

**Reaching academic library users during the COVID-19 pandemic:
New and adapted approaches in access services**

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Reaching academic library users during the COVID-19 pandemic: New and adapted approaches in access services

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Reaching academic library users during the COVID-19 pandemic: New and adapted approaches in access services

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic, which hit academic libraries in the United States during the spring semester of 2020, forced librarians and staff to redouble their efforts to reach out to users in light of newly enforced safety measures such as building closures, quarantine periods, enforced social distancing, etc. This article describes three services - one adapted, one newly developed, and one a collaboration across several units on campus - to allow users to continue receiving the assistance and the materials they needed despite the obstacles inherent to the pandemic. Unexpectedly, these changes also helped streamline processes in a post-pandemic academic library environment.

Keywords: Access Services, Chat, Grab N Go, COVID-19, streamlining services

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Introduction

Revisions to academic library service models often happen slowly, methodically, and in response to shifting priorities or evolving funding paradigms, new technologies, or changes in needs communicated from the perspective of the user. The academic library environment did not have the luxury of time when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the United States as discussions about closing the library buildings happened within a week. In the case of the University of Alabama Libraries, that week was the regularly scheduled spring break for students. Conversations on Friday, March 13, 2020 between the libraries' leadership team and department heads were characterized by hypothetical questions pertaining to closing the library, not preparing to actually do so. Queries such as, "How many laptops would you need for your area so that everyone could work from home for a week *if* we closed for a few days after spring break?" and "Could you create a bulleted list of generalized work processes and activities members of your team could complete at home" guided these information-seeking consultations. Following these conversations, the University of Alabama Libraries actually closed all four of its campus branch libraries beginning on Monday, March 23, 2020 at the end of spring break week. The official reopening date for the libraries was Monday, July 6, 2020, but the libraries' grand re-opening was welcomed by a very changed campus - and global - environment.

This article describes the rapid shift that staff in access services had to make to the services the campus environment had come to depend on for their research, scholarship, and course assignments for the period between late March and early July 2020. While not a single department in any of the libraries was left untouched by the changes necessitated by the

pandemic, the perspective and emphasis of this article will be on the access services department (with staff members situated in each of the branches). This is in no means meant to diminish the extraordinary, concerted effort every member of the University of Alabama Libraries faculty and staff made, but rather an opportunity to describe and showcase the services situated in the access services department that underwent changes and modifications to reach users during this unprecedented time. These changes also, unexpectedly, provided a unique opportunity to re-evaluate and re-imagine existing service models toward enhanced user experience for the academic library after the pandemic's end.

Literature Review

The academic library is an important place and space within the user community, and the COVID-19 pandemic has both, at the same time, further solidified and threatened that status. For example, while the academic library has long served the most vulnerable student populations, the fallout from the pandemic, reactive building closures, and resulting budget cuts are likely to negatively impact libraries disproportionately as compared to other units on campus (Matthews, 2020). In this context, how academic libraries meet the challenges brought by COVID-19 will partially determine whether or not they remain critical infrastructures in the eyes of the campuses to which they belong (Jones, 2020).

It has also become apparent through this public health crisis that the physical space of the library is difficult to recreate virtually, as users depend on these spaces more than we might have previously believed (Ahlfeld, 2020). It is incumbent upon the library to be proactive – and now creative – about offering services as not everyone is adept at using digital-only services (Ayre & Craner, 2020). Even those who are tech-savvy often still crave the interpersonal, face-to-face interaction at the library (Ahlfeld, 2020). Indeed, the services that librarians have historically

offered during past crises, both in terms of access to computers and connections to human services, are difficult to provide when libraries are not physically open or only open with limited access (Jones, 2020).

Academic libraries that already supported a robust off-campus student population arguably had an easier migration to virtual services during the COVID-19 pandemic (Schulz, 2020). Whatever digital groundwork was in place pre-pandemic was foundational in allowing libraries to shift more seamlessly into all-digital for the period of the lockdown (Jones, 2020). Additionally, the forced closure during the lockdown enhanced the need for digital resources and demonstrated them to be a worthwhile investment even on limited library budgets (Pokorná, Indrá, Grman, Stepanovsky, & Smetánková, 2020). Problematic to this, however, is that in hindsight, most libraries emphasized building closures, instead of highlighting the fact that their services in many cases were still available online (Ayre, 2020). For many librarians working at home during lockdown, once they were logged in, they were in a library mindset and ready to assist users just as they would do if they were conducting an in-person interaction (Hunter, 2020). Part of this misunderstanding can be attributed to an error in communication and the other part of this is the result of the digital divide and users not recognizing that they could access their library online or simply not having the ability or resources to do so (Ayre & Craner, 2020).

