Georgia Librarians Returning to Work In-Person during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Georgia Librarians Returning to Work In-Person during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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As libraries across the United States began reopening in the midst of the ongoing COVID-19 Pandemic, library employees prepared and implemented in-person services with safety in mind. To document this period in time, Georgia library employees contributed short essays on their experiences with returning to work in-person, including how they adapted spaces and services for their users.

Benjamin Bryson
Assistant Director
Marshes of Glynn Libraries

Excitement, mixed with a little anxiety, was the predominant mood as our library management team quickly developed procedures to offer curbside services safely at our library branches in early May. Our patrons, as we found out, were equally excited about the ability to check out books, audiobooks, and movies once these services officially began on May 4, 2020. This was also the day I returned to the library after six weeks of working from home.

In early May, the rate of community spread for COVID-19 in Glynn County was less than two new cases per day. In accordance with our management team’s plan for minimizing the risk to our staff and the public, we decided to move to the next phase and re-open our library facilities to the public beginning May 20, 2020.

May 20th arrived, and circulation staff sat behind plexiglass barriers and wore facemasks in anticipation of serving our patrons. Slowly but surely, the public trickled back into our libraries. The familiar faces from before the library closures came back to use the public computers, read the newspaper, and pick up their holds. The typical crowds of summer, however, were absent due to the suspension of in-person library programs and meeting room rentals. We settled into a new, slower pace of summer activity once we caught up with the backlog of courier shipments and returned materials.

By mid-June, however, the relative sense of safety in our community was beginning to collapse as COVID-19 case numbers began to rise. The second half of June saw more than 1,000 new cases of coronavirus in Glynn County. Many restaurants were temporarily shutting down due to staff illness and exposures. As a tourist destination, our community was bracing for the Fourth of July holiday and its aftermath.

Fortunately, our county commissioners responded to the local rise of cases and enacted a policy for county buildings that required employees and visitors alike to wear facemasks in common indoor areas. Our libraries are also county facilities, so beginning July 6, 2020, we were also able to require—not just ask—our patrons to wear facemasks inside the libraries. Two months later, this policy is still going strong as our patrons and staff continue to mask up.

Inevitably, our libraries have experienced a few staff absences due to temporary daycare closures, but none of these absences have been directly related to exposures at the libraries or to library staff themselves. So far, community spread of the coronavirus in the fall is down to about 25 new cases per day from a peak of more than 70 per day at the end of June, although, as of this writing, we have yet to see the full impact of the new school year.
The keys to our success in safely re-opening and sustainably operating our libraries, we feel, have been implementation of the mask requirement policy, the application of social distancing guidelines, and the limitation of group gatherings to minimize potential airborne exposures to the coronavirus and prevent person-to-person contact.

After four months, we have settled in for the long haul of library life during the pandemic. In addition to welcoming our patrons, our libraries are now hosting census worker training, county election board training for our region, mandatory public hearings for our county commissioners, and a livestreamed Coast Guard hearing for the *Golden Ray* incident.

Jessica C. Garner
Access Services Department Head
Georgia Southern University, Henderson Library, Statesboro Campus

As of mid-September 2020, Georgia Southern University has had four weeks of classes combining virtual, asynchronous learning, and face-to-face.

Before classes began, Access Services diligently prepared the library for the return of students during a pandemic. We removed over 200 chairs from the building to encourage social distancing. We posted signs, placed sneeze guards at the checkout desk, socially distanced over 300 computers, and all students, faculty, and staff are required to wear a mask. We did everything that we could to prepare for students to return to campus. Like every business or public institution, we were asked to invent policy incredibly quickly given the scope of the task. We want our students to be successful and to have the college experience that they have always dreamed about while also being mindful of COVID-19.

On the first day of classes, it felt like all of Access Services was collectively holding their breath. As I walked into the library on Monday, August 17, 2020, I scanned the checkout desk and looked across the learning commons and was pleasantly surprised to see all students in the library wearing a mask. Most were socially distancing. I released a sigh of relief and felt a little hope grow that this would all go well.

