

August 2023

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Recommended Citation

Hudson, Kelly K. and Gilbert, Heather (2023) "Archival Research in the Time of Coronavirus," *South Carolina Libraries*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 3.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51221/sc.scl.2023.7.1.3>

Available at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/scl_journal/vol7/iss1/3

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Archival Research in the Time of Coronavirus

Abstract

Two Special Collections directors explore the challenges and strategies of delivering archival services during a global pandemic at their respective academic repositories: Special Collections at the College of Charleston and the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas.

Keywords

management, archives, special collections, access, COVID-19, SARS-CoV-2, SCLA Conference 2022

Introduction

In March 2020, the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic left libraries and archives struggling to keep up with the needs of their patrons while balancing safety measures and the unknown. Librarians and archivists had to use evolving strategies to serve their researchers as more and better information about the novel Coronavirus became available. Conducting research in an archive has long been an in-person activity, often taking long hours of study, pouring over manuscript collections with the assistance of archivists. The College of Charleston's Special Collections and the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas faced a variety of challenges and implemented a suite of new services and strategies to continue to provide, not just for their patrons, but also for their staff. Some of these strategies outlived their use, others became permanent fixtures in a post-COVID world.

Institutional Challenges

During a global emergency of this scale, every institution faces its challenges. While Special Collections at the College of Charleston and the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin are several states apart, and faced different COVID scenarios, there were also similarities. Both institutions were state schools, (like everyone else) both were caught off guard by a problem of this nature and scale, both received less direction than they would have liked from their higher-ups (at the administrative or state level), and both rose to the occasion to ensure that research needs were met and that staff needs and well-being were supported and respected as best as possible.

The College of Charleston is a state school located in Charleston, South Carolina. Like many institutions in March 2020, we had very little time to prepare for the transition to remote work and were originally instructed to prepare for a 2-week remote work scenario. However, those two weeks proved quite a bit longer. The Libraries (and therefore Special Collections) closed their doors to physical traffic on March 17th, 2020, and campus access was restricted to essential personnel only. The library was expected to continue providing virtual services to our patrons; therefore, we were able to

successfully argue that our personnel was essential. However, to limit possible contagion, we initially had severe occupancy limits placed on staff and only one or two people could be in the department concurrently. This was challenging within an archival environment because it meant collection access was available to only those staff members at any given time.

Essential personnel campus restrictions were lifted in June 2020. By August 2020, the doors were open once again to in-person traffic. However, remote work was encouraged whenever possible and occupancy limits remained. In early March 2021 (just before the COVID-19 vaccine release for educators) the state of South Carolina ordered all state employees to return to in-person work thereby lifting staff occupancy limits in working spaces.

The Harry Ransom Center is a humanities research center (library/archives) and museum that is part of the University of Texas at Austin. When the Coronavirus pandemic reached Texas in what felt like overnight, the Ransom Center closed its doors to onsite visitors and staff on Friday, March 13, 2020. Like the College of Charleston, we also had little time to prepare. Staff were eventually allowed back into the building in the following weeks, but only to secure special collections materials for long-term lockdown and to retrieve personal belongings.

The Ransom Center's large Reading and Viewing Room and three dedicated Special Collections classroom spaces are very busy places that typically serve dozens of researchers and as many as five or six visiting classes each day. At the time of the shutdown in mid-March, Spring Break was approaching, so class visits were not an issue. However, the reading room was inundated with Ransom Center-awarded Research Fellows and other long-term independent researchers working on projects with publication deadlines, many of whom, both Fellows and independent, had traveled from overseas to study in the archives.

As an institution, the University of Texas was very cautious in allowing staff back to work onsite, and the Ransom Center was even more so. Essential staff who had to work to maintain facilities and/or

conserve or accession collections trickled in, returning in the summer and fall of 2020 with strong occupancy limits and limited, staggered schedules. The bulk of reader, reference, and instructional services staff were encouraged to stay home and provide services remotely, and that didn't change until the spring of 2021 with the availability of the first COVID-19 vaccines. At that time, public services staff were allowed to return onsite to work with collection materials. That meant a full year of staff working to answer research queries, provide reference copies, and teach with primary source materials without having physical access to the collections.

A few months later in July 2021 the Ransom Center finally reopened the Reading and Viewing Room to in-person visitors. The Ransom Center Fellowship Program (Harry Ransom Center, n.d.) resumed and the many Fellows who missed their scheduled award visits were allowed to make them up. However, due to concerns about capacity and staffing limitations, in-person class visits would not resume until the spring of 2022.