Nonetheless, COVID-19 has provided a unique opportunity for academic librarians to re-think their key roles and core values in supporting teaching and learning in their institutions (Ma, 2020). It also provides a chance to regroup and consider reallocating funds and limited resources based on the changing needs of users in the academic library setting (Jones, 2020). A need for information exists in every crisis and librarians need to be nimble and proactive in order to meet this need (Ali & Gaiti, 2020). For example, while many academic librarians scrambled to help

course instructors transition to the online teaching environment, many also strategized to offer WiFi hotspots to their most at-risk users (Adams, 2020; Goddard, 2020).

In many instances, prior to the pandemic, there has simply not been the time, impetus, or support to make changes to library services (Breslin, 2020). The pandemic brought with it not only a revolution in online teaching, but also an opportunity for academic librarians to consider how they might deliver services virtually (Mehta & Wang, 2020). While there has been this unprecedented opportunity to experiment with online teaching, moving forward there is now the subsequent opportunity to consider deepening accessibility for these online interactions either in instruction or between a librarian, library staff member, and a user (Walsh & Rana, 2020). Librarians and library staff can then take this opportunity to re-write the rules of user engagement and invent new service models (Goddard, 2020).

As it relates to outreach and the human connection, revitalizing the connection between colleagues within the library environment may enjoy a renewed emphasis from the pandemic and in the era that comes afterward (Ahlfeld, 2020). Keeping each other abreast of rapidly evolving situations and simply checking in on each other to ensure that stress is not overtaking someone at the personal level is important to collegial relationships (Breslin, 2020). Weekly meetings and opportunities for coaching and conversing online can prove especially helpful during social-distancing (Risley, 2020). Post-crisis it will be interesting to observe whether or not interpersonal relationships have strengthened between colleagues. It will also be interesting to determine whether most users tend to stay away from the library buildings in favor of a digitally-mediated library experience or if they will be starved for human contact and the library will experience a boom as users return to the physical spaces (Pokorná, Indrá, Grman, Stepanovsky, & Smetánková, 2020).

Access Services during the COVID-19 pandemic

In order to reach users during the period that the physical library buildings were closed, the University of Alabama Libraries needed to make modifications so that library services and materials could still be accessed by users in order to ensure that research, teaching, and learning could still take place in an unfamiliar, largely digitally-moderated, low-contact, semi-virtual environment. While users of academic libraries have benefitted from resources accessed through the Internet the past two decades or so, and libraries actively promote online access for times when the physical buildings are closed, the COVID-19 pandemic forced new considerations of the library as a place and space, the circulation of materials (more technology than print), sharing with other institutions via interlibrary loan, and user interactions with librarians and library staff. In what follows, three services either adapted or created to meet user needs during the pandemic are outlined and broader implications about their role in a post-pandemic library are explored.

Chat

In and of itself, live chat is not a revolutionary service within the contemporary academic library. Many institutions have offered live chat as a service for years, if not decades, already. The University of Alabama Libraries' subscription to Springshare included LibChat (Springshare's proprietary online chat platform), but up until March 2020, the University of Alabama was not making use of it. Admittedly, this news came as a surprise to the author, who believed that LibChat was already up and running based on the effective and long-standing use of LibAnswers, LibGuides, LibInsight, etc. With the sudden mandate to close the library buildings on campus due to COVID-19, the need for a live chat service became mission critical to staying in communication with the campus community during what was already becoming a rapidly-evolving situation.

In response to this need, the Associate Dean for Research and User Services tapped the Head of Gorgas (Library) Information Services (GIS) and the Director of Branch Library Services to oversee the rapid implementation of Chat. Following their work in partnering with the Technology Development Librarian to get the LibChat module switched on with our parameters set, the Head of GIS and the Director of Branch Library Services were asked to first draft best practices and protocols, and then continue to co-chair the LibChat initiative by managing scheduling and monitoring the usage of the service. LibChat was brought online quickly and smoothly and the Director of Strategic Engagement for the Libraries helped ensure a swift communication of the service via social media and other campus outlets so that library users would be aware of this service. A link to the new chat box was also highlighted on the libraries' homepage to ensure awareness for those attempting to find news about the library from the website.