In a normal semester, Henderson Library is almost always one of the busiest buildings on campus. For the first week of Fall 2019, 87,188 students visited the library. It always felt like there was a steady stream of students flowing around the checkout desk. The first day of Fall 2020 felt different than any other semester.
before. Students were in the library, but it was a quiet hum. Not the vibrating excitement from previous semesters. Our gate count reflected this noticed difference with only 14,721 students visiting the library the entire first week of classes.

At first, students gathered on the main floor, our second floor. In the past, this floor housed most of the computers in the library. To socially distance, all 300 computers were spread over four floors. It took about one day for students to learn where the new computers were located. Four weeks later we are seeing students utilize every area of the library.

While students have learned to navigate the new seating in the library, they have also become lax regarding masks. Access Services began receiving complaints that students were not wearing their masks while studying. Access Services is now making regular announcements via the library PA system reminding students to wear their masks at all times. We are also handing out free masks.

To continue to encourage social distancing, Access Services makes every effort to keep the furniture socially distanced. However, with rolling chairs and moveable furniture, this is a never-ending challenge.

Going forward, Access Services continues to be adaptable and understanding. We know that students are tired. We are also tired. We know that “pandemic fatigue” is real. Our goal is to continue to gently remind our students to stay the course to “Do Right” for the good of us all.

Rebecca Hunnicut
Collections Management Librarian
Georgia Southern University

As many will agree, this has been an unusual year, to say the least. After months of teleworking and making many necessary adjustments due to living, and working through, a global pandemic, I have come back to my library and have been working in my office again for several weeks. There has been some anxiety about doing so, in regards to mine and others’ health and safety, but the Georgia Southern University administration, and my library dean, have done a lot to implement practices to help ensure our
physical health and safety. Because of this, and my limited interaction with students, I feel relatively safe being back in the office. I have been provided with five university purchased masks, multiple bottles of hand sanitizer, and the promise of more when needed. Flex schedules have been implemented, so workers are only in the office approximately 50% of the time, reducing the number of people with whom I come into contact. Another new safety feature is that we are now allowed to enter the building through a back door with a key, instead of the main entrance, which is cluttered with people now that the students have returned. Also, signs! Signs are everywhere in my library. They are on the walls and floors, giving patrons and employees visible reminders of safe practices. Furniture and technology have been completely rearranged to help maintain distance but allow access. It is a very different environment in many ways, but still provides the same level of support as our pre-COVID-19 practices.

The biggest concern of being in the office again during this pandemic has nothing to do with guidelines or implemented safety practices, but with the understanding, knowledge, and compassion that has come with the young college students that have returned to campus. In a small rural town in South Georgia, that had a relatively low instance of case numbers, it is the knowledge that tens of thousands of people have flooded the city at one time, bringing with them a surge in the number of cases. During the shutdown and with quarantining practices in place the last few months, I have been able to control the level of exposure to myself and family, which has helped with the mental stress caused by this pandemic. But now that schools are opening again, and life is trying to move forward, in a new way, the level of control is reduced. At the time of this writing, my city had become a top 10 hot spot in the nation. There is only so much that I and others are able to do in order to protect ourselves, and we are at the mercy of those who are not willing to abide by the safety measures that are needed in order to keep everyone safe and healthy, so that we can eventually move out of this time in history. I now can only look forward to the next lockdown.

Jennifer Ivey
Branch Manager, Madison County Library
Athens Regional Library System

Returning to in-person library work was something that I looked forward to—I missed interacting with staff and patrons, I missed circulation and shelving, and I missed handling books! I knew that working during a pandemic would stretch staff in new ways and cause us to grow as individuals and as a team. We and our patrons would adapt to a new way of service that might expand and contract with waves of COVID-19 infection.

While I harbored concerns about what services might look like, I was also excited about the prospect of expanding my skills in these unprecedented times. I strove to project that to my staff as well, as I knew that many were worried about so many things in addition to providing library services—I wanted to provide a bit of positivity about the situation and really hoped that we could all look at it as a time of growth as opposed to a time of scarcity.

