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What's Involved in the Evolving?: The Process Used in Developing a Proposal for Library Needs of Distant Learners in a Sparsely Populated State

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What's Involved in the Evolving?:

The Process Used in Developing a Proposal for Library
Needs of Distant Learners in a Sparsely Populated State

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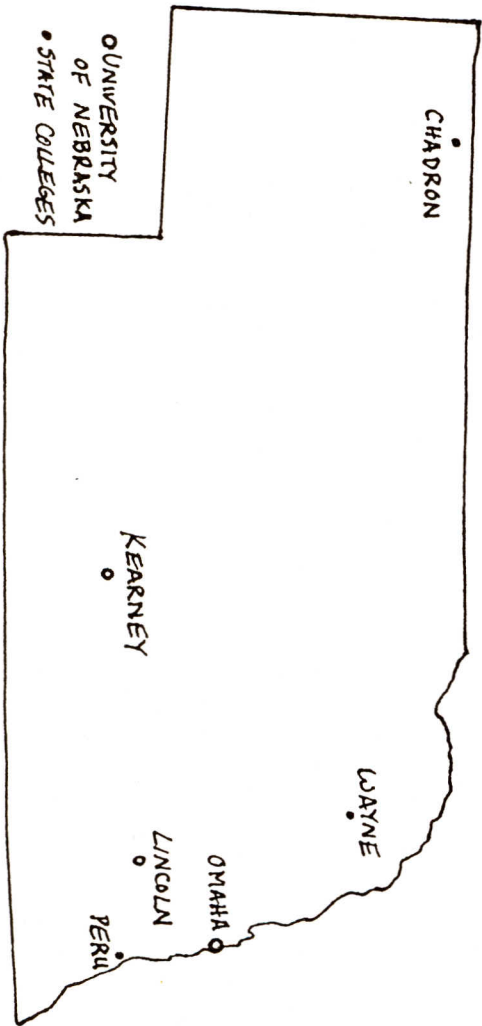
INTRODUCTION

Distance education. Distant learners. Extended campus library service. Nontraditional students. Satellite delivery. Access to information. Equal access to information and service. Limited resources. Over the past few years, these topics have appeared frequently in the literatures of higher education and librarianship. As the burgeoning interest in distance education continues to grow, more and more librarians are involved with meeting the needs of distance education students.

Although meeting the library needs of any nontraditional student has always been a challenge for academic libraries, developing a program and process to serve distant learners is particularly challenging. In Nebraska, geographic and demographic factors further add to the challenge. Nebraska, a state spanning 400 miles, is sparsely populated (1.6 million), with the majority of the population concentrated in the eastern quarter of the state. Total enrollment at all public higher education institutions in the state numbers only 104,617 (U.S. Department of Education, 1990). The University of Nebraska system, comprised of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, University of Nebraska at Omaha, University of Nebraska Medical Center, and the recently-added University of Nebraska-Kearney, accounts for 48 percent of this enrollment. Additionally, there are three state colleges, located in Chadron, Peru, and Wayne, and a dozen private schools.

[insert map of public colleges]

MAP 1. Public Institutions of Higher Education
of Nebraska



Given the geographical distances and the relatively small number of academic libraries, the challenge of serving distant learners becomes greater. This paper describes the planning process used at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln to develop library service for distant learners.

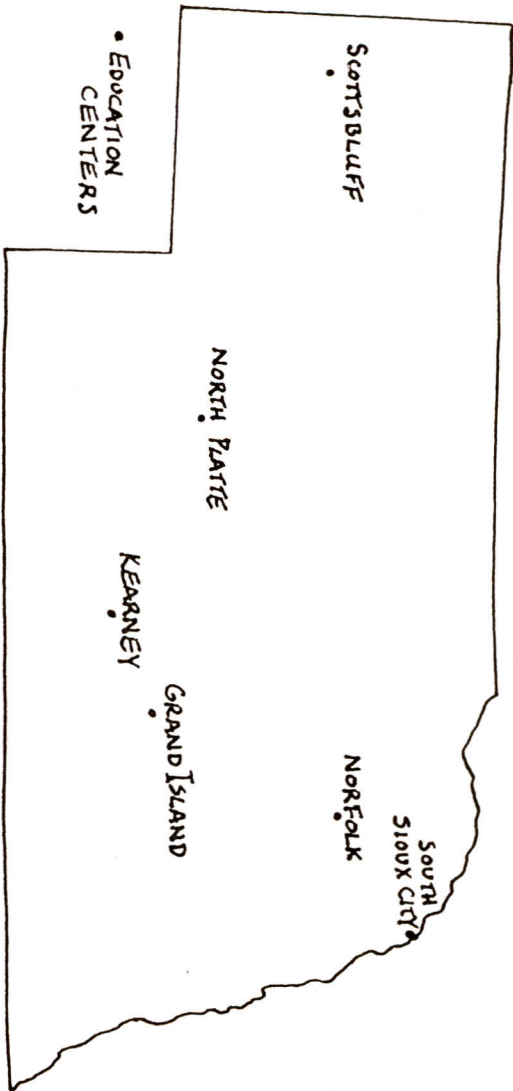
BACKGROUND

In the spring of 1990, the library at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) was focused on automation. The University Libraries had just signed a contract with Innovative Interfaces Inc. for the purchase of Innopac, an integrated online system. The system was scheduled to go online over a span of five months, starting with the public access catalog and circulation modules, and followed closely by the cataloging, acquisitions, and serials modules. At the same time a grant proposal was in the works to fund a CD ROM Local Area Network for the University Libraries consisting of ten different sites and with as much as three miles between them.

