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COVID's Lasting Impact on Georgia Libraries

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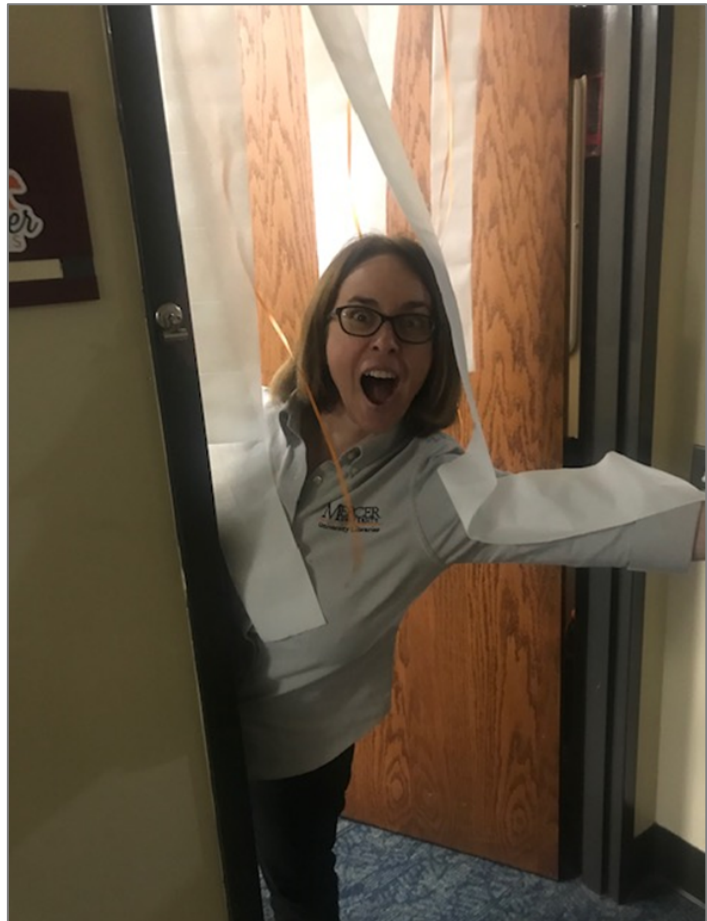
COVID's Lasting Impact on Georgia Libraries

By Gail Morton, J. Sara Paulk, Catherine Downey, Jonathan H. Harwell, Jessica Lee, Robert Taylor, Michael Holt, and Scott Pieper

Special Article Call: *This spring marks three years since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Looking back, what have been the pandemic's lasting impacts on your work or your library? What have you or your library learned or how have you changed?*

Three years ago, our library research services were provided mainly in person with the occasional phone call or chat. That all changed very quickly when the pandemic hit and we were sent home. In that initial phase of work from home, my top two concerns were my coworkers and their well-being, and how to interact with a large group using video and chat at the same time. While these concerns remained throughout the experience, they did somewhat subside with practice and familiarity. This type of online virtual interaction resulted in a research services team, serving two campuses and two regional academic centers, that became closer colleagues marked by more collaboration and cohesiveness. We were able to share fears and concerns as well as triumphs and small victories, photos of cats and dogs and children, and in the end toilet paper. Two of my coworkers sent me two different brands.

After many meetings where we discussed how best to serve our community, we were able to provide seamless library research services by populating a virtual desk schedule that included video, chat, email, and phone conversations. We found that we could not only meet with users regardless of where we all were, but also provide virtual research library classes, set up one-on-one virtual research consultations, and create a large number of how-to videos. Putting our heads together as a team allowed us to improve library services in spite of,



*Our fearless leader, Lee Twombly Olson.
We used shared toilet paper to dress up her office soon after we returned.*

or perhaps because of, the limitations placed on us by the pandemic. Importantly, as the lockdown dragged on, we gradually came to realize that we were reaching members of our campus community that we had been missing all along.

This realization hit me suddenly one day when a

student arrived in our Zoom room during my shift on the virtual desk. This student was undergoing chemotherapy, and, while this news startled me, we were able to find the research needed. After our interaction, which left me feeling pensive, I began to see that our university has always had students who could or would never come into the library due to life circumstances. This was a group of users that had existed long before the pandemic and who had been woefully underserved by our old model of mostly in-person services.

