



**McMaster University Academic Librarians' Association**

c/o MUFA (McMaster University Faculty Association)

Hamilton Hall Room 103A

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Library Leadership Group  
McMaster University Libraries  
1280 Main Street West  
Hamilton, ON L8S 4L6

To our esteemed colleagues of the Library Leadership Group:

We are writing to request further clarification about McMaster Libraries' position and plans regarding the emergent COVID-19 public health crisis. We also wish to express concerns from our membership about the parsimony and asymmetry of information and support that different employee groups on campus, including our own union, may be experiencing as the situation develops.

As you will no doubt be aware, the World Health Organisation today elected to declare the COVID-19 crisis a pandemic, even as the Prime Minister warns Canadians to expect significant disruptions to public life in an attempt to flatten the curve of virus transmission and thereby to reduce the potential for catastrophic impacts on an already over-burdened healthcare system. You will also have seen that community transmission in Ontario is verified and that Hamilton recorded its first confirmed case — an oncology doctor — today. The situation is grave and proactive messaging is essential in preparing our community to weather the difficult times ahead.

In recognition of this, Laurentian today became the first university in the province to announce significant closures. We are aware of other universities and university libraries in the province which have well-established and clearly communicated protocols for contingencies as the crisis escalates. At least one institution has made it clear to staff that the library will be closed in the event that a decision is made to move teaching online.

We are also in close communication with our members working in HSL, who inform us that they have been receiving daily updates on the situation since the beginning of March. Several of our HSL members have communicated to MUALA that they feel clearly informed and prepared for contingencies as they may arrive. While acknowledging that the clinical adjacency of their work setting may merit a certain degree of increased information-sharing, the contrast to what our members are experiencing in UL is stark. Our members are confused, frightened, and in some cases dismayed by the tone, timeliness, and accuracy of the updates—such as they are—that we have received to date from McMaster as an institution and from the library as a workplace. We have recently found ourselves in the awkward position of trying to compile and share informational resources about the crisis with our own membership since this has not reliably been forthcoming at an institutional level.

We are aware that you must all share similar worries and that you are almost certainly in the difficult position of feeling obliged to filter much of your official message through the apparatus of the Public Relations office. We also wish to acknowledge that many of our members report feeling supported by their individual supervisors in expressing and exploring concerns related to COVID-19; the locus of this letter is that we do not feel these individual instances of compassion, wisdom, and forward-thinking are being reflected at an institutional level. In that spirit, please note that we are addressing this letter to you, our direct colleagues and supervisors, and not to the central PR or HR apparatus of the University. We would prefer to receive honest and direct answers to these questions from you, based on your knowledge and opinions, rather than being referred to a third party.

In a similar spirit of openness, we wish to articulate the union's position that, in the interest of public health, McMaster University should be taking all possible steps to keep as many workers and students at home as may be, effective immediately. If this action is taken in time, this institution may still play some beneficial role in the public health trajectory of this disease. It is important to us that this position be on the record.

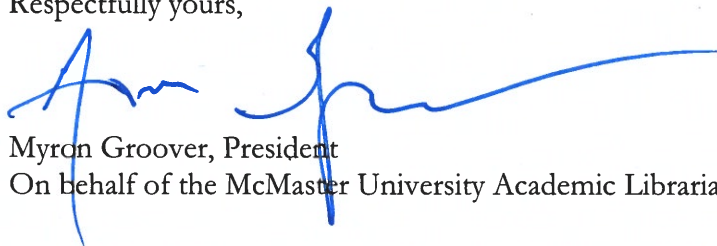
This being established, we have a number of specific questions:

- What steps are being taken to protect our frontline employees, particularly student workers and UNIFOR staff, from exposure to COVID-19 in a work setting? How will these change as the situation becomes more severe?
- What supports are in place for our frontline employees, particularly student workers and UNIFOR staff, in the event that they elect to voluntarily practise social distancing or self-isolation at home in an effort to flatten the curve of COVID-19 transmission?
- Effective immediately, what degree of autonomy and support can our members expect from McMaster Libraries in exercising value judgements about postponing or cancelling events for reasons of public health or personal safety?
- Effective immediately, what degree of autonomy and support can our members expect from McMaster Libraries in electing to voluntarily practise social distancing or self-isolation at home in an effort to flatten the curve of COVID-19 transmission?
- How, if at all, do those judgements differ for employees deemed to have on-site operational responsibilities as a key component of their work portfolio?
- What plans are in place for closing different areas of McMaster operations, especially including its libraries, as the situation escalates? Will staff be clearly informed of these arrangements in advance, as is the case at many other institutions?
- Why have some MUALA members, particularly those working in UL, received no direct information to date from the Employer about what steps we may need to be making in preparing to work remotely? What supports are currently in place to facilitate this? If the university were to announce tomorrow that in-person operations were cancelled and that MUALA members were expected to move their work online, would we be prepared?

We appreciate that these are complex questions and we further appreciate that you, as colleagues and supervisors, are coming to this conversation from a place of concern and goodwill. Please help us to be better informed and better prepared so that our members can better manage the difficult emotional burden of a confusing and rapidly escalating public health crisis — and so that we can continue serving our community well.

It is our hope that responses to our specific questions will be forthcoming, and available in writing, at or prior to the All-Staff Meeting on Friday, 13th March.

Respectfully yours,



Myron Groover, President  
On behalf of the McMaster University Academic Librarians' Association

cc: Jennifer McKinnell, Director, Health Sciences Library  
MUALA Executive