Instead of the influx of patrons and returned books that I expected, services began slowly and built to a crescendo as our community caught on to what we were doing. Some days we emptied our book drops three to four times as opposed to our usual once a day! We
accustomed ourselves to waving and shouting “thank you!” as patrons walked up to get their items from a safe distance. We eventually extended curbside hours to accommodate more of our patrons, and we provided space for a few blood drives in partnership with the Red Cross.

One of my favorite experiences during this time has been meeting patrons who previously had browsed on their own and used our self-checkout machine. Now they must interact with staff a little bit to get their items brought outside—and they get to see that we are friendly and enthusiastic about continuing to have library materials available for them. Many of our regulars have stated that they appreciate the curbside service and hope that it continues post-COVID-19. A large number of our circulation patrons prefer having items brought out rather than having to make a trek inside, and curbside serves our patrons with limited mobility well.

We most recently began providing computer access by appointment, and patrons are happy to be in the building again. Staff have truly enjoyed seeing our regular visitors again. It has been so good to see them healthy and to know that they missed us as much as we missed them! We are tentatively planning limited browsing of our stacks in the future, and compliance with new protocols during computer sessions are a good test of what we can expect, I think. Overall, I believe that this experience has made us stronger as a community and as a team of staff, and better at our jobs going forward. May we all move forward with good health, and with empathy for each other.

Tomeka Jackson
Catalog and Metadata Assistant
Kennesaw State University

When I found out in March 2020 that we would be teleworking from home because of COVID-19, I was shocked but thought this is temporary, and we will be back. Seven months later, returning to work feels even more like a shock to my system. Although I was working one day in the office in May and the rest at home, going back is still an adjustment. In late August, my work schedule changed to being in the office two days a week in the afternoon while continuing teleworking at home. While at the office, I copy catalog print book materials, physically processing them. This process includes placing security bar code strips, applying book cover jackets, and stamping the library’s name in the books. Most of my office work consists of cataloging print books for the library’s teen, general, teacher’s resource, professional development, and textbook collections. Usually, a student assistant helps me physically process books, and until we receive one, I will be pulling double duty, which I do not mind. I will also have an opportunity to perform chat reference this fall for the students at Kennesaw State University (KSU), which I have never done before. Still, I am excited to see how it goes.

While I do not mind the work, the silence is different. I am used to talking to my co-workers and visiting their offices for questions as well as having general conversations during our 15-minute breaks. Now I work alone, wear a mask in the office, follow CDC cleaning regulations using a micro cloth with disinfecting products, wear gloves to handle print books, and avoid the break room or any common areas. The adjustment to the new COVID-19 regulations feels like I am in Will Smith’s film *I Am Legend* or Dr. Manhattan sitting on Mars from the comic series Watchmen. Although the changes are odd, and I miss seeing my co-workers, I know everything will be fine and go with the current flow.

Going back to work during a pandemic and finishing my last semester in the MLIS program online at the University of South Carolina will be quite challenging. On the one hand, I will have more time to study, which is needed, especially for my last semester. Still, on the other hand, I am anxious about the uncertainty of this virus. I
take comfort in knowing that KSU has been working hard in implementing safety measures, which includes proper cleaning regulations and providing gloves and facemasks. However, no one can be ready for anything like this except by trial and error. Still, it is better to “be prepared!” as Scar from the Lion King says!

**Gail Morton, Research Services Librarian**  
**Adam Griggs, Research Services Librarian**  
**Kristen Bailey, Research Services Librarian**  
**Lee Olson, Head of Research Services**  
**Mercer University, Jack Tarver Library**

When Georgia’s stay-at-home order lifted, after almost two months of telework, it was time to return to the library. Wide-eyed and cautious, with our face coverings and hand sanitizer, our department reunited in person in May. We prepared for summer session, with the next academic year just around the corner. At home, we professionally developed through self-directed research, online workshops, and webinars—and we were now ready to apply our new knowledge. This included learning how to provide research services to our Mercer community, what software works best, and how to provide a safe environment for Mercerians. Before opening our doors to patrons on June 1, 2020, we established safe consultation protocols, created distance learning spaces, implemented extra cleaning, put hand sanitizer everywhere possible, and always wore facemasks in shared spaces. We believed that exceptional precautions would protect us.