Then I recalled other virtual interactions over the previous weeks, the glimpses into students' lives I had been afforded. I remembered those students who were in their cars, parked outside their workplace during a break. And then there were those whose lives as parents were announced by the visible sippy cups or baby wipes on the screen or by the shouts of a toddler off camera. Because we had been sent home, my colleagues and I saw these underserved library

users that we may have never seen otherwise, and we became committed to giving them the research services they so desperately needed.

Three years later, we have improved our services. Our library has purchased a better chat service, created FAQs, and made many more how-to videos than we had before. Since we came back into the physical library, our visible reference desk is back with a few modifications, and we are once again available for in-person research interactions. But now the physical reference desk is supplemented by the virtual one that we created during COVID. On campus students who want the face-to-face interaction can have it, while users with more complicated lives can visit with us virtually. So now there are more ways than ever for students to see us for help with research—no matter where they are!

*Gail Morton is a research services librarian at
Mercer University*

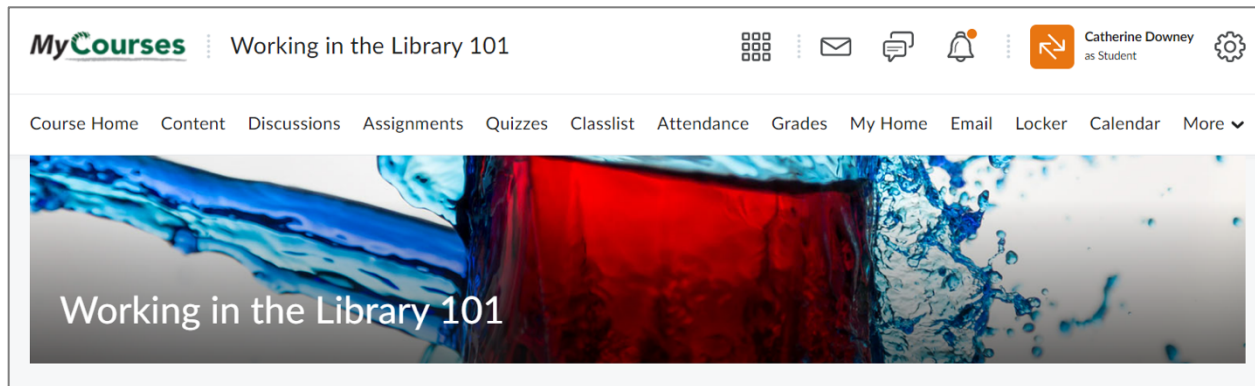
When buildings were closed in spring 2020, circulation and use of physical items dropped to zero for weeks at a time as buildings closed and patrons searched for a substitute. While e-books and e-audios were popular before COVID, this combination of shutting down physical buildings, improving internet and Wi-Fi access, and increasing funding into downloadable content caused an explosion in the use of these specific formats.

When buildings began reopening, the use of electronic content did not diminish. To use one example, the Houston County Public Library has approximately 35,000 library users. As of March 2023, those 35,000 users had roughly 1,500 holds on physical items, or around 4%. This library is a member of Georgia Download

Destination (GADD), a consortium of 50 library systems in Georgia that share e-book and e-audio content. The Houston County system has 3,000 active GADD users who have 3,000 holds. Circulation and title requests have parallel usage.

As chair of selection for GADD, I have also seen this response and demand replicated on the state level for the 50 library members. There are 93,000 GADD users and currently 110,000 unfilled holds. By comparison, in PINES, a nearly statewide integrated library service, there are approximately two million active patrons and 60,000 unfilled holds.

