

8-2023

## Addressing Challenges & Reactions to COVID-19 in Academic Libraries

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### Recommended Citation

Robertson, T., Foxhall, E., & Hodge, M. (2023). Addressing Challenges & Reactions to COVID-19 in Academic Libraries. *Alabama Libraries*, 61(1). Retrieved from [https://jagworks.southalabama.edu/alabamalibraries\\_journal/vol61/iss1/3](https://jagworks.southalabama.edu/alabamalibraries_journal/vol61/iss1/3)

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## ADDRESSING CHALLENGES

### Addressing Challenges & Reactions to COVID-19 in Academic Libraries

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## **ADDRESSING CHALLENGES**

### **Addressing Challenges and Reactions to COVID-19 in Academic Libraries**

#### **Abstract**

The unprecedented COVID-19 crisis has impacted many universities and academic libraries resulting in normal operations ceasing temporarily. Overall, academic libraries at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic immediately adjusted to the so-called new normal and accommodated disrupted work operations to operate successfully. This article discusses the procedures implemented, positive and negative reactions to these changes, and the challenges experienced at Alabama State University's Levi Watkins Learning Center. This article also highlights implemented procedures carried out by other university libraries, including difficulties and successes that libraries experienced during peak periods of the COVID-19 pandemic. To conclude, academic libraries are challenged to adapt to new learning trends and the research needs of their campus communities to provide the best quality resources and services despite COVID-19.

*Keywords:* library services, COVID-19, pandemic, academic libraries, reference services

#### **Introduction**

According to research, COVID-19 was identified in Wuhan, China in December 2019 (Kempuraj et al., 2020). Approximately six million individuals have succumbed to COVID-19 (World Health Organization, 2023). COVID-19 is characterized by coughing, sneezing, chills, and fever (Kay et al., 2021). Individuals diagnosed with underlying health conditions such as hypertension, heart disease, asthma, and diabetes are more susceptible to this virus (Kaye et al.,

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2021). Due to the virus's rapid spread, universities and businesses in the United States were forced to quickly shut down and shelter in place to minimize the spread of the virus.

In March 2020, cases of COVID-19 increased resulting in a global crisis impacting many universities. Normal workflow operations temporarily ceased or shut down due to the pandemic. Also, at the start of COVID-19, increased morbidity and mortality rates continued to rise, and mandatory mask-wearing in public places such as academic libraries occurred. This became the new normal. These academic libraries had to implement new procedures and services to meet the information and research needs of students, faculty, and staff. Alabama State University and other universities in the United States adopted new guidelines to comply with the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Walke et al., 2020). This descriptive research identified and defined procedures that were implemented at Alabama State University, Louisiana State University, Valparaiso University of Indiana, Eastern Illinois University, and The University of Alabama to serve their communities. In this paper, challenges, strengths, and future perspectives of academic libraries will be addressed.

### **Literature Review**

A considerable amount of research has been published on the challenges and benefits stemming from COVID-19 that have been experienced by libraries. University libraries were selected based on the following criteria: years of publication within the last four years related to the timespan of COVID-19 (2019-2023); databases utilized by academic libraries, such as Academic Search Premier, Google Scholar, Library Literature & Information Science Full Text, and ScienceDirect; and similar academic majors or programs. Additionally, these libraries were

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selected based on the size of the libraries in comparison to Alabama State University. This pandemic greatly impacted the ability to provide adequate resources and services in academic libraries (Connell et al., 2021). During this time, libraries in the United States experienced an increase in virtual communications, especially academic libraries such as those at Alabama State University, The University of Alabama, Louisiana State University, Northeastern Illinois University, and Valparaiso University (Connell et al., 2021). Other research has shown that academic libraries experienced increases in online reference queries related to COVID-19 and misinformation (Charbonneau & Vardell, 2022).

