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Strick Mask Enforcement in an Academic Library

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ABSTRACT

Universities faced a variety of options regarding COVID-19 preparations and enforcement rules in the fall 2020 and spring 2021 semesters. Libraries were on the front line as they provided computer labs, wi-fi, study spaces, and academic resources. The Angelo and Jennette Volpe Library at Tennessee Tech University made major changes as part of a campus-wide mobilization to provide face to face classes and services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Staff installed dozens of signs, stored away hundreds of chairs, and recorded new public address announcements. Students started the semester wearing masks, but as a group they steadily moved in the direction of masklessness. During the final week of the semester only 38% were wearing masks over their noses and mouths. Between semesters the university administration asked the library dean to strictly enforce mask wearing in the library. Volunteer library staff strictly enforced mask wearing, including removing students from the library without a warning for not wearing a mask. As a result of the new enforcement students wore masks at a 95% rate with another 4% wearing their masks below their noses. The latter were asked to raise their masks. The tale of the two semesters shows that strict enforcement can generate a high compliance rate despite students' inclination toward not wearing masks.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19 pandemic, university libraries, mask wearing, student behavior

In response to the need to protect students, staff, and faculty from the spread of COVID-19, Tennessee Tech University initiated several changes for the fall 2020 semester. The university moved many classes online, but still offered 40% of the undergraduate classes face to face. Several campus-wide committees worked on changes to classrooms, building entrances, and pedestrian traffic inside buildings. They also reduced seating, installed partitions, restricted access to drinking fountains (but allowed bottle filling stations), provided hand sanitizer stations at the entrance to all buildings, handed out information, masks, and sanitizer to all students, and added new signage to explain all the changes.

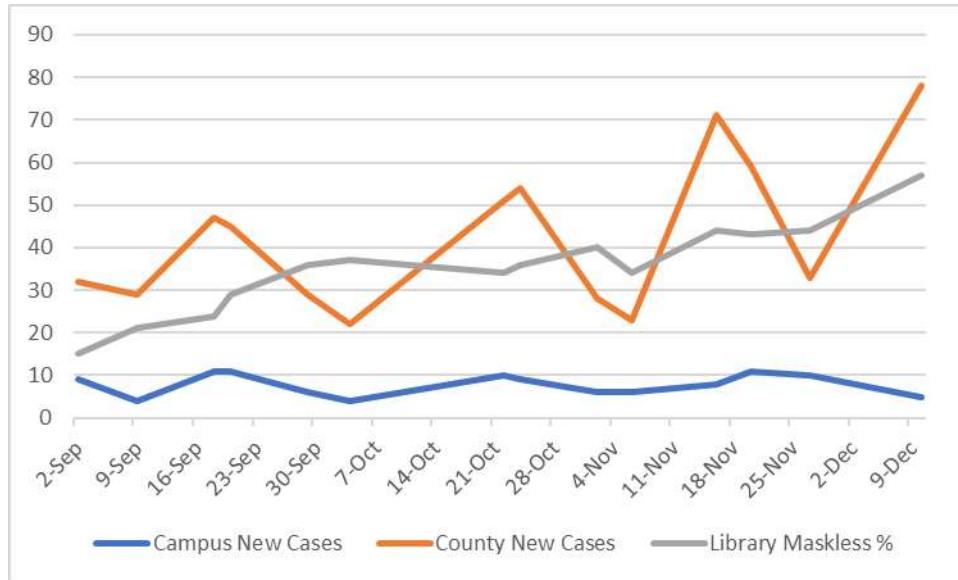
The Tennessee Tech library made many changes too. Classrooms within the library were thinned of extra seating so students would be six feet away from classmates. The front doors to the library were clearly marked as entrances and exits so library users would enter and exit to the right. Partitions were installed around teaching stations, in some faculty offices, and at service points. Seating was reduced by 53% as tables were allotted chairs in proportion to their capacity to accommodate distanced sitters. Hourly announcements went out over the public address system reminding everyone that all library patrons needed to wear masks at all times within the building. Signage announced the mask wearing requirement. The most common sign stated, "ENTERING MASK ZONE, Face Coverings are Required." That sign was posted at the entrance as well on each table, study carrel, booth, and study room in the building.

Everything was in place, but the library lacked an enforcement mechanism. During the fall 2020 semester, library staff kept detailed statistics of mask wearing by patrons in the library. A seating study conducted in the fall 2019 semester identified 11:30 am, followed by 1:00 pm as the peak usage times for people studying in the library, so those times were chosen for the fall 2020 mask wearing observations. The data showed a steady decline in mask wearing from 100% on day one of the semester to only 44% for the final week of the semester. On the worst day, only 37% were wearing masks. The standard for "wearing a mask" was very low as people who were eating or had their noses exposed were counted as

wearing a mask. Starting in week nine of the semester the library added granularity to the statistics by breaking out those who were eating and those whose noses were exposed. This provided a clearer picture that instead of 44% wearing masks at the end of the semester, only 38% were actually wearing masks correctly, while 5% had masks below their noses and 1% were eating or drinking. For the sake of consistency only completely maskless patrons were counted as maskless for the remainder of this paper. Some staff were concerned that without an enforcement mechanism the library seemed primed to be a hot spot for COVID-19 transmission.

