

Georgia Depository Libraries

Expanding Engagement During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Through the Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP), the Government Publishing Office (GPO) provides materials published by government agencies to designated libraries in the United States and its territories. In return, these libraries offer free, public access to the materials in their depository collections.¹ The state of Georgia has 23 federal depository libraries—one Regional and 22 Selectives.² All but two of these libraries are affiliated with academic institutions, and the majority are part of the University System of Georgia (USG).³

The network of depository libraries in Georgia provides multiple ways for depository coordinators to build relationships and collaborate in efforts to support each other's work and to promote government information to their constituents. These initiatives include annual state depository meetings, a statewide email discussion list, and involvement in the Georgia Library Association's Government Information Interest Group (GIIG). Aside from the discussion list, most of these collaborations have been in person, which limited the ability of some depository coordinators and their assistants to attend due to travel funding restrictions and job responsibilities.

We started to explore virtual methods for communication so that more members of the depository community could participate, beginning with hybrid state meetings in 2019 and 2020. In March 2020, the sudden move to long-term, fully remote work due to COVID-19 provided new opportunities for collaboration around programming as well as relationship-building. This expanded engagement among depository coordinators is important in that it lessens the need of individual coordinators to “reinvent the wheel” when planning events. As we continue to collaborate on events and programming, it can also increase the visibility and signal the importance of the depository collections to the greater library community and local administrations.

Established Collaboration Opportunities The Georgia State Plan for Federal Depository Libraries

The Georgia State Plan for Federal Depository Libraries describes how depositories “work individually and collectively to ensure that all residents of the State of Georgia have physical and intellectual access to Federal government information in all formats.”⁴ A committee of Selective depository coordinators, chaired by the Regional librarian, reviews and updates the plan at least every five years.

One of the goals of the plan describes responsibilities for fostering and facilitating communication between depository libraries. Responsibilities of the Regional depository coordinator include promoting cooperation for resource sharing and reference assistance, as well as promoting communication and enhancing networking activities between Selective depository libraries. Selective depository coordinators are responsible for communicating with the Regional librarian and providing updates in staffing or contact information, significant changes in depository status, and/or significant changes in collection access due to renovation projects or disaster events. Selectives are also encouraged to collaborate with nearby depositories on collection development, promotional events, and continuing education activities for their local communities.

Annual Meetings

The Regional depository librarian facilitates the Annual Meeting of Georgia Depository Libraries. This one-day meeting is free and open to anyone interested in government information. In the past, meetings were hosted by various depository libraries centrally located in the state, but in more recent years, they have been hosted by the Map & Government Information Library at the University of Georgia. The meetings were solely

in-person until 2018, which limited the number of participants due to prohibitive travel times or the lack of travel funds. Partnering with GPO in 2018 to use their virtual meeting platform provided the addition of a virtual component to the meeting. This allowed for more people from around the state to attend and for GPO staff to provide updates without having to travel to the state. As part of the meeting, coordinators give updates about happenings and events at their libraries. A focus of the past few years has been the discussion of outreach and promotion activities used to highlight government information and the depository library.

US Depositories in Georgia Email Listserv

The official listserv for depository libraries in Georgia is DOC-SGA-L.⁵ The list is open to all depository coordinators and other staff members in Georgia who work with government information. It is primarily used for announcements from the Regional librarian and for information sharing. While the list is not very active, it provides an easily accessible method for depository coordinators to ask questions and to share resources and events. The activity on the listserv has remained about the same in the past year, and it is still serving its intended purpose of information sharing. However, the listserv is an effective tool that can be increasingly utilized for effective communication as coordinators continue to work together in the future. An added benefit to using the listserv is that subscribers can search the archives to view older messages and identify previously-posted activities.

Government Information Interest Group (GIIG)

The Georgia Library Association (GLA) offers a number of interest groups for association members to join. The Government Information Interest Group serves “to promote the use and accessibility of federal, state, and local government information as well as foreign and international government information and to provide support, information sharing, and instruction for government information at all levels.”⁶ It is the officially recognized Georgia affiliate to the Government Documents Round Table of the American Library Association (GODORT).