While the College of Charleston and the Harry Ransom Center dealt with varying degrees of accessibility and different expectations of service, both institutions faced the issue of a lack of data on the SARS-CoV-2 virus, specifically, how the virus was spread via surface contamination. The REopening Archives, Libraries and Museums (REALM) project (OCLC, 2021) conducted by OCLC, the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), and Batelle was started and designed to “produce and distribute science-based COVID-19 information that can aid local decision making regarding operations of archives, libraries, and museums” (OCLC, 2021). The REALM project was slowly releasing its testing data and each new result had the potential to change an institution's policy on materials handling during the pandemic.

COVID Services and Strategies

As SARS-CoV-2 was an unknown virus, both Special Collections and the Harry Ransom Center implemented a variety of solutions that evolved as more data became available. In Special Collections,

the COVID-19 adjustments were focused on occupancy limits, surface transmission for both patron and staff safety, and technology for facilitating work regardless of physical location. At the Harry Ransom Center, COVID-19 initiatives included implementing a return-to-work task force and a campus-wide Collections Committee. However, with little staff access to the building and collections, the real adjustment that Ransom Center public services had to focus on was how to provide quality research and instruction remotely for the next year using only materials that happened to have already been digitized.

At the College of Charleston, like most academic institutions, the library is often considered the center of the academic campus. Students are used to spending time in our library for group projects, silent study, coffee runs, and sometimes just to have some quiet space to themselves. Faculty use the library in much the same way. With the uncertainty surrounding the SARS-CoV-2 virus, the fear that the libraries could be the center of a campus outbreak (both for patrons and staff) was very real. Like many libraries, the College of Charleston Libraries had experienced numerous staffing cuts over the last several years, so even a relatively small but unexpected increase in the number of staff on sick leave could cause the library to have to adjust its hours or services. Therefore, our primary COVID-19 adjustments were focused on occupancy and surface transmission for both patron and staff safety and technology for facilitating work regardless of physical location.

With any respiratory virus, close quarters promote transmission. Therefore, occupancy limits were one of our primary methods of attempting to keep Special Collections staff and eventually patrons safe. While it seems strange to think that masks weren't common in the very early stages of the pandemic, the messaging on masking was initially confusing, and once masking was accepted as an effective safety measure, high-quality masks were scarce. Implementing occupancy limits for staff was therefore a practical and effective method of ensuring work safety. In addition to limited on-campus access, Special Collections was a founding partner of the Lowcountry Digital Library (The Lowcountry

Digital Library, n.d.) and had a variety of collection materials already digitized. In early 2020, between our limited on-campus access and leveraging online resources like Lowcountry Digital Library, the South Carolina Digital Library (South Carolina Digital Library, n.d.), the Special Collections website (College of Charleston Special Collections, n.d.) which hosted the department's EAD finding aids (later migrated to ArchivesSpace), and the research guides (College of Charleston Special Collections, n.d.) maintained by the department, reference services never went on hiatus.

On-campus staff were managed with shared calendars so there was no confusion as to who was working where, and anyone wanting access to campus outside of their scheduled day had to request permission. Access was initially restricted to one or two on-campus staff per department, however, institutional needs soon required that those restrictions were loosened. With masking, staffing occupancies were allowed to increase, and in March 2021 with the Governor's order that all state employees must return to in-person work, staff occupancy limits were lifted. Masking requirements for staff were maintained for as long as we were legally allowed to do so.

Occupancy limits for researchers followed a different tactic. Special Collections serves a diverse audience consisting of people affiliated with the College of Charleston (faculty, students, and staff), people affiliated with the South Carolina Historical Society (whom we share a workspace and provide shared research services with on-campus), Friends of the Library members, and members of the general public. One strategy used to limit occupancy was to initially limit in-person research to affiliated researchers only (College of Charleston, South Carolina Historical Society, and Friend of the Library). The library itself was limiting access to College of Charleston-affiliated patrons, so implementing similar restrictions in Special Collections (with procedures for exceptions) was necessary. The ultimate goal was always to open back up to members of the public, and in 2021 we were finally able to do so.