Figure 1

Campus and County New Cases (7-day Moving Averages) with Campus Library Maskless Rate for September to December 2020



During the fall 2020 semester the number of active COVID-19 cases on campus peaked three times hitting 89 active cases on September 18, 94 on October 22, and 98 on November 20 (Tennessee Tech University, 2021). After each peak the number of active cases dipped into the 30-60 range before spiking again. The university was able to stay open throughout the semester. Tennessee Tech University is in Cookeville, Tennessee which is the largest city and is centrally located within Putnam County. The seven-day moving average for the number of new COVID-19 cases within Putnam County was 30 per day when the Fall 2020 semester started and peaked at 71 new cases per day on November 17 (Tennessee Department of Health, 2021). (Tennessee Tech does not report “new” cases separately and the Tennessee Department of Health does not report “active” cases so these numbers are difficult to compare, other than by their trend.) The number of active COVID-19 cases on campus and the rate of new infections in the county were closely related, but masklessness in the library did not seem to be as closely correlated to either of them. While both masklessness and the number of active cases rose during the semester, masklessness rose steadily throughout the semester while the number of active cases fluctuated wildly.

During the break between semesters university administrators charged the dean of the library with the task of increasing mask wearing compliance in the library for the spring semester. The library dean consulted with an ad-hoc group of library staff to develop a plan. The proposed plan involved additional signage at the library entrance, student workers giving verbal reminders to patrons entering the building, five patrols between 7:00 am – 4:30 pm plus two more between 5:00 pm – midnight. During patrols maskless students would be asked to leave the building. Students would be allowed to reenter immediately as long as they were wearing a mask. Library staff could get campus police assistance to remove students who refused to comply with the request to leave the library. The plan went to the uni-

versity administration who provided feedback. Concerns raised were the importance of consistent enforcement, and the challenge of stricter mask enforcement in the library versus other buildings on campus. Another suggestion that was incorporated into the plan was that the head of public relations be notified if the police removed a student so social media could be monitored. Another topic which was considered was the possibility of restricting food in the building to the in-building restaurant. Ultimately this idea was not incorporated into the plan because drinking water was the most common reason students were not wearing a mask due to eating or drinking and it was not conceivable that we would not allow students to drink water throughout the building.

In response the library changed the hourly announcements and signage to include the fact that not wearing a mask meant that library users could be asked to leave the building. The new announcements said:

Hey Golden Eagles! You must wear a mask over your nose and mouth at all times in the building, even if no one is nearby. Wear your mask between drinks and between bites of food. Anyone found without a mask over their nose and mouth is subject to removal from the library. Thanks for helping us keep the library open and keep everyone safe by following this university requirement.

The library entrance had no fewer than 12 signs indicating that not wearing a mask in the library could result in patrons being asked to leave the library. There was also a new table that students had to walk around. The initial plan was for student workers to verbally inform students that they needed to wear masks over their noses and mouths at all times in the library. This part of the plan didn't come to fruition due to a limited student worker budget and a lack of existing student workers to staff the table. Even without staffing, the table restricting the entrance served a purpose. Research in retail shopping shows that making people change direction close to an entrance shortens the transition zone and makes shoppers more aware of their surroundings (Underhill, 1999). It is possible the table at the entrance served a similar purpose. The plexiglass divider on the table did have signs, including pictures of incorrect mask wearing (below the nose or mouth) and correct mask wearing above the nose.

On the first day of the spring semester library staff patrolled the library continually. The initial patrols consisted of five staff members sweeping through the library, but this was quickly reduced to two staff per patrol. All patrol staff were volunteers, seven of the library's 23 full time staff, administrators, and faculty volunteered. Library patrons who were not wearing masks over their mouths and noses were told they had to leave the library (and that they could return to the library immediately if they wore a mask over their nose and mouth). Students who were eating or drinking were told that they needed to wear their mask between bites of food and between sips of drink. During the first day and a half library staff conducted 24 patrols and told 120 people to leave the library. The gate count for each of those days was around 1400 students per day. Halfway through the second day staff started issuing warnings for patrons who were wearing their masks below their noses rather than asking them to leave the library. After the first week library staff averaged six patrols on Monday through Wednesday, five on Thursday, two on Friday, and one on Sunday. (Due to staffing limitations there were no patrols on Saturdays despite the library being open all day.) If scheduled staff members were unavailable some patrols were cancelled. The average week had 23 patrols.

In order to protect library staff from accusations of bias and to make sure every patron received the same message when they were asked to leave the library, staff followed a script which said:

The University Administration has directed the library staff to more strictly enforce mask wearing in the library so this semester we have a zero-tolerance policy regarding masklessness. You are/were violating the university requirement by not wearing a mask, including between drinks and between bites of food. You need to leave the library now. You may return to the library when you are ready to wear a mask covering your nose and mouth at all times.