GIIG provides another opportunity for depository library staff and others interested in government information to meet, discuss topics of interest, and work together to promote government information in the state. GIIG officers host two meetings each year—a planning meeting in January during the GLA Midwinter meeting and a business meeting in October during the Georgia Libraries Conference (GLC). GIIG also sponsors

at least one presentation about government information during GLC.

Because membership in GIIG is open to all GLA members, not just those whose job responsibilities involved government documents, the focus is not solely on depository library management. Discussions have included creating guides to voting and elections information, outreach and collaboration with teachers and media specialists, and partnering with a local public library who also serves as their county’s law library. With the renewed interest in government information, the current officers of GIIG plan to survey members on their interests in order to guide our programming for the upcoming year.

COVID-19—Impact and Ideas

The 2020 annual meeting of Georgia FDLP personnel took place, as usual, during UGA’s spring break—March 10. This was only days before the governor issued an executive order closing “all public elementary, secondary, and post-secondary schools” in the state.⁷ The closure was to last from March 18 through 31, unless extended—and later that month, it was mandated that post-secondary schools be closed for in-person instruction “with limited exceptions” for the rest of the semester.⁸

On March 13, 2020, the University System of Georgia announced a two-week extension of spring break, in order for faculty to move classes online.⁹ Libraries across the state shifted from being completely open to, in some cases, being completely closed, in a matter of days.

With many depository personnel working remotely, we continued to use DOCSGA-L as a way to communicate changes in services and staffing across the state, as well as share GPO guidance regarding library closures. Libraries continued to provide access to government information in whatever format they could, dependent on local restrictions and user need. Many depository libraries in the state began the shift to a mostly-digital depository years ago, and their users are familiar with accessing government information online. Some of the USG libraries that decided to close relied on the HathiTrust Emergency Temporary Access Service to provide additional digital access to materials in their physical collections.¹⁰

As the weeks went on and many continued to work remotely full-time, the Regional Librarian offered to host a “Regional/FDLP Office Hour” via Zoom every other Friday. The time was intended to be low pressure, where people could “drop in” and “use the time to ask questions, swap ideas for new promotional ideas, or just vent about what’s going on in your library.” Beginning May 1, 2020, the first event generated one attendee, but afterward the office hours averaged 3.5 attendees, with a high of seven. Sessions were reduced to once a month

beginning in August, when most people had returned to full or partial on-site work.

Seeing our colleagues more than one to two times a year (at the state meeting and the Georgia Libraries Conference) led to a shift in how we engage with one another. While we did not always talk about library matters (particularly once it began to look like the college football season would actually take place), the ability to see each other more regularly and learn more about the challenges and successes that others were experiencing has been helpful. Hearing about what was happening at other libraries around the state provided a sense of emotional support as we navigated these immense changes, and it also provided a spark of creativity as we learned how our colleagues' pivot to providing online workshops was reaching larger audiences than ever before.

As the fall semester (and September) approached, much of the conversation turned to how libraries were planning to promote Constitution Day. While many of the ideas were too ambitious to be completed last year, we discussed ways that we could build upon local activities to broaden promotion and participation in future years. Ideas included:

- A state-wide trivia competition
- Virtual Constitution Day panels organized by and featuring participants from campuses across the state
- Constitutional read-a-thons

Our discussion about these ideas began over the summer months, so there was not enough time to organize collaborative events among campuses for fall semester. Starting the planning phase much earlier in the year is necessary. Choosing a small and easy to implement project—such as simply creating a guide to all the Constitution Day events happening in the state—could be an easy first endeavor for coordinators.

Ideas for Future Projects

The shift to remote working due to COVID-19 and greater reliance on and accessibility to virtual meeting platforms provided the opportunity for coordinators to come up with ideas we would like to work together on in the future. Because in-person events on campus have not been allowed during the pandemic, we could think about opportunities to involve communities outside our own campuses in a way that had not been previously possible with face-to-face events.

