point for library services [28], and organic collaboration with university departments is crucial for tracking and investigating these needs. Libraries should actively seek support from other university departments to understand diverse needs across user types, disciplines, and reading habits. Re-examine service projects and explore building library information consultation platforms with intelligent Q&A systems and interactive systems to reduce manpower burdens, improve efficiency in answering routine questions, and meet personalized consultation needs. Summarize experiences from major events, build emergency reference question databases, and develop workflows integrating online emergency consultation into overall information services. Explore multi-channel integrated service models centered on consultation platforms to expand service awareness and improve speed, accuracy, and effectiveness.

5.5 Strengthen Construction of Librarians' New Service Capabilities

Library service capability development is an inevitable result of social progress and changing user needs [29]. Facing current and future demands, libraries require new service concepts, models, and capabilities [30]. Emergency services require librarians to sensitively capture hotspots, accurately grasp needs, effectively integrate resources, and communicate quickly—manifestations of new service capabilities requiring strengthened staff development. Training should include: (1) Professional quality—information collection, integration, and verification abilities, cultivating librarians to professionally address hotspot issues from LIS perspectives, processing and classifying massive information resources; (2) Remote teaching abilities—short video recording and MOOC production for large-scale online training; (3) Emergency comprehensive skills—guidance for post-event psychological counseling, reading list recommendations, music appreciation, and healthy online activity planning.

University library emergency service capability represents a new service ability under abnormal circumstances, testing management, technology, coordination, and professional quality—important manifestations of comprehensive service capabilities. The concentrated problems faced by Wuhan's "Double First-Class" libraries during the most severe epidemic period indicate that comprehensively improving online service capabilities and reducing dependence on in-person services is urgent. Establishing e-teaching reference service systems and intelligent information consultation platforms should be prioritized, with digital resource remote access requiring heightened attention. Deep, tiered services around reader needs and social hotspots, combined with LIS professional advantages, can significantly enhance library visibility and influence—all depending on proactive reform concepts and librarians' new service capabilities.

After the pandemic, libraries should promptly summarize lessons learned, revise service regulations, and integrate emergency management mechanisms into daily operations. Simultaneously, they should re-examine hidden problems in non-frontline services, such as acquisition, cataloging, and inspection services heavily dependent on physical presence, and timely business data access issues. The most effective strategy for improving emergency service capability is to prepare for danger in times of safety and address hidden problems before they emerge through comprehensive management improvement and librarian capability enhancement, exploring possibilities for full informatization and online service operation models to meet future challenges and grasp transformation opportunities.

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Yuan Qing: Conceived research questions, designed paper structure, wrote and revised manuscript.

Chen Xingchen: Conducted literature review, collected and analyzed data, wrote manuscript.

Strategies of “Double First-Class” University Libraries in Wuhan During COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: [Purpose/significance] The outbreak of COVID-19 has made profound impact on all walks of life, which also challenges the emergency service capability of university libraries. Taking the pandemic as an example, this paper discusses the new service capability of libraries under abnormal situations in order to provide reference for university libraries to enhance their emergency service capability in the future. [Method/process] By applying network investigation, online interview and case analysis, this paper introduces what emergency services the “Double First-Class” university libraries in Wuhan provided during the pandemic, analyzes existing problems and explores the solution. [Result/conclusion] This paper points out several problems faced with emergency service capability of university libraries, such as insufficient attention to the construction of electronic textbooks, few professional features reflecting advantages of library and information science, limited channels to online training and consultation feedback, inadequate ability of librarians, and defective remote access system. Therefore, it is vital to raise the awareness of emergency services, to improve the ability of remote access to digital resources, to provide tiered services, to build a consultation platform based on user needs, to establish emergency service management system, and to strengthen the new service ability of librarians.

Keywords: emergency service; university library; COVID-19

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

Source: ChinaXiv — Machine translation. Verify with original.