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### When Knowledge Breaks

Elizabeth Jardine

*CUNY La Guardia Community College*

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This blog post was published with an added introduction on the ITHAKA S+R Blog  
<https://sr.ithaka.org/blog/when-knowledge-breaks/>

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# When Knowledge Breaks

Elizabeth Jardine

If ever there was a time for knowledge management, it's now. The COVID-19 crisis has been—and is still—running rampant with guesses, assumptions, rumors, misinformation, and poor communication. And that's just in higher education. Once upon a time, back in February, the student question “Where can I borrow a laptop?” had a simple answer: from our Library Media Desk. But now, in the fog of COVID-19 as our community college tries to deploy laptops to students on a scale we had never attempted before, that question becomes much more complicated to answer. Welcome to knowledge management during a global pandemic!

In mid-March as the coronavirus pandemic affected a growing number of New Yorkers, LaGuardia Community College prepared to make its unexpected transition to distance learning and remote work. However, taking classes online and closing in-person service points knocked the college's [Ask LaGuardia knowledge base](#) out-of-date in many ways all at once. Ask LaGuardia is an automated, online tool that helps students and others find answers to commonly asked questions about navigating this large and busy, urban institution. The knowledge base is a cross-college collaboration managed by the Library's Metadata Librarian—me. And now it was rife with incorrect information.

In many cases, I couldn't get updates into the knowledge base immediately. Sometimes there were no answers—so much remained unclear, provisional, or as-yet-undecided after initial announcements. Emails had gone out notifying everyone about the move to distance learning and remote work, but that elicited even more questions in response. In addition, our workflow for Ask LaGuardia depends on acquiring content for the knowledge base from campus experts in various service areas and academic offices. I could do very little on my own to update the knowledge base. Therefore, while decisions and policies fluctuated, I watched what questions students, faculty, and staff were asking.

Initially, their questions revolved around whether the college was teaching classes and when and if student services offices were open. Students asked how to access their LaGuardia email as suddenly vital instructional information was coming in through this channel. Then concerns shifted to how online classes would work. Students and faculty asked if they could borrow laptops. Instructors who had begun the semester the

previous week teaching face-to-face now had questions about distance learning and using the school's learning management system.

As trends in questions surfaced, I notified members of the knowledge management team to alert them to what our users were asking. This technique received a good response from our content experts. If I was lucky, a team member could give me the answer immediately, but some questions had to wait for further information or confirmation or be passed on to someone else with the expertise. I sometimes had to wait patiently as our staff dealt with the extraordinary demands of transitioning, even though that meant delays in updating the knowledge base. Although Ask LaGuardia is just one of several means of communication with our students, we've found that this 24/7 resource performs a valuable role for off-hours and off-campus information needs.

To give some perspective on the amount of activity we've had in our knowledge base during this time of COVID-19 in March 2020, the number of questions asked increased 21% over March 2019 even though we were closed for 5 days for an instructional recess. The knowledge base currently has around 520 responses in it, 21 of them new and added in response to changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Over 50 more responses, so far, have been updated for the same reason.

The COVID-19 crisis will, I'm sure, reveal many insights over time as to how institutions of higher education can better coordinate information to meet such disruptions to their operations. For example, as I alluded to above, our careful workflow contributed to delays in getting information into the knowledge base as quickly as users needed answers. In the future, some of those delays could be mitigated by a college-wide, knowledge management protocol. As part of their workflow, content experts could send information or updates appropriate for inclusion in the knowledge base to me in conjunction with using that information for other communication channels such as email or the website. Then, I would integrate this information into the knowledge base and add metadata to help match user questions to the best response.

In higher education, as in all institutions, information has value; but in a time of crisis, the value of some information skyrockets. A rare and costly baseball card receives greater attention than the rest yet requires greater care in its use. And so does valuable knowledge.