

Andrew Blakely and Jerrold Mobley

# While the campus sleeps

## Two perspectives on the uniqueness of overnight library work

**M**idnight, by definition, is a period of transition. It's a quiet moment nestled between sunset and sunrise that universally marks the end of one day and the beginning of another. Most people are asleep at that hour, happily oblivious to this ceremonial passage of time, but we aren't most people. As third-shift information associates with the Georgia Tech Library, a 24-hour academic library in Atlanta, Georgia, our work schedule is synchronized with the birth of each new day. We are the vampires of the library world, and midnight is our magic hour. We've reflected on our eight years as colleagues separately and collectively, and have gathered the following thoughts on what makes the graveyard shift at the library a lovely and distinctive experience.

We begin with Andy's musings on the appeal of the night:

I was a night owl from the beginning of my life. I always liked staying up late, and when my parents said I had to go to bed at the end of a tv show, I would try and talk them through the commercials into the next program. I just figured though, that everything stopped at sundown. Then one day, as a child, my father was driving us both into his job in Atlanta, and I saw cars coming out of downtown, towards where we were coming from. I asked him why that was happening, and he explained that some people work over night, while it is dark outside. He said "their work day has ended, while ours is just

beginning." I was enthralled that people did that, that not everything stopped while pitch black outside. From then on, my eyes and possibilities widened.

As I initially started work at night, I thought it was just going to be a copy of what I did during the daytime, just in the dead of night. I thought we would provide all the same services and assistance (we do), just on the opposite side of when most people would think to be in a library. But I soon learned that the reasons and motivations behind the students being here at night were different than during the daytime, and to adjust to that.

Some people get an early start to a project, and come during a time when they can think best, and have the least distractions. Others come because they have procrastinated to the last minute, and the library, the staff, and our services are the only things between them and their 8 a.m. class project they just started at 3 a.m. The library though, is always the destination. It's not someplace they stop by between classes, or before going home. They come with food, and movies, and friends, and headphones, and blankets, and sleeping bags (and sometimes even books and computers) because they know they are in for the long

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haul. Some have seen the sun set, and rise, many days in a row here.

At night, I feel more of a connection to the students than I thought I would. We have our regulars, and we know what they will ask for before they open their mouths. Some we know will come by and talk with us for a while, and some we know will talk at us for a while. We make exceptions for people who have left their IDs at home, because who wants to go home at 4 a.m. to get it just to come back at 5 a.m.? We have people who ask for help with a database, and then if we can recommend a good Chinese place that delivers after midnight (we can, and do, help on both fronts). I believe (or would like to believe) that they have that connection to us, as well. They know that during our whole shift, they are only going to deal with the same two

people throughout. We are frequently asked when our shift ends, and they are always relieved to know we will be here all night for them.

What took years to dawn on me, and it shouldn't have, is that at night we are the face of the library. All the people, and services, that are seen during the daytime are winnowed down to one or two people overnight. If there is a problem with the printers, it's on us. If the Internet goes down, we have to call to make sure it comes back up. If a whole class needs one reserve book, we have to make sure that everyone gets fair treatment. If someone left a jump drive in a computer that's in the kiosk, we have to

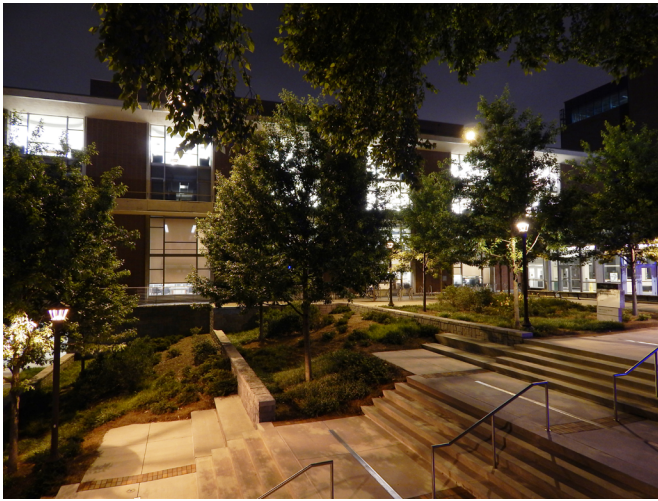
retrieve it. And we have to best represent the library, because there is no one else to do that. Yet I've never once gotten a complaint of something that we couldn't do at night. Everyone understands that there are limits to what we can do, and that at 2 a.m. we don't have the resources available 12 hours later. I've found that to be most remarkable, as the students are under a lot of stress in general, and especially so at night.

The best relationships are where the other person's weaknesses are your strengths, and vice versa. As there are no backups, no calls to other departments, no consulting with

librarians, you have to be confident that you can give a right answer to anything that comes up. And that if you can't, your co-worker can. When I started working at night, I wasn't that confident, but as numerous situations

arose, I was given that confidence by necessity. Everybody does at night, and it becomes ingrained to try and be a sole problem-solver. It can be quite the shock when we have to work daytime during breaks, and see a totally different approach to service.

When I reflect on my time at night (14 years and counting), I have grown much more than if I stayed on during daytime. The shift has forced me to do so, sometimes by stress and failure and other times by opportunities given or taken. My rough edges have been smoothed down by the students I see and interact with here, and I am better for that.



Nighttime at the 24-hour Georgia Tech Library.