The *Journal of Information Technology and Libraries* discusses the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on academic communities (Connell et al., 2021). According to Connell, academic libraries at Louisiana State University, Northeastern Illinois University, and Valparaiso University showed the impact of the use of “library resources during physical building disruptions” (Connell et al., 2021, p. 4). At the beginning of the pandemic, several universities and academic libraries became highly stressed and frustrated because they had to immediately close their doors to the public. In the wake of the pandemic, Valparaiso University’s Christopher Center for Library and Information Resources reduced their hours from 113 per week to 67.5 (Connell et al., 2021). To better assist their campus community, the Valparaiso University Library increased its online presence, which included online chat services to better assist faculty and students when operations were disrupted.

Reorganizing traditional technical services posed a challenge to The University of Alabama Libraries by aligning with current users' expectations, responding to evolving industry standards, and answering to university priorities (Arthur & Jackson, 2020). According to a case study by Arthur and Jackson (2020), large and medium libraries utilized reorganization and

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workflow analysis standards. The University of Alabama initiated two phases of workflow analysis. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, phase one took place in 2007 to initiate the restructuring of technical services and acquisitions areas. This restructuring began in 2004 but was halted due to changes in staff and leadership (Arthur & Jackson, 2020). By 2007, a new dean had arrived; this dean carried out the traditional print-based workflow and initiated the e-resources workflow that would be more efficient. Blackwell, a book vendor, worked as a consulting agency for the library to assist with reorganization and the integration of technology (Arthur & Jackson, 2020). Researchers Arthur and Jackson (2020) recognized “the new strategy considers space needs, evolving user expectations, new university and library strategic goals, and budgetary realities while allowing the library to meet user needs in a rapidly changing environment” (p.121). With vendor visitations, this phase took approximately two years to complete the workflow changes. Required in phase one were the catalogers' information regarding batch procedures and the processing of records. The “traditional reference librarians rejected the vendor-supplied records because they felt that the quality was inferior and did not agree with the changes made in cataloging” (Arthur & Jackson, 2020 p.125).

In 2015, phase two was designed with future plans in mind, such as focusing on the positive changes made in 2007. The decision was made to merge Acquisitions, Cataloging, and e-Resources into one department, changing the staffing. With this newly revamped department, the library administration decided to hire a new department head who supported the three areas merging into one area. This resulted in effective collaborations on potential changes and a successful workflow analysis at The University of Alabama.

### ***Procedures Implemented***

Implementing the following procedures as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic helped to

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greatly minimize the spread of this virus at Alabama State University. For example, the library provided online course reserve materials for students to utilize since the physical copies of these books were unavailable to use in the library. Other safety precautions or measures entailed the requirement of mask-wearing; allowing students to check out single-study rooms only; and providing plexiglass at reference desk computers, and between computers used by students, to support social distancing. During the COVID-19 pandemic, items such as laptop computers, headphone sets, and whiteboards could not be checked out by faculty, staff, or students. Moreover, all information literacy sessions occurred online at the start of the pandemic as a safety measure. Librarians and subject specialists utilized Google Meet, Zoom, Blackboard Collaborate, and other online platforms while instructing students (Connell et al., 2021). Additionally, library staff quarantined returned library items according to guidelines provided by the American Library Association (Ewen, 2020).

### ***Positive and Negative Reactions to Changes***

The Levi Watkins Learning Center experienced positive reactions from students and faculty for the past three years because of the implemented COVID-19 protocols. Similarly, many other academic libraries experienced these same reactions. At the start of COVID-19, university faculty, staff, and students adjusted favorably to implemented procedures, such as mask-wearing and social distancing. Overall, as the pandemic progressed, the majority of the campus community remained compliant with the university's policies to minimize or prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Negative reactions included students responding with defiant attitudes when politely reminded by library staff and faculty to wear face masks and maintain social distancing. Many library staff and faculty became frustrated reminding students on multiple occasions to adhere to

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the university's implemented procedures. Additionally, managers and security intervened during extreme instances asking students who refused to comply with the university's mask mandate and social distancing to leave the library. Some students continued to remain frustrated because they were not able to check out course reserve materials, group study rooms, laptops, and other library resources.