By the end of March 2020, LibChat service had become a much-needed virtual information desk for the campus community; especially undergraduates. Users of all four campus libraries have become very accustomed to a recognizable, staffed information and/or circulation desk (depending upon the physical space of the particular branch) usually at the main entrances of the buildings. With the pandemic's closing of the libraries, users suddenly found themselves without the familiar place to get their questions answered. The building closures, which took place in a very short amount of time, meant that users did not have time to familiarize themselves with what this might also mean in terms of the library services and support they would be depending on for the remainder of the semester. Upon returning from spring break, many users were left with questions pertaining to how to return now overdue ILL books, how to return equipment borrowed before the break, how to avoid fines on overdue

materials, and myriad other questions. All in addition to the gamut of questions users generally ask at the desks on a daily basis during normal library operations.

The availability of LibChat meant that users could communicate with the libraries even while the physical spaces were closed. The Head of GIS and Director of Branch Library Services were diligent in ensuring that LibChat was “live” during what would have been the normal operating hours for spring semester. This “regular hours availability” meant that users could communicate virtually with the libraries, via LibChat, to get the information they needed during the time period they might have otherwise anticipated visiting the libraries in person.

Anecdotally, a few students graciously thanked the libraries for facilitating this mode of contact and referred to it as “a lifeline” for them. Relatedly, it has been observed at Bridgewater State University in Massachusetts, for example, that very few students made use of chat services when the library and reference desk are open as compared to during the lockdown (Mehta & Wang, 2002). Similarly, the University of Toronto Libraries experienced a 50% increase in Chat service demand with the campus closure (Walsh & Rana, 2020).

While user experience is an important consideration for academic libraries, so too are the relationships between faculty (librarians) and staff within the libraries themselves. These are often relationships particularly fraught by inequities in work situations and the pandemic only helped throw these differences into starker contrast when it came to issues such as high face-to-face contact roles, return to work dates, and job duties that were determined to be on site only versus those that were considered to be hybrid between home and campus. The rollout of LibChat helped librarians and staff develop more seamless relationships as serving chat hours together became something of an equalizer. Faculty and staff serve LibChat shifts, designated in

one-, two-, or three- hour time blocks, depending upon the flow of the semester and season (e.g. summer hours and chat usage are different from that of spring semester).

The Head of GIS and Director of Branch Library Services worked to ensure that every staff member (many of whom were Access Services staff) was partnered with a librarian for each LibChat shift. This partnering allowed employees of the library (some who were very long-standing) to work with individuals they may not have worked with previously. While chat is digitally-mediated, it did not detract from the opportunity for teachable moments to transpire. Several staff commented that it was edifying to share their knowledge and expertise with a librarian. One described providing a librarian with a brief overview of how lending strings work in ILL when a user would chat about needing a book that they knew another institution had on its shelf. Details of job duties are often never discussed - nor understood, because there is rarely a context in the busy day-to-day to make these discoveries. Likewise, librarians enjoyed sharing with access services staff intricacies of certain databases. Staff were undoubtedly familiar with the databases, overall, but may not have been as familiar with new options for more in-depth research discovery.

Grab N' Go

The closure of the University of Alabama Libraries' buildings obviously wreaked havoc on the users' ability to access research and course materials. In March 2020, Access Services staff moved quickly to communicate new protocols for the rapidly evolving COVID-19 situation. While fines and fees were waived, renewals for all library materials were extended. These, and similar, accommodations were made at numerous institutions during the lockdown period (Ma, 2020). Users were urged not to return materials as the buildings were closed and past experience

had demonstrated that some users will pile materials up outside the book drop when it is full, which can result in damage to books, etc.

Interlibrary loan (situated in the Access Services department) faced interesting conundrums with the closures, too. As the University of Alabama Libraries were not unique in their closure during Spring semester 2020, and with most of the lending systems and networks, nationally, closed too, the ILL unit was no longer able to fill physical (print) materials. With the campus libraries closed, ILL was also unable to provide scans from onsite materials. Loan requests had to be cancelled until an undefined date in the future wherein staff would be able to start up in earnest again.

