



Project: Documenting COVID-19: Stony Brook University Experiences

Title: Interview with Giulieta Stoianov

Narrator: Giulieta Stoianov (GS)

Interviewer: Chris Kretz (CK)

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Summary: Giulieta Stoianov is the Head of Access and User Services (AUS) at Stony Brook University Libraries and during the early months of the COVID pandemic, she oversaw many main AUS responsibilities while the director was on sabbatical. In this interview, Giulieta discusses the changes that COVID brought to circulation and other public services, and the ways that the staff interacted during home isolation and while the library kept locations open for those remaining students on campus. Giulieta also talks about her contact with family in Europe when the pandemic first broke and her experiences as a contact tracer for New York State.

00:00:02

CK: Okay. So today is April 28th, 2021. This is Chris Kretz of SBU Libraries interviewing Giulieta Stoianov for the COVID—Documenting COVID-19: Stony Brook University Experiences project. Giulieta, first of all, thank you for sharing your experiences with us. And can you tell us to start what your position is here at the university and how long you've been here?

00:00:27

GS: Good morning, Chris. My position is Head of Access and User Services at Stony Brook University Libraries.

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CK: Okay. And what functions do you oversee in that position?

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GS: I'm overseeing pretty much all of the stacks and the library. Also the operations, scheduling students, opening locations sometimes, and overseeing library accounts.

That's pretty much it.

00:01:14

CK: So it's a lot of public-facing contact with students, you would say?

00:01:19

GS: Definitely. Yes. That would be me. When students have questions: books, accounts, fines, or any other questions, that would be me. Yes.

00:01:35

CK: Great. So in a typical year, if you think back to, like, in a January, February of a typical year, what sort of things are you usually working on in the library?

00:01:47

GS: That's pretty much when the spring semester starts, and it's getting busier in the library. The students coming back, usually we get inundated with books—either returning from the fall semester, or students are checking out new materials. And it's pretty busy in the beginning of semester.

I would say towards mid-January to first few weeks in February, it's busy for us because it's just the beginning of semester. And if there are new students, they also are getting used to the libraries—questions and where the books are located. So that's pretty much what is happening in the library around that time.

00:02:50

CK: Okay. So now we want to take you back to that time in 2020. What do you remember of first hearing about COVID, and what were your initial feelings about it?

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GS: I think for me personally, the first time it starts sinking in December. I think it was December or November when I started hearing what was happening in China. And then in January, February, then it starts quickly spreading throughout the European countries.

I have friends and family members in that country and I felt like it's a matter of time to come to spreading in the United States. But still, probably not thinking too much of it. I started noticing that more and more students on campus wearing a mask. It wasn't mandated at that time, but I started noticing, and I was keeping my hand sanitizers handy all the time in trying to avoid large crowds of students or keeping the distance.

That was the beginning.

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CK: And could you say a little bit more about your connection to Europe and what communication you were having, maybe, back and forth?

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GS: I was born in Eastern Europe and my family still lives there. And I, you know, I had contacts pretty much daily with the family members and friends, and I would hear more and more cases that it's spreading. Then in late February I start hearing the word that some of the countries— and Italy was one of the first countries—that are going in lockdown.

That was kind of shocking news to me. I have never experienced a complete lock down, but I— well, at that time, they would start talking about lockdown and I—daily, I would communicate with the family members and friends living in Italy. It was interesting for them too, because they—in the beginning, I think it was just that time of shock and getting used to that.

They would come on the balconies and sing at night. And it was very strict there compared to what was happening here. And I knew that it's a matter of time when we going to go in the lockdown. So I personally start packing on grocery items and other perishables that I thought I'm going to need.

I remember going in Costco at one point and seeing the carts filled with toilet paper and paper towels, and I go like, Oh God, it's coming. It's coming here. It's coming here.

Just that fact that the people were shopping more and the carts were filled more—it was surreal.