Once Special Collections was open to in-person research, occupancy limits, and appointments were required. Appointment time slots were from 9 am-noon and 1 pm to 4 pm, allowing time for cleaning between visits. Initially, we operated with two concurrent research appointments at any given time and divided the room in half with one researcher in each half of the reading room. Eventually, we reduced the restrictions to 4 researchers at a time, then 4 researchers with the possibility of 2 additional slots for students. Finally, occupancy restrictions were lifted. As with staff, masking requirements were maintained for as long as we were legally allowed to do so.

Conducting archival research is a highly tactile process, so surface transmission was a major concern. Initially, before both the reopening to in-person researchers and the results of the REALM project, Special Collections quarantined materials for 3 days after staff use. A quarantine area was established in the (then empty) reading room and both books and collection materials were isolated. There was discussion of quarantining after prolonged use versus quarantining after any use (including putting the materials back on the shelf after quarantining), but a 3-day quarantine after a staff member used the collection was the original and primary method employed. When in-person researchers returned, quarantining of materials after use was still in effect. However, after the REALM project and CDC released their data on the likelihood of fomite transmission, we were, thankfully, able to abandon this time and space-consuming procedure.

Cleaning practices were implemented in the reading room once researchers returned in person. After each research appointment, used collections were either moved into quarantine isolation or returned to the shelf, and all surfaces (tables, chairs, etc.) were thoroughly disinfected with a product approved to disinfect the SARS-CoV-2 virus. These practices, in addition to the occupancy limitations, required an adjustment in reading room hours. Pre-pandemic, Special Collections was open Monday through Friday, 9 am to 5 pm. After reopening to in-person research in Fall 2020, our adjusted hours were 9 am to noon and 1 pm to 4 pm. This allowed for an hour of cleaning and resetting the reading

room after each block of in-person appointments. In addition to cleaning, high-touch services were initially off-limits to researchers, including the reading room book collection, the microfilm viewer, and the Xerox machine. These restrictions were also lessened and ultimately lifted in time as well.

With staff working in different locations and rotating in and out of on-campus work, implementing technology that facilitated communication was key. In early March 2020, our campus was negotiating an institutional license for Zoom (Zoom, 2022) video conferencing software. Zoom was extremely important to Special Collections, not just because it opened up the possibility of virtual reference consultations and instructional sessions, but also because of the chat feature. Special Collections started several Zoom chat channels that covered topics including reference services and day-to-day departmental operations. It also allowed Special Collections staff the ability to chat with colleagues from the South Carolina Historical Society. This chat feature served in part as a means of replicating the in-person quick conversations one might have in the office, something that either requires a more immediate answer than email or something that's occurring at the moment. It also served as a means to prevent isolation amongst staff working from home and provided a platform to ensure all were included in departmental announcements or discussions that occurred outside of staff meetings.

Special Collections was also able to implement a Springshare product called LibAnswers (Springshare, n.d.). LibAnswers allows an institution to embed "Ask Us" widgets into a website and provides a dedicated ticketing system to track and fulfill any questions submitted. Previously, the College of Charleston Libraries had one LibAnswers queue for all patron requests. By setting up a second instance that was dedicated solely to archival research, Special Collections was able to customize the question form to request archival research-specific information, eliminate the (albeit slim) chances that a Special Collections request wouldn't get forwarded to the department's attention by non-Special

Collections library staff, and provide better tracking and analysis of patron questions and answers. Using this software was a win-win for both Special Collections staff and their patrons.

The Ransom Center implemented many initiatives to address the limitations to access that the COVID-19 shutdown brought about as well as to plan for the pending but unknown timeline for eventually reopening safely. Staff representatives from across the Center, including Reader and Viewer Services, Museum Visitor Services, Conservation, and Facilities formed a task force to plan for staff to return to work in stages and later the public to return with restrictions in place. This return-to-work task force met regularly to monitor REALM study findings and to create policies related to space capacity, distancing, quarantining materials, and disinfecting surfaces.

Likewise, a cross-campus Collections Committee was formed. Leaders, including the Ransom Center's Head of Reader Services, from five research institutions across the University of Texas met often to compare notes, learn from each other, and coordinate efforts. We shared our future reopening plans, distancing and capacity guidelines, and practices for how we were each tackling reference queries and teaching requests. The Ransom Center was among one of the last of these campus collections to reopen to staff and patrons, in part because of its robust efforts to provide quite accessible research and instruction services remotely.