*J. Sarah Paulk is the director of Houston County
Public Library System*



Banner to an online course module designed to train library student employees

When thinking back three years ago to what it felt like to work through a pandemic, I remember so much uncertainty about so many things. When Georgia Gwinnett College first decided to shut down, we were sure we would be back on campus in a couple of weeks, three at the most. In the frenzy to get all full-time and part-time library employees equipped and connected to perform their work online, we didn't immediately address putting our student employees to work virtually. In the second week, when we learned that we would be working remotely for the remainder of the semester, the cry from the assistant department head for access services (Stephanie Bennett, now of Appalachian State University) on behalf of the students became louder. She was certain that not only did our students need money and the experience but also the personal connection working remotely would offer. Bennett proposed that our newer students learn to answer basic reference queries, and students on track to graduate spring 2020 could help library employees create the modules to teach their coworkers these skills. In the year before the pandemic, Kaufman Library services were consolidated from three to just one service point. We planned but had not trained students to perform frontline reference as much as we would have liked before COVID shut us down; the move to online services gave us a perfect opportunity to focus on that training.

We proposed that students would participate in

training, roleplaying, and testing to learn basic reference interview skills, then shadow librarians on chat reference and, eventually, answer Ask a Librarian queries themselves. The students graduating immediately would help with production of training materials in their last couple of months before commencement. All of the students were asked to reflect on their work and how it might benefit them in their current roles as students or in their lives beyond college.

In 2015 our now retired assistant department head for access services, Holly Heitman, created an online course in our D2L learning management platform to house videos and materials for training previously kept on a server. The idea behind Library 101 was that every student and part-time staff member would receive the same training, and trainers wouldn't have to repeat everything numerous times. We did put materials into the course but just didn't have the time to flesh it out as we wanted. COVID presented the opportunity we needed. Rebranded "Working in the Library 101," the course took shape during the pandemic. Access services staff all contribute instructional materials on their areas of expertise, and we continually evaluate, add, and refine resources covering reference and all the other areas access services entails.

Our original work plan for students did result in their learning basic reference skills, creating a

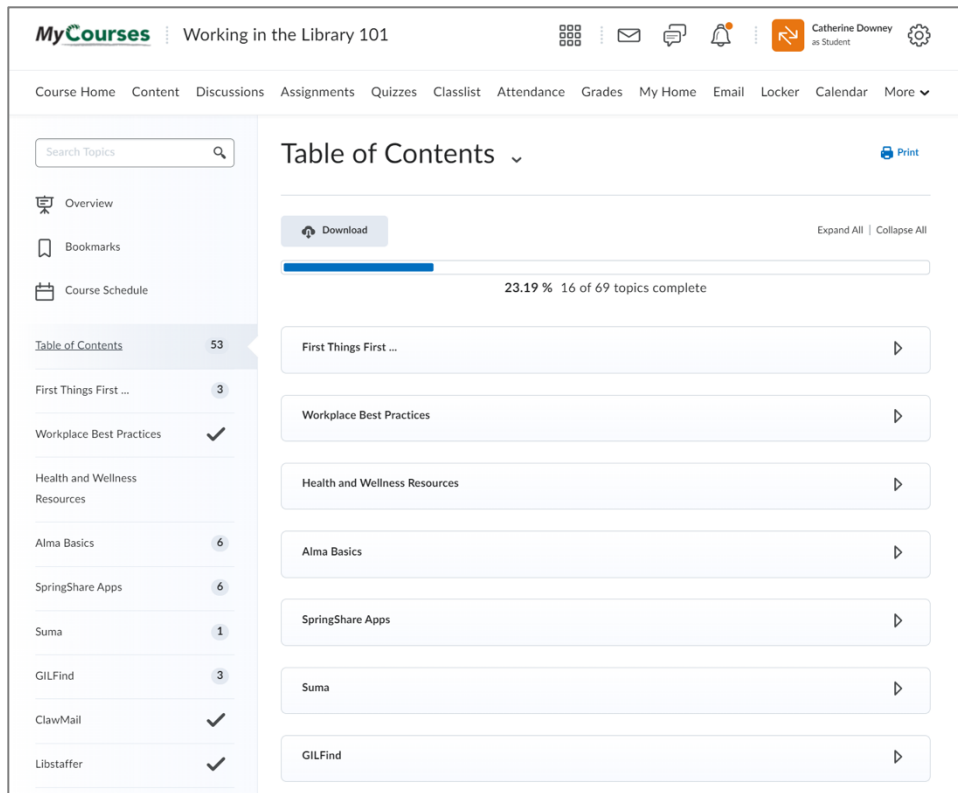


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few modules and reflecting on their experiences. However, the pandemic’s lasting impact on our library was an online training course we now use every day and which has revolutionized the way we train our employees.