00:07:07

CK: When do you remember first hearing about Stony Brook's plans for shutting down the campus leading up to spring break?

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GS: I think it was right that weekend—or before the weekend, when students were getting ready to go for spring break. And I started noticing on campus less and less students. Usually right before the spring break, the libraries are busier with midterm finals and they would— you'd just be much more students. So I started noticing that the week before the break was planned to start, I started noticing that we have less and less students on campus. And I remember thinking at the time that, Why we don't let the students go home earlier?

Kind of like concerned about seeing the students still together in groups, studying, or talking to each other. And for me it was because I was already experiencing what was happening in Europe and how people are in lockdown and quarantine in house. They were not allowed even to do—walk on the streets in some big cities.

And for me it was, Why are we still dragging here? That week right before the close, the campus being shut down, it was—I don't even know how to say and put it in a word. It was an anxious week because at that point we didn't know that we were going in a shutdown, but meanwhile students were still gathering together, and I was concerned. I was concerned for my safety and my health that that [was] what was happening.

And I think before Cuomo announced that we're going—New York is going—in a lockdown, we had a meeting and I think we start preparing. We start talking about what's the plan for the next—when the students coming, when the spring break is done. But we really didn't have much of a plan in place. I think we were meeting daily and trying to figure out how to still operate and keep everyone safe.

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CK: Can you say a little more about who were in the meetings with you? What were those early decisions for things to do before the lockdown was announced?

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GS: At that time was interesting because my supervisor, the director of the department, was going on sabbatical and it was made—the decision—that I'll take over some of the responsibilities. And I remember being like, Oh, now it's even better. Not just in the normal time would be a challenging thing, but this was not normal times.

So I was—I don't want to say afraid but kind of a little worried about how we can make a decision without having the head of the department. Janet [Clarke] was in the meetings. The library dean [Shafeek Fazal], occasionally. But we were just meeting early in the morning and, okay, what we doing today? How are we managing the books? How are we managing the locations?

I think we had one week, I want to say, or two weeks [that] we were closed. Completely closed. And then after that we start planning on which location we should keep open. At that time, when we were closed completely, we were working from home, and we would have Zoom meetings daily talking about next phase. That's when we decided that we will open Central Reading Room, and we will keep that location open. Maybe not necessarily have a staff at the desk but have signs, and we will have students calling if they need anything.

We were on call, technically, in the office upstairs, monitoring the location, still having—checking out books, occasionally—students who drop books in the book drop. There were not that many students, I have to say. A few students, probably just maybe international students, were the students who were still on campus. And most of the students were coming to print things or maybe use the Wi-Fi, and I'm assuming just a quiet space.

00:13:37

CK: Talk a little bit about the circulating books and what were the concerns about circulating the print materials. And what did you have—what kind of systems did you set up for that?

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GS: We definitely stopped circulating the materials at that point. Probably the concern was facing the public and being—having that face-to-face contact with people. So we did stop circulating the materials for—I want to say at least a few months. There was non-circulating.

The items that were coming back were returns. We were just handling those, checking materials in. But as a circulation, there was nothing circulated at that point. So I want to say April and May, maybe June, that's when we did not circulate anything at that time.

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CK: Talk a little bit about—so during these first few months, when you came in to work—and actually, how often were you coming into work at that point?

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GS: Because it was only one location open, we decided that we—all of the staff that felt comfortable—and it was at that point, it was completely voluntarily. An email was sent to the staff and asked that, voluntarily, if we want to come to campus and help staff the location. So some people volunteered to come, some people did not. And the people who volunteered to come, we kind of take turns. If I would go in the morning and cover the desk for four hours, my colleague would come in the afternoon and cover for four hours. We tried not to be in the same space more than two of us.

But we were taking turns. So I would say a few days, two, three days a week, I would come on campus. And so would some of my colleagues, Monday through Friday, and staff the location. And it was, again, totally volunteers. It was not—no one was asked to come if they would not feel comfortable.