However, requests for electronic journal articles and items were still able to be delivered, throughout this period. It is important to note that physical reserves services were suspended, too, and faculty were encouraged to use digital formats, as they were available. With staff working from home, ILL resolved to fill article requests for items the University of Alabama did not own via the e-resources collection online. Requests on the borrowing side could be matched by ISSN or ISBN numbers and with staff at other lending institutions strategizing to work from home, users were still offered a turn-around time of about 24 hours for their article requests. Some lending libraries began filling requests for book chapters, too, via their e-books collections, provided that their licensing would allow for it.

Document Delivery, which is dependent upon the physical scanning of books, was an aspect of service that had to be suspended during the closure, as well. Via the COVID-19 LibGuide (created to help guide users through library usage during the pandemic), ILL proposed that patrons submit their requests via their ILLiad accounts, as the “Request Item” button for Document Delivery had been disabled from the catalog. The Document Delivery platform,

however, is the one that later gave rise to the Grab N' Go service when the University of Alabama Libraries reopened under a closed stacks model in the summer of 2020. This reopening, on July 6, 2020, meant that Access Services staff were returning to the libraries under a staggered and socially-distanced paradigm. Print materials housed in any of the University of Alabama Libraries were now able to be requested either via a user's ILLiad account or Document Delivery's reinstated "Request Item" button. Materials could be picked up at Gorgas Libraries' Capstone entrance doors (back doors, as understood by library staff) Monday through Friday between 1:00-4:00 pm.

After submitting the request online, users participating in the Grab N' Go service received an email notification when their materials were ready for pick-up. Access services guaranteed that requests would be filled within three business days. Users were required to pick up their own items. No proxy service was allowed during this time (in part due to safety protocols), and users were required to show their campus ID (Action Card) to verify their identity. Not unlike limits on physical ILL material pick-ups periods during normal times, users were told that Grab N' Go items would be held for 5 days.

Users were also instructed to phone the Gorgas Circulation Desk when they had arrived to pick up their requested materials and an access services staff member would deliver their materials in plastic bags via the Capstone back doors at Gorgas Library. With masks required and a quick hand off of bags through the doors, this was a low-contact solution for getting users their materials during a closed-stacks service model.

The original model for Grab N' Go centered on access services staff delivering these plastic bags of books to the trunks of borrower's cars for a completely contact-free solution. However, this did not come to fruition due to the closure of certain campus gates and other

vagaries from UA Campus Transportation. Access services staff wore masks and gloves and only opened the door wide enough to pass the bags out to the user. It was the best solution to the issue of getting users their items, and no complaints from users were received regarding the perceived safety of the transaction. The University of Alabama Libraries also considered the REALM Project regarding the safe handling of materials and items returned were set aside for three full days before staff would process them back into the collection based on information contained in the report (REALM Project, 2020).

It was also critical to reiterate to users that while the University of Alabama Libraries had reopened and were therefore able to circulate from the home print collection via Grab N' Go, that print ILL was still dependent upon the opening of other institutions. Requests for print materials made by University of Alabama would return unfilled if none of the owning libraries were lending at the time of the request. However, as staff slowly returned to their institutions across the nation, print ILL became increasingly available through Fall semester 2020.

Perhaps the greatest source of concern for users during the University of Alabama Libraries' closure and subsequent reopening (with closed stacks) was how they would get their materials. Grab N' Go, based on an existing digital platform (Document Delivery), was a solution that not only provided access to everything we could retrieve from our collections (and the collections of others who had reopened in some capacity), but also a method for limiting face-to-face contact for our users and our Access Services staff. While the original service model proposed that the Grab N'Go service would cease with the reopening of the stacks at the beginning of fall semester (August 19, 2020), the service has continued to the present.

Anecdotally, the service has been very popular among our users. The service has been promoted via word of mouth from library employees, on library social media, and on signage

now displayed in the library buildings. From a staffing perspective, supporting the service does not require more time on the part of access services staff. Print materials would need to be pulled and kept on the holds shelf anyway, so it does not require much more effort or time to have staff members put the items into plastic bags and deliver them to the user upon receiving a phone call. Access services staff have benefitted from hearing kudos and compliments from very appreciative users, as well.