Some common themes were discovered while recounting our histories together, but Jerrold's experience was a bit different:

I came into this role of third-shift information associate already accustomed to a schedule of long nights and early mornings—or so I thought. Prior to accepting the position, I was running a full-fledged photography business while working full-time at a local medical school library, completely engulfed by the two things I loved most: art and libraries. Before that, I was a full-time student at Morehouse College, working nights at the aforementioned medical school library, while completing community service activities and training courses as an Adams Public Service Institute Scholar. My schedule and story before that is more of the same—multiple avenues of work, long days, and even longer nights. And if you were to delve further into my past, this pattern will appear over and over, probably causing the euphemism *workaholic* to come to mind. That would be a superficial view of things, however, and not entirely accurate.

It is true that, even now, I wake each night knowing every minute of my day is already accounted for, and that I honestly can't recall a time where I didn't have at least two "hustles." It's also true that I intentionally fill whatever precious time is leftover from my workweek with more work, albeit "work" of a different nature. Personal projects, community organizing, business ventures, and an array of other things barely leave me enough time to sleep and eat most days. But I am *not* a workaholic.

For one, the label *workaholic* implies that the individual in question actually *prefers* working all the time. In my case, that couldn't be further from the truth, as I derive no joy from my schedule (even if joy is found in its individual parts). The other truth that separates me from most workaholics is that those individuals are operating out of compulsion—that they have no control over the desire to remain busy. My current work ethic, and the schedule it creates, is not concerned with "busyness." It is born purely of two things: a desire for security and an overwhelming appreciation of opportunity.

There is a sort of refuge created by over-extending yourself—to the point where if one piece of your life were to disappear, another piece would immediately pop up in its place. There's safety in that concept, especially financially. The other side of the coin is an innate desire to maximize any opportunity presented, out of appreciation for the presenter, and in an effort to remain adaptable and open to all the things this world has to offer someone ready to seize the moment.

The lengthy, involved narrative above is offered as a primer regarding who I am. But it's also meant to serve as an introduction to the type of energy third shift creates, and the type of individual it attracts, when considering the users of a 24-hour academic library. This isn't to say that students found pounding away at their studies between the midnight and 8 a.m. hours can be lumped into a single profile of what an overnight user is (our regulars are as varied as they come), but there are some qualities much like my own mentioned above that can be found in all of them.

Most overnight users of the Georgia Tech Library have a keen understanding and appreciation for time, and in a way that goes far beyond the norms of simply making it to class as scheduled, or presenting at lab within specific range of minutes and seconds. They are in the library at ungodly hours because they've developed their own schedules and routines that maximize the potential of every day. Most overnight users are unique in ways that may run contrary to the norms of society, and they've come to see the library as a safe and welcoming space for them to get things done. It may be a group of students who have not mastered English yet, and need a place that's patient with them and accepting of their differences. It may be a student with personality traits that cause them to stand out among their peers in a negative way. The library represents a space where boundaries are accepted and privacy is well respected. A large portion of overnight users are overachievers. They aren't in the

library working on a single project, they are focused on several. These students are well-balanced and well organized, and have come to expect the stability that the library provides for their hectic schedule. They are driven by goals and achievement, and need a space where the services are reliable and the tools they need are in supply. These are just a few examples of the core patrons best served by the late-night scene, but there are dozens of categories.

Understanding all these things and trying to remain mindful of personalities drawn to this type of environment is a rather large part of what do as overnight information associates. It's one of those duties that's difficult to put into context, and even harder to plan accommodations for. It's a bit of a magical quality that's simply evolved during our service as the sole representatives of the library during this time slot. We're part sympathetic bartender, part father-figure, part gate-keeper, part medic, part library professional. We know when silence is golden, and when a listening ear is needed. We are observant of those who are weary and in need of rest versus those in distress and in need medical

assistance. We can discern the difference between the whinings of a procrastinator and the pleadings of a genuinely frustrated, overworked student in need of a miracle. We strive each night to master the art of blending policy enforcement with a shared humanity that keeps us engaged and motivated about serving and advocating for the late-night patrons of the Georgia Tech Library.

## Conclusion

As we move toward implementing LibraryNext, an ambitious reimagining of the Georgia Tech Library, we know that we have to mold overnight use and services to what is best for the students. Before we even started the renewal process, we knew it would be different at night, and instantly began thinking of ways to improve specifically the overnight experience. It is because we know through our time here that there are differences, that a one-size-fits-all approach is not the best strategy for users with diverse needs and that we are always looking towards providing an experience as necessary, unique, and enjoyable as possible at night. 🌀

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*("The displaced librarian," continues from page 95)*

bring laptops to their regular classrooms. You might even be able to borrow laptops from your campus technology department. Post your handouts online, since printing and copying will be tricky during a displacement.

- Prepare for a nomadic librarian lifestyle. Procure laptops and backpacks that will permit you to rove around campus outside your temporary reference area. It can be difficult to foresee where students will congregate after a library closure. Leave yourself the flexibility to go directly to the students in addition to maintaining a relocated reference desk.

- Maintain a positive attitude. Every day is filled with new and different challenges when you are removed from your typical

environment. Go with the flow and embrace the uncertainty with grace.

An emergency closure is definitely an unwelcome disruption to professional life. However, students will still need research support in order for learning to occur. Strategically seize the opportunity to do campus outreach and connect with faculty, staff, and students whether they are library novices or die-hard supporters. Being a displaced librarian opens up doors to strengthening campus partnerships and making embedded librarianship not just a reality but a necessity. The experience has certainly taught us that while the physical library is essential to the campus, the work we do as librarians transcends the four walls of our building. 🌀