00:16:45

CK: And this was still just the Central Reading Room was open?

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GS: Correct. Yes.

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CK: Can you talk a little bit about what you had to do to that physical space?

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GS: Early on, I don't think we— we did not have plexiglass. We did not have masks at that point. No one was required to wear a mask. That was the reason that we decided not to completely be in that location all the time. We would just come and check and see what's going on every half an hour. And then we would stay in enclosed locations, either the office or in another location where there was no public around. And if anybody had a question, they would just call us on the phone that was—it was put on a desk, which phone to call.

So we would interact by phone. At that time books were not circulating so it was not much of an interaction, like face-to-face interaction, with any of the public early on.

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CK: We've talked to a few people that were working on campus through this. What did it feel like to you coming to campus?

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GS: It was surreal, definitely. Especially because it was the early spring and the weather was gloomy and the campus was empty, completely empty. Just walking through the empty hallways and library spaces and thinking, a week ago this place was full of students and bustling and no one was there.

It was gloomy but not just the campus. Even driving to work was a surreal experience. Very few cars on the road, and it was quite an experience, definitely. You know, constantly hearing the sirens going on of the ambulances on the street. I think this was the only noise I would hear when I was driving to work.

00:19:35

CK: Where were the ambulances going? Were they—

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GS: Well, you know, because of the Stony Brook hospital was right across the street. That's where the ambulances were going. And very often—I would say every ten minutes—you'd hear an ambulance going towards the hospital.

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CK: And can you talk a little bit about how it affected or changed your life outside of the library?

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GS: I think the most challenging was getting adjusted to work from home. In the beginning, seems like, oh, this is cool. You can be in your pajama where you can still wake up a little later.

But after a week working on my kitchen table, I hurt my back, and all of a sudden I find myself a week in bed. I could not move, apparently for a wrong posture sitting on the kitchen table. And I think I learned a lesson straight right there, that I need to come up with something.

And also taking these breaks. And I remember early on, Stony Brook Recreational Center launched an app where we would Zoom in and have this half an hour exercises. I guess some students from the Recreational Center were doing these exercises, and that was kind of cool because I remember on my lunchtime break, I would just do exercises with them and connect with other colleagues to just do a yoga, half an hour yoga.

I was living alone, so for me, having a FaceTime with my family back in Italy, that was the—I guess the time that I was looking for. And also learning what was happening there. And God, every day was a sad story of how many people died that day. Because there was happening before us, it just—it was sad. Kind of like depressing in the beginning. And looking forward to eleven o'clock, or midday, press conference. Cuomo's press conference. I think that was daily that I was, okay, sitting down and listening, completely listening to what was happening.

And I loved that because I felt like that was my only source, that learning what was happening in New York and being updated daily.

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CK: And how did you keep up with news about Stony Brook?

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GS: Definitely through daily meetings. We had quite, almost daily, meetings with our peers and colleagues and supervisors and talking about what's happening, what we need to do. What should we do to keep us safe, and then how we should move forward.

I don't think we really had a plan in the beginning few—first few months in the beginning, there was no plan. We were just taking one day at a time and wished that, you know, the numbers would go down or—it was so unpredictable.

And no one knew what's the plan in a week or two.

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CK: Right. And as it progressed, once we got out of spring and looking to last fall, 2020, what do you remember of the changes to the library as some more students were coming back or as we got ready for the fall semester?

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GS: So as summer was approaching, I think it gave us a glimpse of hope because the weather was getting warmer and we kind of felt, okay, now maybe we can still see each other at a distance and being outside. And we still kept the Central Reading Room open.

As the summer was—as the fall semester was approaching, we had to come up with a plan. How we can increase our services in person. At that time we—sometime beginning of August, we started coming on campus more often and planning the locations. Kind of like counting the numbers, the capacity, distancing the tables and putting the plexiglasses at the desk.