CARES Laptops

The University of Alabama was a recipient of funding from the CARES Act (Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security). With this funding, the Office of Information Technology (OIT) was able to purchase several different types of technology equipment to assist students who had been negatively impacted by COVID-19. It began with the purchase of hotspots so that students would be able to pivot to the online learning environment and access the web from virtually anywhere with the use of the portable device. The difficulty for them came in with assessing which students should be issued a hotspot and how to physically get the device to them. The Division of Student Life and the University Libraries were approached to partner with OIT on this initiative.

The Division of Student Life stepped in with their already cultivated strength in working to assess student need. Having led many initiatives for scholarships, events, and all manner of issues relating to student health and well-being, they were poised to contribute a newly-developed student needs assessment form, which they would use to determine which students would receive free-of-charge hotspots. This would also allow Student Life officers to interface with students from the perspective of any other COVID-19-related needs. The Libraries were able to use their Voyager database to physically circulate the hotspots once Student Life had sent

the list of students to the Libraries' circulation email account (which is checked by all Circulation staff). The cataloging staff were able to quickly catalog the hotspots, giving them unique identifier numbers in order to facilitate the circulation of the hotspots. So, the process became one wherein once the hotspots had been purchased and connected via OIT, Student Life would review the intake forms and approve students to receive hotspots and email the list to the libraries where members of Access Services (Circulation) would then check out the laptops to the students as they came to the library to pick them up. Gorgas Library, in particular, became the pick-up location for students.

The collaboration was seamless throughout the beginning of Fall semester 2020, so by October, OIT suggested that we move our partnership into laptops and webcams for students in need as well, following the same program we had designed for circulating the hotspots. Previously, the Libraries (all branches) had a robust laptop circulation program spanning many years that was halted due to COVID-19. On March 23, 2020, because of the approaching spring break, only a few laptops were checked out (overdue) at the time of the necessary closure. As there was not a firm consensus at the time on safe disinfecting protocols for circulating laptops, the university libraries suspended the circulation of laptops once the buildings reopened. Critical to inputting the CARES funded laptops in Voyager was ensuring that they did not get mixed in with the libraries' existing collection of laptops. Also, the loan period for the CARES equipment was the length of the semester, which quelled the need to discuss disinfecting procedures.

While the libraries' pre-existing laptop circulation program was popular with students, the 72-hour laptops often plagued Access Services staff with issues related to overdue or damaged machines. Laptop checkout remained too successful to cut the program completely, but prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Access Services was already working to strategize ways to

reduce the staff time it was taking to deal with issues stemming from the laptop program. The circulation of the CARES equipment provided an opportunity to reconsider the University Libraries' loan period and methods for a future state wherein the circulation of laptops would be reinstated. With the CARES laptops being on a semester-long loan period, it ensured that students would be covered in the event of additional closures, etc. It also meant that all issues relating to damaged or overdue machines were delayed until the end of the semester. With the first trial period of CARES funded hotspot, laptop, and webcam circulation ending in December 2020, all issues were received by Access Services staff within one week as opposed to throughout the semester. This allowed for staff to dedicate the time necessary to addressing these problems all at once as opposed to on a weekly basis, which was sometimes the case with the libraries' laptop checkout program.

The fact that the CARES laptops were cataloged in Voyager also meant that the same fines for overdue or damaged equipment that that libraries used for the circulating collection of laptops applied to these laptops, as well. Insurance policies were included with the purchase of the CARES laptops (and hotspots and webcams) so, ultimately, manually overriding these fines assuaged many users' (or their parents') fears. As a collaborative group, OIT, Student Live, and the University Libraries agreed to waive overdue fines for CARES equipment, too. These actions helped mitigate the number of complaints the Circulation desk received, as students tend to panic when charges come through on their Banner accounts.

While collaborations are often discussed on college and university campuses, it is often difficult to maintain them or to ensure that entities involved are carrying equal weight. While there were multiple Zoom-mediated meetings between stakeholders in each of the collaborating units, agreements were not recorded other than in meeting minutes. Nonetheless, the

collaboration has allowed students in need to borrow hotspots, laptops, and webcams for a period of time up to the length of a semester. It also allowed for the sharing of information between units that has been disparate up until this point in time. It has also set a precedent for demonstrating ways the libraries can support large-scale campus initiatives.