Some of the proposed ideas include:

- Promoting and utilizing the FDLP Coordinator Calendar LibGuide to help depository personnel prepare for displays, events, and social media posts ¹¹
- Creating LibGuides modules that can be shared across institutions
- Providing a forum to bring together those who catalog government documents and the depository coordinators (if they are not the same person)
- Creating a newsletter highlighting government information that would be informative and of interest to the citizens of Georgia. There is interest and enthusiasm among depository coordinators to participate in creating content for a newsletter. Several logistics to ensure continuity, including finding a hosting site, choosing an editor, and a publication schedule, still remain to be determined.

Challenges

While many depository coordinators want to work together more often, and we have many ideas about how we can do so, there are a number of challenges that slow us down from putting these ideas into practice. Time is a major factor. Many depository coordinators and staff have multiple job responsibilities in addition to working with government documents and do not have the time available to begin new projects or events. Further, priorities set by the library or the institution can take away from time spent on promoting the depository collection and resources.

Beginning in 2020, virtual meetings became the norm out of necessity. Many of us have experienced “Zoom fatigue” from the numerous meetings, conferences, and webinars we have to attend online.¹² And while the office hours are intended to be low pressure, attending additional online meetings to discuss sharing resources and event planning can add to feelings of stress or overwhelm.

Another challenge we have faced in the state are personnel changes. In the past two years there have been six new depository coordinators in the state, often individuals who are taking on depository responsibilities in addition to their existing duties in administration or technical services. The Regional depository librarian reaches out to new coordinators as she is notified, and is exploring the establishment of a “welcome packet” that could cover some frequently asked questions and direct people to GPO-provided resources. Succession planning was a topic at the 2021 state meeting, as several current coordinators acknowledged the need to “train from within” because it was unlikely that a new depository coordinator would be hired

when they left their organization. Building and sustaining a community is more challenging when fewer people are hired in to work with depository resources and instead those responsibilities are added to existing duties—particularly if the coordinator is also the library director. Exploring simple ways to support these new coordinators is an area for further development.

Conclusion

Depositories can establish relationships and maintain communication in order to solve problems and provide the best possible access to government information. Time, staffing, and workloads can make it challenging to work with other depositories on statewide projects. The campus closures and changes in work situations brought on by the pandemic served as a catalyst for the conversations about collaboration between depositories to occur. Greater accessibility to technology and virtual programming created avenues for us to strengthen relationships among depositories in 2020 and discuss more ways to work together, a silver lining of all the adaptations brought on by the pandemic. We look forward to putting more of our ideas into practice in the upcoming years.

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Notes

1. “About the FDLP: Federal Depository Libraries,” Federal Depository Library Program, <https://www.fdlp.gov/about-the-fdlp/federal-depository-libraries>.

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3. Federal Depository Library Directory (FDLD) Profile Search, https://catalog.gpo.gov/fdlpdir/FDLPdir.jsp?flag=searchp&st_12=GA.
4. “Georgia State Plan for Federal Depository Libraries 2017,” University of Georgia Map and Government Information Library, https://www.libs.uga.edu/magil/files/ga_stateplan_2017.pdf.
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7. “School Closures to Stop Spread of COVID-19,” Executive Order 03.16.20.01, <https://gov.georgia.gov/document/2020-executive-order/03162001/download>.
8. “Extended School Closures to Stop Spread of COVID-19,” Executive Order 03.26.20.02, <https://gov.georgia.gov/document/2020-executive-order/03262002/download>.
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10. “Emergency Temporary Access Service,” HathiTrust, <https://www.hathitrust.org/ETAS-Description>.
11. FDLP Coordinator Calendar. <https://libguides.fdlp.gov/coordinator-calendar>
12. “Zoom Fatigue: What We Have Learned,” *Inside Higher Ed*, <https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/blogs/online-trending-now/zoom-fatigue-what-we-have-learned>.