We knew that we'll have to open a few more locations in getting ready for in-person services. That was the month of—in August—where we preparing how to open and what other services we could do. So we decided that the stacks will still remain closed and we will have students requesting books and we will just pull the books. The staff will pull the books and have them on hold shelves for the students. Since at that point, you know, it was still a few numbers of students on campus. So definitely, when fall semester started, the students who were coming more on campus and in the libraries as well.

Once we start pulling books and placing books on hold, we had more and more students, or professors, faculty members, who will come and check out books. We had the plexiglass in place. We decided that we'll have only one or two people at the counter and we'll also take four hour-, three hour-schedule shifts so we don't stay all day in masks. And I think the students liked that. So we tried to keep our services as much as we could, and I think we succeeded. Even though we didn't have the stacks open for people to go and browse, but we were still able to have books on hold. And occasionally we were mailing the books to the students who could not come and pick them in person.

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CK: And were you still acting as head at that point?

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GS: Yes. Throughout the summer. And fall, then no. Then Jennifer [DeVito] came back and we started talking about other services and planning.

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CK: And through all of this, what did you do to take care of your own mental health? Or what activities did you find that kept you going?

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GS: Definitely walking outside. I walked pretty much daily, at least three miles a day. I would do exercise at home, sign up on a few apps, and I would do that. But I think what I find myself doing at that time—baking.

I remember trying all my recipes that I could do it. Every week was something I was baking. A cake, cookies, and that was my therapy. Also keeping up with friends and family constantly on FaceTime and Zoom meetings with my colleagues and peers. We will pretty much do at least once a week. On Fridays we would get together on Zoom and have happy hour after work. And as summer approached, then we had more gatherings outdoors—in person, distanced, of course, with masks. But during that time, FaceTime and Zoom calls was the only thing that kept us together.

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CK: What was the favorite—your favorite thing that you baked?

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GS: (laughing) I bake cakes and cookies, usually. But my favorite was—I was making tiramisu a lot. And I was thinking, my God, who's going to eat all this? I cannot even send them anywhere. Now everyone is afraid to eat somebody's food. But that was my saving grace, I guess, during that time.

00:30:14

CK: Can you freeze that, or do you have a whole lot of that in the fridge?

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GS: (talking at the same time) Yeah, I could. And I did freeze, and I had close neighbors that were living with me at the time and they—I occasionally I would give them to.

But I think that was the challenge because usually when I bake, I bring to work, and I share. And at that time is, okay, no, you can't share with anyone.

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CK: We had talked earlier, and you had mentioned you got involved with contact tracing. Can you say a little bit about how that came about?

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GS: I don't remember exactly what my—I think it was probably in April when Cuomo announced that that would be one of the initiatives that New York State would start implementing in order to minimize the spreading—to do contact tracing. So I remember hearing and that intrigued me,

and I applied for the job, and I got hired. I started training and learning so much, you know. Having online courses about COVID and how it's spreading and when it's starting and by May I got hired, and I started doing my first calls as a contact tracing. It was quite an experience because Americans are not quite feeling comfortable sharing the information.

In Europe that was a practice many years ago, and it was normal. I grew up in a communist country so you really had not much privacy. And me calling and asking, "Where are you living and who you've been in contact with and when did it start at?"

So definitely, pushback from people. And even talking with friends and colleagues and telling them, "Hey, by the way, I'm a contract tracer." I was afraid in the beginning even saying that because people would just look at me as like, Oh, really? Now I have to worry about where I'm going, who I'm speaking with?

I think that's the challenging part—having people share their personal information and their whereabouts. But, you know, I would say most of the people were very grateful that we were doing that. I think that was the only way that we could minimize the spreading, and it did. People—as we got into the program—people would be more cooperative and understanding that, hey, it's not like I'm writing a book about you. It's just because we need to minimize the spreading.

