

Iowa City Public Library Director's Annual Report: FY21

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair...

The opening line of *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens seems like a perfect way to frame this year's Director's Annual Report. As I prepared to craft this end-of-year reflection of the efforts and outputs of the Iowa City Public Library, I continually looped back to the idea of contradictions. FY2021 was a year of paradoxes. The high notes were pretty great, the low notes were pretty terrible. Perhaps most notably, this was our second fiscal year working through the COVID-19 pandemic, but in reality, it was so much more than that.

It was the best of times

Working through a changing pandemic—and the evolving readiness of staff, volunteers, and the community to reengage with onsite services—provided innumerable opportunities for us to think differently about how we meet community needs.

Two of our service adaptations stand out to me as prime examples of COVID-inspired innovation: developing new ways for patrons to interact with and use our collections, and the combination of producing interactive virtual programs and expanding our tech reach via lending more technology tools.

Starting at the end of FY20, we offered curbside pickup for items patrons had placed on hold, while simultaneously offering postal mail service for most materials. Early in FY21, we added a new digital service for “virtual RA” called “Staff Picks...just for you.” This web-based service invites patrons to fill out a form indicating their reading interests, and staff respond with 3-5 title suggestions. This program evolved to include book bundles, as well. We also offered a children's book bundle program and a “low tech” remote shelf browsing option; physical copies of books were placed in our lobby windows and labeled with a number. Patrons could look over the selections, then request the book (by title or number) at a service point. Staff would collect the item immediately and check it out to the patron.

For those patrons ready and able to come to us online, we produced an amazing number of virtual programs—all conceptualized, filmed, and edited inhouse—and increased our digital holdings throughout the collection through targeted and on-demand ordering. We added an option to contact the director directly via text and rolled out an enhanced ICPL app.

It was the worst of times

One of the hardest parts of the entire COVID closure was the ongoing challenge of trying to balance virtual services with more traditional onsite or print offerings, since we know many of our users cannot fully engage in online options due to lack of training, equipment, or connectivity.

To counter this, we purchased additional Chromebook/Hotspot bundles for circulation (with a generous grant from the Community Foundation of Johnson County), as well as a number of new stand-alone hotspots, and offered many beginner-level classes and tutorials for the use of our proprietary tech tools—like our online catalog—as well as those we offer patrons through subscriptions or purchase (databases and ebooks, etc.).

We offered take-home kits for children with all supplies included, so adult caregivers and children had fewer barriers to participating, and as soon as it was safe to do so, we began opening the building to provide some of the physical services we know are needed, like access to clean public restrooms and water fountains. For the library staff responsible for designing and implementing our services, those long months when our building doors were closed to the public were incredibly difficult; despite knowing we were making choices that benefitted the whole community by limiting exposure to COVID-19, it was impossible to feel like we were really doing our jobs while a portion of our users were less served than others.

It was the age of wisdom

Despite all of the unusual aspects of FY21, we were able to make some real strides in restructuring core service areas and recruiting some amazing new staff. Look for new smiling faces in almost every department next time you're in the library.

We also worked hard to review and update a number of our policies and practices, many with a specific focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion. We established strategic marketing partnerships, documented processes and practices that needed more detailed records, and developed training standards and timelines related to communications. We updated our pandemic response plan to incorporate new information as it became available, and adjusted our benchmarks for service delivery as we understood more about how COVID is transmitted in a library environment.

It was the age of foolishness

Going into FY21, we knew much more about COVID-19 than we did the previous year, but we also learned how quickly things can change with variants and community behavior; not all previous knowledge was helpful.

Budgeting for this year's emerging needs was an interesting exercise. We made the decision early on to focus on safety, which meant making many adjustments to the established budget as the year went on. Supply costs increased and decreased based on demand and availability, and onsite need for hand sanitizer, gloves, and masks were significant. We were strategic in reallocating funds to ensure we could cover the costs of mailing materials to patrons, package items for curbside pickup, purchase materials for take-home kits.

The year presented cost-saving opportunities, as well. We used significantly fewer paper products in our public restrooms during the building closure, and since we were prioritizing the purchasing of digital materials, our costs associated with processing print books went down.