In the early stages of the pandemic shutdown, Ransom Center public services staff began to hold Zoom meetings with a specific focus on how to provide research and reference services as well as teaching with primary sources without access to archival collections. We knew we'd need to use images of collection materials that had already been scanned or photographed to answer reference queries and provide instruction, and luckily, because of an already active remote reference team, we had a large collection of previously digitized content available to through an internal Digital Images Database (DIDb) which is a much larger collection of the publicly available Harry Ransom Center Digital Collections online CONTENTdm repository (Harry Ransom Center, n.d.).

We started with a formal training session for all Reader, Reference, and Instructional Services staff led by the Head of Reference Services on how to access and navigate the DIdb. Next, because so many visiting Research Fellows and other independent researchers, as well as instructors and research faculty, were left without access when we closed the Reading and Viewing Room abruptly, we prioritized access to those constituents by assigning staff liaisons to work directly with each. These liaisons weren't only the usual Reference Services team staff; other professionals (archivists, catalogers, etc.) were also enlisted to help. We also lifted the photoduplication fees usually charged to patrons ensuring that everyone could receive what they needed at no cost.

New strategies were also needed to handle the hefty teaching load that didn't disappear just because of the pandemic. Most of the classes booked at the Ransom Center are undergraduate arts and humanities courses visiting to use primary source archival materials or early, rare books in support of course objectives. The Ransom Center has a high-quality Instructional Services program, and much planning and coordination go on to choose very specific materials for students to see and evaluate. Without access to those resources, staff had to pivot to other materials and models to support the classes. We had to hunt for different images of materials that could be used to teach via Zoom, images that had already been digitized, and in many cases, not the materials that instructors had requested or used for many semesters. We had to enlist the help of those outside the usual team of five or six staff who would typically support in-person classes. We now needed staff to look for images, liaise with faculty, run Zoom instruction sessions, build slideshows using digital whiteboard software like Google's Jamboard or other interactive platforms, and keep students engaged with the materials in remote sessions. This usually took at least two staff members per class, so support was enlisted to form a team of those interested in helping with Instructional Services. This team consisted of graduate assistants, archivists, and even paging staff, in addition to the Research Associates and Instructional Services team who usually facilitated classes. The results were overwhelmingly positive - more staff could teach, more

innovative ways to teach online, and matching up images of archival materials that perhaps hadn't been used before.

While most reference staff were at home for a year providing access remotely and only using previously digitized materials to address research questions, the pending reference query queue grew to an almost unmanageable number of requests. Many requests couldn't be fulfilled until staff could return to the collections and get to the specific archival materials in need of duplication for remote patrons. During this time Reference Services staff began using Trello (Trello, n.d.) to keep track of queries that were waiting for staff access to materials. Trello is an easy-to-use, online project management platform that allows users to create and share organized lists. It was a new platform for most of the staff, but training by colleagues in Digital Services who had already been using it pre-COVID.

Once staff were allowed back to work in the spring of 2021, it was time to tackle the reference query backlog. We formed a group of about 25 volunteers from across the Library Division to make up what we called VAST - the Virtual Access Services Team. The purpose of VAST was to work its way through the very long queue of research and reproduction queries we'd received over the past year. We enlisted the help of archivists, book catalogers, instructional services, circulation coordinators, and paging staff, all working in different ways to do the work that would usually be done onsite by our reference and research team. Some staff were making automated requests for materials and communicating with researchers, some were paging and reshelving materials, and some were doing the imaging using document camera stations. VAST was divided into three sub-teams who all learned and used Trello to manage and fulfill requests. We continued to allow a high number of scans at no cost to the researchers.

Finally, in July 2021, the Ransom Center reopened its doors to the public to welcome in-person researchers back into the Reading and Viewing Room. Much deliberate planning had gone into the new practices in place for safety for both staff and visitors during the still ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, and

in that case the Omicron variant. Onsite Reader Services resumed with limited open hours, limited capacity in the reading room, social distancing, limited times materials would be paged on demand during the open hours, pre-paging materials to be placed on hold for prospective visitors, and messaging and online forms strongly encouraging researchers to reach out ahead of their visit and communicate about research needs and materials requested. These modifications ensured a smoother transition to resuming onsite research services.

Permanent Changes

Several of the strategies and tools employed proved too valuable to discard and have become permanent additions to each institution's workflows and best practices. For Special Collections at the College of Charleston, software and digital workflows as well as limiting hours have improved both staff and patron experiences and were permanent changes adopted by the unit. At the Harry Ransom Center, new reading room staff practices like pre-paging materials and limited windows of on-demand paging times, offering a higher number of free scans for remote researchers, and adopting new communication and organization platforms like Microsoft Teams (Microsoft, n.d.) and Trello were changes for the better that have become permanent additions to the public services department.