### ***Challenges and Strengths***

This section will identify and address the challenges and strengths experienced by academic libraries during the start of the COVID-19 era. Five of the crucial issues faced by libraries were: operating with time constraints; managing libraries with fewer library staff and resources; providing reference services behind plexiglass; getting students to comply with or adhere to COVID-19 protocols; and experiencing problems accessing print books and journals that were inaccessible online. As observed by Tosaka and Weng (2022), technical services departments in the U.S. experienced challenges as a result of the pandemic. These included adapting to the pandemic as a public health emergency, which presented new challenges to continue to serve academic communities. At the start of COVID-19, technical services departments struggled to work remotely with the "understanding that most physical processing and cataloging operations might need to be stalled" (Tosaka and Weng 2022 p. 82).

When the COVID-19 pandemic was declared a public health emergency in the state of Alabama, the technical services department at Alabama State University's Levi Watkins Learning Center could not catalog physical books. To resolve this issue, subject specialists increased their ordering of digital books to accommodate faculty, staff, and students. Additionally, the library increased its usage of OverDrive, a digital book service, to accommodate the research needs of students. Similarly, the usage of electronic databases



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increased among the campus community.

Researchers identified at least three major benefits or strengths that allowed many academic libraries to survive and thrive. As a first major strength, several library staff and faculty were able to identify and carry out innovative ways to address the information and research needs of their academic communities. These strengths included updating or creating policies and workflows, such as implementing online reading lists and creating LibGuides in learning management systems (Black & Powelson, 2021). For the next major strength, some universities updated software or programs to support online teaching and learning, such as Ex Libris (Black & Powelson, 2021). According to Black and Powelson (2021), Ex Libris is an integrated library system that is workable to support online teaching and research. At Alabama State University's library, information literacy sessions and research consultations were all taught online using platforms like Google Meet and Zoom. Likewise, some research consultations were conducted over the phone to accommodate students. Finally, as a major strength, more open access databases and resources such as the Public Library of Science were provided to faculty and students. These resources were essential to assist faculty and students with completing research projects when the library no longer subscribed to specific databases or when access was limited.

### ***Future Perspectives***

Most libraries will continue to experience the effects of the pandemic regarding collections, programs, and community needs for years to come (Shumaker, 2021). According to several researchers, this will be referred to as the new normal related to library operations and management. Universities will hopefully continue to benefit as the demand for more open educational resources increases during ongoing budget cuts and reduced funding (Shumaker,

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2021). “Social and political instability, inflation, economic uncertainty, and the ongoing shift to open access models have resulted in rising journal prices,” including skyrocketing database costs (Bosch et al., 2022, p.13). Also, academic libraries will have to continue to adapt to new learning and research trends of faculty and students to provide high-quality library-related resources and services. Based on research, workflow analysis should be continued in detail to identify inefficiencies in library operations and collection development (Arthur & Jackson, 2020). For example, if a library department's procedures and policies have not been updated in several years, “a workflow analysis can serve to identify where changes are needed, and who should be involved in the process” (Arthur & Jackson, 2020, p.127).

## **Conclusion**

As libraries continue to move forward in 2023, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on library resources and services are still lingering. For instance, some essential databases and online resources have been discontinued because of increased costs during the pandemic. Moreover, there has been a shift in demographics related to the types of users that enter academic libraries. Many users now expect libraries to provide a plethora of online resources and reference services to meet their informational and research needs. Thus, usage of print books, journals, and microfiche has significantly declined among patrons during in-person library visitations. Faculty continue to utilize more online platforms such as Canvas, Blackboard Collaborate, Zoom, and Google Meet to meet the learning needs of their students, either synchronously or asynchronously. Also, due to the pandemic, several students are continuing to take hybrid courses or courses entirely online because these methods of instruction are more convenient and less expensive; therefore, this trend will continue to greatly impact those who use

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the in-person resources and services in academic libraries.

Additionally, users have mixed emotions about whether to wear masks, since state-wide and university mask mandates at most colleges have been removed. Fewer library users continue to wear masks in libraries to prevent or greatly reduce the spread of COVID-19 and other respiratory viruses. Unfortunately, mask-wearing became a political issue during the pandemic. This will continue to pose mixed feelings among library staff who feel that all users who enter libraries should wear masks to protect themselves, and others, from emerging strands of COVID-19.

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