Despite the variances in planned expenditures, I am proud of the way we were able to pivot repeatedly to meet community needs while ending the year with a responsibly-managed budget.

It was the epoch of belief

As FY21 unfolded, full of challenges and changes, there were moments that tested ICPL in ways I don't think it's been tested before. Despite this stress and pain, library staff, the Board of Trustees, and the Friends Foundation Board stayed true to our shared values, kept the strategic plan in focus, and committed to serving our community no matter what it took to do so.

We stayed nimble and responsive—developing a postal mail delivery system for print materials, deploying the Bookmobile as a community hotspot after the devastating derecho—while maintaining our priority work, like evaluating the diversity and inclusivity of our YA collection (via a fully manual diversity audit) and recataloged the juvenile holiday collection to expand holidays in a way that better reflects our community.

It was the epoch of incredulity

Providing public service during a pandemic is hard. There were some dark moments of low staff morale and leadership fatigue during FY21, but we learned how to navigate the ambiguity of COVID as the months went on, established trust in our dedication to best safety practices, and gained confidence in our shared ability to design public services systems that do not put staff or patrons at significant risk for exposure to COVID-19. Many staff are still concerned about working with the public, but our track record of requiring use of PPE and maintaining an organized, clean building helps all library staff feel grounded.

It was the season of Light

Yes, this was a challenging year, but we found ways to have fun and connect with each other, too. FY21 brought many opportunities to think about the legacy of ICPL in the community and how we will continue this critical work.

We developed and offered a variety of community programs and historical reflections in celebration of Iowa City Public Library's 125th Anniversary, including special programs for kids and adults, new library card designs that include images that represent the past and present work of ICPL, and a virtual timeline of events in the Library's history.

Our virtual In-Service Day, designed and facilitated by staff, focused on finding alternatives to calling the Police for library rule infractions (one of our strategic initiatives). It was amazing to see the creativity, compassion, and appreciative inquiry staff brought to this day.

It was the season of Darkness

We hit a hard spot with COVID in mid-summer, when all signs had been indicating we were almost to the end of the pandemic. Transmission and new case numbers were trending down, schools and businesses were opening up with few or no restrictions, and the vaccine was readily available.

When the trends reversed and we saw transmission statistics stagnate, then increase, it was a real disappointment. It became easy to forget how far we had come since the initial building closure and to feel more untethered than we really were. We rallied again, though, and talked about how we had done this work already and we could do it again. Our experience paid us back in resiliency, and after honoring our natural responses of disappointment, fear, sadness, and stress—all very legitimate responses to the second wave of a pandemic—we were able to update our steering documents and get back to working.

We also said a final goodbye to Lolly Eggers, a library leader who served as the director of ICPL from 1974 through 1994. Lolly was a visionary librarian, and she embraced technology and changing system very quickly, laying the groundwork for where ICPL is now. Lolly's death in February was felt deeply in the library and the community. Staff built a remembrance site on the Library's website that highlights Lolly's accomplishments in the Library and in the community.

It was the spring of hope

ICPL remains committed to prioritizing public health and safety in design and delivery of library services during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Considering FY21 as a whole, I am tremendously proud of the work ICPL has done. I am humbled by the commitment and creativity of the staff, thankful for the guidance of the Library Board of Trustees and the support of the Friends Foundation Board, and grateful to all of the local and regional library directors who found ways to support each other throughout the year.

And the community! What a gift to serve a community that was willing to flex and change as we adapted our service models. The understanding and kindness extended from our patrons was incredible.

~~It was the winter of despair~~

With all due respect to Mr. Dickens, I am not going to end this narrative on a low note. I elect to close on the idea that better days are coming; like libraries around the country and beyond, ICPL faces an uncertain future in many ways; we have significant work to do deciphering what our community's needs and wants are right now and how they will change post-pandemic, how our collections and services will change as we move back to fully onsite work, and how we may be called to serve our communities in nontraditional ways as new needs emerge. This work is hard, but also energizing and exciting.

While FY21 was an unusual year, the core truths of our shared work remain true: Finding new ways to delight patrons brings joy, working as a team feels organic and dynamic, and we are honored to work in not just any public library, but the Iowa City Public Library.

Respectfully submitted,

Elsworth Carman