In Special Collections at the College of Charleston, new software was vital. The institutional Zoom license was fantastic and quickly became one of the department's go-to methods of communication. Implementing a LibAnswers queue dedicated to archival research was also extraordinarily useful during the pandemic. It allowed one platform for research requests that could be accessed both in-person and off-campus. This allowed supervisors and their staff to share remote reference and facilitated better communication between the team, regardless of work location that day. The software allowed not just for better communication between department members during research requests, but for more efficient communication and the ability to bring in multiple team members when needed. This was a great improvement for the department and one that was gladly kept.

Digital reference workflows for the department changed slightly as scanning requests of commonly used collection materials were now saved for future use. Scan quality was also adjusted for researchers. When in-person research was restricted, digitization requests dramatically increased. We determined that many researchers didn't need a high-resolution copy, and just needed to be able to read the document in question. We purchased iPads for the department to facilitate rapid use-copy scanning requests. These same iPads could also be used in remote instruction to facilitate the display of archival materials.

The new reading room schedule in Special Collections, while slightly limited over what was typical pre-COVID, not only allowed for disinfection between researchers but also provided much-needed breathing room for staff. Taking a midday break from reading room traffic allowed our staff to not only shelve collections after morning research but provided them with a meaningful break from the public without having to worry about desk coverage. These breaks are important for preparing for the afternoon research sessions, catching up on any virtual requests, and, perhaps, even eating lunch. Our closure to researchers at 4 pm provides time to reshelve books and manuscript collections for the day, pull materials for the next day, prepare for any upcoming instructional sessions, catch up on administrative work, and more. We were very pleased to be able to continue with this schedule as it not only improved the morale of our staff, but it provides a more organized experience for the patron.

Likewise, the Harry Ransom Center's modified public services proved to be invaluable in preserving staff time and triaging on-demand research requests. The Patron Visit Form (Harry Ransom Center, n.d.) encouraged researchers to notify Reader and Viewer Services of their upcoming research visit and these requests remain an important way to "work ahead" for both pre-paging and addressing reference questions. While the scaled-back reading room hours have gone back to the pre-pandemic 9-5, the more limited windows for on-demand paging (Harry Ransom Center, n.d.) helps to conserve staff time and direct researchers to consolidate and prioritize their requests. As far as remote reference

services go, the increased number of scans at no cost is still in place and has both taken the monetary burden off patrons and freed up staff time spent processing payment for duplication orders. It feels like a liberating win-win for all.

Other COVID shutdown adaptations that are still in use include highly efficient and versatile software platforms like Zoom (of course), Trello, Jamboard, and Teams. These technologies were all learned quickly by the public services staff at the Ransom Center during the first few months of lockdown and they are still in regular rotation today. Trello has proved a great way to organize reference and duplication requests, Jamboard is nimble for real-time teaching and other projects, and Teams has become the communication tool of choice for staff to all public services staff to chat within and across units and departments.

Finally, an additional positive outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic for the Ransom Center library and archives is that it provided a very busy reading room and the staff that support it to space. Such space allowed us to focus on seemingly less urgent but just as important goals that can sometimes get neglected in the hustle and bustle of public service work. We worked together to update manuals, workflows, language, and policies. We created an internal wiki for Reader, Reference, and Instructional Services detailing how each unit functions on its own and together. We took the extra time to seek out professional development opportunities for ourselves and our colleagues. At the urging of the Head of Reader and Viewer Services, all staff in our department took online diversity and inclusion courses and several reached the goal of UT's Dynamics of Diversity Certification (Division of Diversity and Community Engagement, The University of Texas at Austin, n.d.). Because we had the time and space to focus on the importance of revising policies, updating communication, and educating ourselves, we became better equipped to serve our patrons.

Conclusion

College of Charleston's Special Collections and the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas were able to manage the challenges presented by SARS-CoV-2 extraordinarily well, thanks in no small part to forward-thinking research services teams who embraced new technologies and were flexible and highly adaptable to change. Lessons were learned and staff weathered both high-stress situations and the rapid adoption of new technologies with grace. Ultimately, the permanent changes within the departments have enhanced each's suite of services and brought another level of connectivity to their researchers.

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