Fast forward two months to August. Classes were about to begin, and our first group orientation for the 2020–2021 academic year was for Mercer’s Opportunity Scholars and Minority Mentors program. This program is designed to support underrepresented and underserved students, and the library has always been invited to be a part of their large orientation. Before the pandemic, the orientation was done in a large hall with the ability to accommodate over 200 participants. But to follow CDC guidelines, the orientation was offered as two Zoom sessions. We had planned our presentation in advance and applied safety protocols. We were going to use our classroom to project our presentation on the projector with each one of us taking turns to say hello, and to present our assigned slide. Since the orientation was on Zoom, we were able to be more inclusive and invite circulation, who are normally building bound, to join us. Then, two days before the orientation, we found ourselves in quarantine. One of us tested positive for COVID-19, which meant we all had to be tested, and we all had to self-isolate. As a result, we each had to Zoom in to the orientation while quarantined at home. The orientation went relatively well; yet, as it happens in the pandemic, we had some new experiences: someone’s toddler started crying, someone’s internet was a little shaky, and someone who was a little nervous in Zoom seemed to steal the show! We were thankful for a PowerPoint to share with the attendees because no one could see us unless we turned our cameras on.

While all the planning and preparing is important, it is not the cornerstone. Best practices have changed often during the pandemic, and we have refashioned the library
to suit safety protocols. When we learn something new about the illness, we adapt. This applies to our situation as well. We are very lucky to have learned this valuable lesson and, like a developmental workshop, have applied it to our lives. We have become a lot less rigid, a lot more collaborative, and, most importantly, much more adaptable.

Jasmine Rizer
Head, Serials Cataloging Section
University of Georgia

Earlier this year, when numerous shelter-in-place orders were in force, there was a lot of discussion about the quarantine’s effects on mental health. I don’t want to discount how hard it must have been for a lot of people, being cooped up for so long. For me, though, the real mental health horror show started after lockdown was over and the phased return-to-work plan at my institution started to ramp up.

I have literal obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). You’re probably making a hand-washing joke in your head, and you’re not wrong. There have been times at work lately when I’ve lingered at the sink for a second hand-washing session because I wasn’t happy with the first one.

Obviously, I am not in any way involved with making the big decisions about re-opening my institution. A lot of this is out of my control. In these situations, you’re often advised to focus on what you can control.

OCD is devious, though. It can find a way to wriggle past any safety protocol that might help set a typical mind at ease. Give me a pair of gloves to wear when handling library materials, and I will quickly find myself lost in a tangled skein of contamination scenarios that might be better explained in the accompanying illustration than in words. This may look like a silly little drawing, but I can assure you that the bombardment of worry is quite serious. In the afternoon, it’s hard for me to get away from work because of the temptation to stay and wipe down just one more surface.

In spite of all this, my actual library work keeps getting done. In fact, my brain seems willing to let go of some of the tendencies that, during normal times, can make work more excruciating than satisfying. Maybe my mind only has the capacity to grind its gears over a limited number of things at once, or maybe a crisis simply forces things into perspective. To be clear, I would certainly rather have a hard time at work than have bad things happening outside of work—to myself or to other people. Still, I’m grateful that my brain has not decided to pile questions like, “are you sure you don’t want to look at that publisher’s address one more time?” on top of my worry about my own safety and that of students and my fellow employees.

I wish I could wrap these observations up with a short and handy list of tips for other folks with similar issues. The only advice I feel qualified to
I offer is: mental health care can be expensive, and I know everyone can’t afford to see a therapist as often as they’d like, but if there’s room on your calendar and in your budget, there is no shame in needing to check in with a mental health professional a little more often than usual. Returning to work right now is scary. Stay as safe as you can and remember that you’re not alone, folks.