Future Directions

In the case of implementing LibChat at the University of Alabama Libraries at the start of the COVID-19 library buildings' closure, two significant things happened. First, the chat service became a lifeline for students who reported that they would have otherwise felt untethered by not having access to the staff who help them with their needs at the information and circulation desks. Second, it provided an opportunity for relationship building between librarians and staff in ways that allowed most to feel that they had learned something from their colleagues. This happened at a critical point within the pandemic trajectory wherein feelings of resentment for those who may have been better able to work from home may have been building and this created an opportunity to squelch those feelings and create camaraderie from teachable moments.

Further investigation of the Springshare subscription panoply revealed that the University of Alabama was also paying for the LibCal Appointments module which is now being explored by the Head of GIS as a key method for allowing users to reach librarians and schedule virtual appointments. This is particularly important presently as it is not necessarily possible during the pandemic's staggered work schedules to walk in and ask for someone specific to be paged from the desk, as they may be working from home. The implementation of live chat as a direct response to needing to enhance online communication during the pandemic spawned a deeper investigation into other services that could be implemented to further bolster communication in a period when library hours were not completely back to normal. In this way, implementing chat

allowed for a deeper consideration of other resources that might be brought online or adapted in order to facilitate communication between the library and its user community.

Grab N' Go, which became essential over the summer of 2020 to allowing users to pick up their materials when the library hours were irregular, and/or the stacks were closed, morphed into a service that allowed users who were hesitant about entering the library buildings an opportunity to pick up their materials at the back doors of the library. Although Grab N' Go was available for winter break 2020 and there were only three requests received, it remains a service under consideration for permanent status.

At the time of the pandemic's end, when low-contact becomes less urgent of a consideration, library users - and faculty in particular - are still going to value time-saving measures as it pertains to receiving their materials. Having the ability to simply phone the circulation desk and have materials brought down to them at the back doors, or inside in the first-floor lobby, will improve library experience for faculty through time-saving, enhanced customer service. As there are never fewer than a combination of two staff (or student assistants) scheduled for the circulation desk, continuing Grab N' Go does not negatively impact existing scheduling and will be welcomed by the campus community as a permanent library service.

While the popularity of the circulating laptops program in the libraries was clear, the program was not without problems for staff as it related to the time it took daily to process fines for damaged or missing equipment. The collaboration with OIT and Student Life to circulate CARES funded laptops provided an opportunity to rethink the checkout period for laptops. While 72 hours had been the norm, the reality when reviewing user accounts is that most students who borrow a laptop once during a semester borrow one again. It stands to reason that perhaps the policy should include a semester-long checkout and users can return their laptop

early if the situation arises. Further, just as the CARES equipment was insured, so too are the libraries' collection of laptops. Discontinuing - or at least reducing - fees for damaged laptops may be more appropriate when the libraries reinstate the in-house circulating laptop program.

The relationships built between OIT, Student Life, and the Libraries may yield important and mutually beneficial partnerships in the future as well, in a post-pandemic environment. This collaboration to circulate technology equipment is similar to the collaboration which took place at the University of Pennsylvania wherein library management, technical services, and IT innovated together to bolster digital access precisely at the moment in the pandemic that users needed it most (Morton-Owens, 2020). In both instances, a collaborative – and, hopefully, continuing - relationship between previously disparate units is a fortuitous outcome from very trying times.

Conclusion

The University of Alabama Libraries and, in particular, the Access Services staff have worked to negotiate much less than optimal conditions brought on by the global COVID-19 pandemic. While there were mere days to plan for the closure of the four campus libraries, library staff were able to build off of existing library programs and resources to ensure that users had the critical access they needed via Chat, Grab N' Go, and the circulation of critical technology equipment. The success of each of these services has also afforded the libraries' a chance to reconsider existing services with an eye toward improvement of user experience post-pandemic; an opportunity that likely would not have come if not for the pandemic, if one is to look for the proverbial silver lining in this situation. Most, if not all, academic libraries had to strategize to continue to provide services to their users, the University of Alabama Libraries' is

but one voice in that chorus, but the experience and the discoveries that have led to service enhancement in the future is of value to preserving a record of this COVID-19 era.

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