Catherine Jannik Downey is the head of access services and information commons at Georgia Gwinnett College Library

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the authors’ research agendas looked very different from each other. The topics spanned across librarianship, including consortium migrations, tabletop games, cataloging, history, and reference. We each had different visions of our future research and one thing in common: young kids who added another layer of complexity to our lives. As parents and caregivers navigating the pandemic and our own personal burnout, we found that a call for book chapters about academic librarian burnout changed everything. We pivoted our research agendas and joined together to write about our experiences. The pandemic gave us perspective on institutional

changes, boundaries, priorities, and work–life balance that is crucial to eliminating or reducing burnout in others. The shift in our research agendas has given us more perspective on how to be better employees, managers, and human beings. Our article focuses on why we need to be mindful of the interplay of identities, library worker, researcher, parent, and others, when interacting with our employees.

Jessica Lee is the electronic resources and serials librarian at Valdosta State University

Robert Griggs-Taylor and Michael Holt were formerly librarians at Valdosta State University

The lasting impact on my work in two different libraries has been the economic effect, seen in still ongoing hiring freezes, which exacerbated the effects of the Great Resignation, and led me to resign my previous position. If I had stayed, I would have become solely responsible for all technical services, when I had supervised six people previously. Through this overwork, combined with pandemic telecommuting in which I was essentially on call 24/7, I had to make an intentional effort to relearn how not to be at work. I removed my

email app from my phone, and I now only look at my email from home when I need to. It helped me to reclaim my life and to focus on work when at work. In my new position, I again face an ongoing hiring freeze and short staffing, but I have guarded my work-life balance, and in this library, at least I still have a colleague doing cataloging.

Jonathan H. Harwell is the associate director for collection and resource services at Georgia College & State University

Now, I just reread the *GLQ* article I contributed to in summer 2020. At that time, I was feeling the great sense of disconnect and fear that struck so suddenly. In addition to COVID-19, it was a summer of social upheaval across the country. The stress was certainly palpable and inescapable. As an information professional, I found it painful to see so much misinformation and disinformation spread. We returned to in-person work sooner than I hoped in fall 2020, which felt very uncertain and scary. My library has returned to normal operations for the most part. There are still signs of COVID: we still have plexiglass around the service desks, and several of us still regularly mask. We still provide disinfecting wipes and hand sanitizer to staff and students. Some procedures turned out to be fleeting as we learned more about COVID transmission: quarantining items and touch-free pickup of library books, as examples.

can to provide a sense of welcome and connection for students.

GSU Library certainly learned lessons from 2020. We've kept and accelerated our online workshop programs and online research appointments. Internally, we learned that face-to-face meetings are valuable, but Microsoft Teams and WebEx have become a more convenient way to communicate regularly in a multicampus environment. I know I've saved a lot of time, gas, and frustration by not driving around metro Atlanta for meetings.

Personally, I miss the extra time I had with my family that COVID summer. Daily walks in the morning and in the afternoon replaced the time I would typically be stuck on I-285. I am glad that my immediate family has not experienced extreme illness. I am thankful for vaccines.

The largest impact still felt is the decline of in-person enrollment at our campus. In-person enrollment is stubbornly at 50% of prepandemic levels. That drop has certainly impacted the pace of our day-to-day routine. My campus's operating hours have been reduced. I don't see expanded hours coming back anytime soon. We've seen a big drop in circulation of physical books that has not rebounded. Life around campus is not as vibrant with fewer students and student activities. Our library is doing what we

Professionally, I feel less and less stress at work, despite uncertainty around staff turnover and budget cuts in higher ed. Having lived through crisis, I appreciate more fully the importance of trust, compassion, and humor among colleagues. It has been a comfort to reconnect.

Scott Pieper is the associate department head at Georgia State University Library Perimeter College, Decatur