Kelly Williams  
*Supervisory Librarian, Suwanee Branch  
Gwinnett County Public Library*

When the United States erupted into chaos in March 2020, I was just getting back to work from a weeklong staycation. My extrovert batteries were critically low, and serotonin was sorely lacking. I needed to pour my energy into a new project, but like many, I was working from home and unable to do much except binge webinars and Netflix. During the work from home period, I received a sudden bright light: an interview for a supervisory position that I’ve been working towards for the past two years. Miracle of miracles, they chose me for my dream job! I was going to start as soon as the library reopened. I found out in March, and by the time we announced a reopening plan in May, I was champing at the bit to spill my secret. I was so excited to share my big news with my coworkers, but it was a bittersweet moment; sharing excitement in a Google Meet just isn’t the same. The dichotomy of excitement and dismay was difficult to balance.

I started the new job in May, not knowing what to expect. Not only was I beginning a new job, with a new role and new people, I was also doing this in a time when uncertainty reigned supreme. How would I be able to learn this new position, while simultaneously helping both myself and my new staff live through the most tumultuous time period in recent history? At the time of this writing, I’m three months in, and some days I still don’t know what to expect. Will we ever get back to normal? What does normal even mean?

In the past few months, I’ve learned so much about this position, this system, these people. I’ve also learned more about myself in the last six months than I have in years of introspection. I’ve learned that I struggle when I don’t have a network of support, that I need meaningful work in order to feel fulfilled, and that there’s so much still to learn. I’m working on how to help myself and my staff cope with change, and how to move forward when it feels time is standing still. I hope to learn to use the lens of this strange time period to discover more about myself and others.

The time I’ve spent getting to know my new team is rife with memories that I’ll look back on with mixed emotions for the rest of my life. What would have been different if I had started when the world was normal? What would I have learned differently, coped with differently, done differently? I’ll never know the answers to those questions. Still, I treasure the chance to have this new experience and go down this path. We’re all going through this time trying to survive; I’m beyond honored that I’ve been given this opportunity to thrive.

Ashley Wilson, *Information Services Librarian, Douglas Campus*  
Janice Williams, *Library Coordinator, Waycross Campus  
South Georgia State College*

Returning to work in a library during a pandemic naturally brought concerns and questions. Our concerns were for our community and ourselves. How do we keep everyone safe? How do we promote library services and keep our students and faculty safe? Should we continue to serve community patrons? On both our Waycross and Douglas campuses, we had to rethink how we allow our patrons to use the space.

Pre-COVID-19, we encouraged students to collaborate in the library. However, group study rooms can no longer accommodate up to nine persons. Due to COVID-19, study rooms are
limited to two or three persons. We previously featured available resources and promoted browsing and borrowing through displays, but now browsing is discouraged.

Re-opening means we need to sanitize everything frequently. We quarantine books before re-shelving. Students are discouraged from retrieving books they want to borrow from the shelves. While supplies last, we do not loan but give out pencils and pens to whomever needs them. Increased signage reminds patrons to sanitize their hands and study space with supplies provided at the various sanitizing stations located throughout the library. Additional signage advises students to avoid moving strategically placed seating to maintain physical distance. Face coverings are required for all, unless alone in an office or study room.

In a pandemic of this nature, where the virus moves from person to person, we had to rethink how we perform routine tasks, loan items, and share space. In Waycross, we share the office space among three staff members, plus a work-study student. Aside from books, we normally touch many things in common, including the computer mouse and keyboard, the date-due stamp, mailing supplies (mailing bags, address labels, tape, scissors), and more. We also lend calculators, pencils, pens, and markers. Opening and closing routines involve touching door handles and light switches. That is not to mention the proximity required for helping patrons with computer issues. We often see someone cough or sneeze on their hand, then touch the computer mouse or keyboard before asking us for help.

While we can sanitize our work areas and equipment, we are finding it difficult to maintain the six-foot distance from patrons when helping with computers.

On the Douglas campus, we have several homeless community patrons who use our facilities for computers, internet, and restrooms. We want them to be able to use our resources, but we have concerns about how to continue safely. We removed some of our computers for the sake of social distancing, but some questions remain. How do we enforce mandatory face coverings with our community patrons who may not be able to afford them? How do they keep up with the news when the only access they have is through our computers and newspapers? While serving our student patrons continues to be our priority, there has always been a place in the library for our community patrons. Although COVID-19 has caused us to restrict resources available to all, those for community patrons have become far more limited.