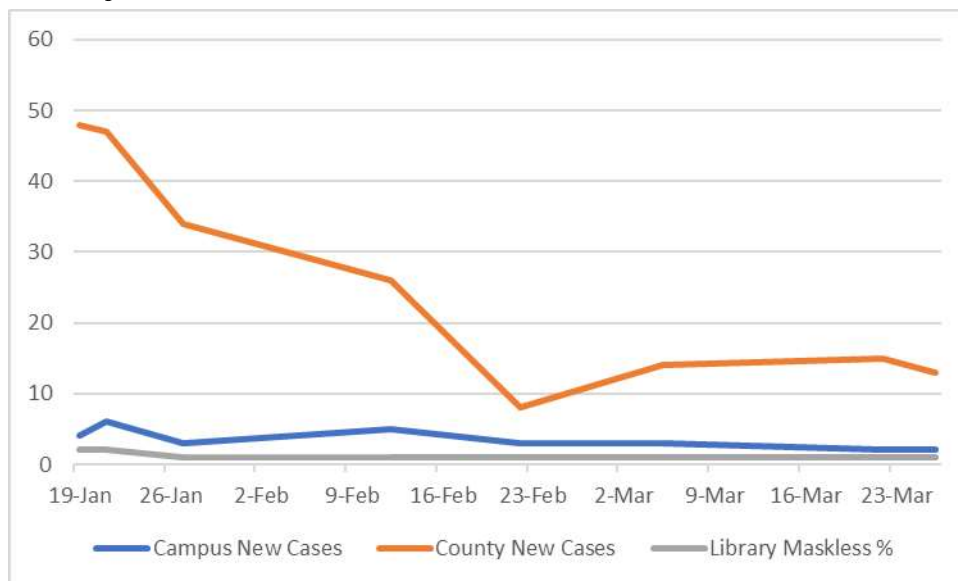
For the new semester we changed the statistics we gathered since it would seem like a mixed message if sometimes staff were asking people to leave and other times they were just observing and tal-

lying the mask wearing rate. The new statistics counted those who were asked to leave the library and those who were warned to wear their masks properly (which included people who needed to raise their mask over their nose as well as those who were eating and needed to wear their mask between sips of drink and bites of food). The new statistics included most of the same categories as the previous semester except for a total number of people in the library. Without that number we could not calculate percentages of people in each category. As it turned out this was not a big problem in determining the success of the changes because overall mask wearing compliance skyrocketed. On occasion we would count the number of people in the building and work out the percentages. After the first week the average patrol resulted in two students being asked to leave the building and six being warned. Most of the time there are 150 students in the building so the rate of students wearing masks properly was around 95% with 4% warned and 1% asked to leave. That was a dramatic improvement from the 44% rate of mask wearing at the end of the previous semester.

The rate of removing students was very steady at two per patrol, but the rate of warnings jumped up from 4.9 for weeks 2-5 compared to 6.6 for weeks 7-9. (The university was closed for week 6 due to an ice storm.) So there appears to be a small number of students who are willing to endure a staff member warning them about wearing their mask properly for the additional freedom of breathing through their noses without a mask.

The responses of students to the shocking news that they needed to leave the library were varied. Some students were very apologetic and were more than willing to leave and return. Others were willing to leave peaceably but chose not to return. Still other students were more perturbed, but complied. The vast majority of the 405 students asked to leave the library fell into these three groups. There was one serious outlier. One student wanted to argue about the utility of wearing masks, his relative isolation within the library, and the personal beliefs of the staff members regarding mask wearing enforcement. The library staff members informed the student that if he didn't comply we would call the campus police. After 10 minutes of fruitless conversation one of the staff members did call the campus police. Two officers arrived within minutes, and after 10 more minutes of conversation the officers escorted the student out of the building. The officers told him he needed to speak with the dean of students before returning to the library.

Figure 2
Campus and County New Cases (7-day Moving Averages) with Campus Library Maskless Rate for January to March 2021



It is clear that the strict enforcement of mask wearing inside the library was successful in getting

more students to wear masks. Proper mask wearing went up from 38% to 95% within the library. But mask wearing was only part of the goal. The ultimate goal was to reduce the spread of COVID-19 on campus. After the semester break students returned for classes on January 19, 2021. The number of active COVID-19 cases on campus hovered between 32-49 until February 12 when they collapsed down to the 12-24 range through the end of March (Tennessee Tech University, 2021). The seven-day average for new cases in the county when the spring semester started was 48 per day and dropping rapidly; at the end of March, the rate was 14 per day (Tennessee Department of Health, 2021). Based on the fall 2020 statistics the number of active COVID-19 cases and masklessness in the library did not seem to be closely correlated. While both masklessness and the number of active cases rose throughout the semester, masklessness rose steadily throughout the semester while the number of active cases fluctuated wildly.

In the fall semester it was common for students to complain to staff about the masklessness in the library. There were no such complaints in the spring semester, and library staff were also much happier working in a setting where everyone was wearing masks. The strict enforcement was successful in changing the mask wearing culture within the library. During the spring semester COVID-19 rates on campus and in the local area began declining dramatically. It would be impossible to calculate the impact of the Tennessee Tech library's stricter enforcement of mask wearing on the infection rate, but as one campus administrator noted at the outset, "It is a step in the right direction."

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