EMORY LIBRARIES & INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY | Woodruff Health Sciences Center Library

Open for Business: Offering Physical Library Spaces in the COVID Era

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Introduction

In order to support the research and educational needs of the communities that it serves, the WHSC Library reopened its physical spaces to authorized users in mid-summer 2020. The library's goal was to create a safe and functional space for study, printer and computer use, attendance of virtual classes and meetings for individuals who do not have adequate spaces for these activities. The library also offers contactless book pick up and drop off because there are many resources required by users which are unavailable digitally. In collaboration with other units on campus, the WHSC Library put a number of procedures in place to protect the health and safety of its employees and users.

Procedures

Safety:
In collaboration with the University's environmental and safety health officers, we made determinations of the number of seats that could safely be offered.
• Seating was removed or signposted.
• Cleaning materials were distributed around the library for easy access by library staff and users.
• Signage and plexiglass dividers direct library users.
• Library staff monitor user behavior and issue reminders as needed.

Procedures

Appointments for General Seating:
We implemented a reservations system (LibCal) to limit the number of people in the library at one time and to ensure that all library visitors had completed the University's requirements for returning to campus. We have adjusted the system based on user feedback to make the process clearer and are now generally able to accommodate walk-ins. Positive reminders have been an effective strategy for maintaining user cooperation.

Study Rooms:
Five study rooms are available for individual use (increased from an initial three) for users who need to take or teach an online class or otherwise interact with others virtually.

Physical Borrowing:
Current research indicates that a 48-hour quarantine period for paper items is sufficient for safely providing books to users [1]. Books are stored in bags and the information needed for checkout is recorded on the outside. Two days after the book has been bagged, it is checked out to the user and placed on a cart outside our entryway's interior doors. An email with instructions is sent to the user. Returns are placed on a separate cart and handled with gloves. These are dated, and the Stacks Assistants return the books to the shelves two days after their return.

1. OCLC. REALM Project: Reopening Archives, Libraries, Museums. https://www.oclc.org/realm/research.html. Last accessed Oct. 20,2020.

Continuing Challenges

- We are unable to provide space for many of our previous users, including CDC employees, alumni, and members of the general public.
- We have an increased need for tech support as users access more electronic resources.
- We have more demand for study rooms than we can currently accommodate.

Results

We were able to open the library on July 6th at approximately 25% of our normal capacity. Users generally adhere to library expectations and we have been able to gradually offer additional spaces. We have made continual improvements to the reservations system to increase user-friendliness and time sensitivity.

Summary and Conclusions

With careful planning and collaboration with other University service points, libraries can partially reopen their physical spaces and create a climate of safety, compliance, and comfort for their users. Following similar protocols may be immediately useful to your library and may offer guidance to help you prepare for possible future large-scale public health challenges.

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