They were all cooperating, and some of them who lived alone and needed help or assistance were very grateful that we would just have these daily calls and check on them and see how they feel and if they need anything. I would explain, like, it's not just us tracing you. It's just asking how you're doing. Do you need any assistance? There were people who could not quarantine because they had no room where they could quarantine and the county and the state would assist with finding a room in a hotel. Or they didn't know what to do—how to do the grocery shopping. And people were not aware that, oh, by the way, maybe you can order them. So getting this type of assistance. That population were not aware that this is what our intention was.

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CK: Just to ask a little more: so the people you were calling, what was the category they fell into? Why were they given to you to call—their situation?

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GS: It's because they were identified as being in close contact with someone who tested positive. So when the person gets that test and it's being identified as positive, at that point he is interviewed by the county health department.

And the goal is to find out who this person was in contact with in the past forty-eight hours before the symptoms start. And when this person says, "Well, I saw such and such and such" then a list is made of these people who this person was in contact and then was given to us and we would just call and say, Hey, by the way, you've been identified as being in contact with

someone who tested positive. And most of the people were already aware because either the person himself told them, and some of them were not. And some of them were angry. Why? You telling me I'm going to be in quarantine for two weeks now? Who is this person? Like, very angry.

And obviously we could not name, tell names or anything. But a lot of people were surprised. So when we called, that they need to be in quarantine for two weeks, it was quite a shock. And not just being in quarantine. Now you, possibly—because you've been exposed to someone who tested positive—you could possibly be positive in a few days as well and now watch for symptoms.

And things like that and just go over the protocols and procedures in how to quarantine and what to do.

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CK: Are you still doing that kind of work?

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GS: Yes, I am. Very much still in progress. And I moved from the contact tracing. I moved to interviewing, actually, the cases—the people who actually tested positive.

And it's a little harder because now I'm talking to people who are COVID positive and most of them are—have symptoms. They are not feeling well. And it's a different type of interview and a different type of approach. The challenge is that people still don't want to give the information and still don't want to say where they have been and, Why you asking so many questions?

Things like that. That's the challenging part, having them understand that the only reason is, is because to minimize the spread in the community and have those person who you've been in contact with, actually quarantining.

00:38:20

CK: Sure. No, that's important work you're doing. Thank you for doing it.

Just circle it back to the library. So now it's May; it's over a year later. What's your sense of the mood in the library now, in terms of how many students you're seeing and the activity level?

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GS: Definitely the spring—the start of the spring semester, it changed a little more scenery in the library. The library is becoming much more busier, and I see more students, people, coming more, checking out books, requesting books. And now as the semester is approaching to the end, it's definitely getting busier. Students are in the library studying. And seeing campus more alive, it just makes me happy. Definitely. And it's getting warmer outside.

I'm happy to see that we have them back and happy to serve them.

00:39:25

CK: Great. So this is our last big question, but beyond what we've talked about, what would you like people to know about this time in your life and what you experienced?

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GS: You know, it's like a silver lining and anything to learn from this experience that, certainly not taking things for granted and sorry for many people who lost their family, friends, and colleagues. That's one thing that you learn. That you could, tomorrow—we don't know what tomorrow is expected.

And we also—what I learned [is] that we certainly depend on each other for anything, Even in the beginning where all of a sudden we have no PPEs [Personal Protective Equipment] and people or countries start not supplying with those things. But I, for me, it was not as much as of a new thing. I went through when Soviet Union collapsed and for a period of more than a year the country was going through so many things. The empty stores and even [though] there was no COVID at that time, but the disaster was there. So I very much remember those times. I was a student and having no food or having no money because there was no money. No one was paying the salaries. So I kind of—that prepared me for many things in life. I've been through a lot. And it didn't really much scare me, in sense of how I'm going to survive if I have no paper towels or toilet paper. That was not a concern. I felt very sorry for people who were losing their loved ones.

00:41:48

CK: Well, we want to thank you again for sharing all of those memories with us and for taking part in this project. So thank you.

GS: 00:41:54

GS: You're welcome. Happy to share them.

[end of interview]