Externally, the University environment also was changing. A presidential search was in progress, there were several vacancies among key administrative posts, and the addition of Kearney State College to the state university system was underway. During this same time, in May of 1990, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Division of Continuing Studies released a draft report of its three-year curriculum plan for expanding the delivery of courses via satellite. The curriculum would primarily be at the graduate level, although there would also be delivery of professional-level workshops and seminars. Seven locations, called education centers, were identified as being core delivery sites. The seven education centers were in various stages of development. For instance, graduate-level engineering courses had been delivered to the Scottsbluff education center for three years, while the education center at Grand Island was in the fund-raising stage.

[INSERT MAP OF EDUCATION CENTERS]

MAP 2 Division of Continuing Studies
Education Centers



THE UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES' INVOLVEMENT

In May, administrators and staff from the University Libraries and the Division of Continuing Studies (DCS) held an initial meeting to discuss the role of the University Libraries and how the library needs of distant learners at the education centers could be satisfied. As an outgrowth of this meeting, the University Libraries administration formed a working group charged with developing a process to address how the University Libraries could indeed provide library services to distant learners.

By July 31, 1990, a mere three months later, the working group had submitted its report, "Library Services to Division of Continuing Studies," outlining the proposed process to the library administration. The report was accepted by the library administration with few changes and forwarded to the Division of Continuing Studies. How the working group developed a workable proposal within two and a half months is the theme of this paper.

THE PROCESS

Four librarians--the Chair of General Services Department, the circulation librarian, the business librarian, and an agriculture/social sciences librarian--were appointed to what became known as the Division of Continuing Studies Working Group. The concept of "working group" had already been developed and used extensively by the University Libraries during the preparation for and implementation of Innopac, the automated system. A working group is defined by the University Libraries as an ad hoc committee, created with a specific charge and life span. Members are selected from a list of individuals who express a willingness to serve and who meet key criteria such as job assignment and experience. Working groups are encouraged to be creative and forward-looking in developing final products. Functioning in an atmosphere of creativity, plus operating with specific deadlines and short life span, working groups have tended to develop a sense of trust and reliance upon full participation by all members.

The Division of Continuing Studies Working Group's initial meeting in May was a brainstorming session in

which issues and concerns were enumerated. Issues considered included telephone reference, the role of subject specialist librarians, staffing and hours, costs, bibliographic control, impact on interlibrary loan, and possible services available through local public and community libraries. Also, we began to identify colleagues within the University Libraries who could provide information about the issues raised and to assess the projected impact of an extended campus library service program on current services.

During this initial meeting we also identified specific constraints and assumptions that would necessarily shape the University Libraries' extended campus library service program in Nebraska. We decided any proposal would likely have to work within an environment of limited library resources (staffing, space, budget) and with an extended campus program still in the developmental stages with a limited but growing curriculum and uncertain enrollments. Additionally, other constraints included the administrative requirement from the University Libraries that support for on-site collections at the education centers would not be acceptable, nor would the promotion of duplication in services be favored. These limitations, although not unworkable, did inject a sense of reality into the kind of proposal we could expect to prepare within the two month time period.

With these issues and constraints in mind, the working group proceeded by dividing responsibilities for gathering information. Those of us who planned to attend ALA Annual Conference were asked to make contacts and attend meetings of the Extended Campus Library Services Discussion Group. Another member was asked to consult colleagues within the University Libraries about possible programmatic impacts on current service levels. Also, one member contacted the Nebraska Library Commission (Nebraska's state library) to gather more information about the collections and services of public libraries throughout the state.

Between meetings, a formal literature review, using Library Literature and ERIC, was conducted. The working group was in the fortunate position of having two recently-published seminal resources available. One was the "ACRL Guidelines for Extended Campus Library Service" (1990). The second was Virginia

Witucke's article, "Off-Campus Library Services: Leading the Way" (1990), which proved invaluable. Also, not to be overlooked was the availability of several Off-Campus Library Services Conference proceedings, which proved equally helpful.

As the working group probed the literature and continued to discuss the concept of extended campus library service, we ascertained areas needing further data gathering and discussion. We felt areas such as bibliographic instruction, contacts with teaching faculty, document delivery, telefax, the roles of interlibrary loan and cataloging, the impact on mediated computer searching, reserve materials, accreditation issues, and publicity all merited consideration. In addition, we developed a list of academic institutions throughout the country that already had extended campus library service programs in place.

By mid-June, the working group had met formally only four times. Meetings emphasized "blue-skying" and discussion, rather than details. We examined overarching concepts and debated alternatives, roadblocks, and realities. However, outside the meetings, each member spent several hours gathering information, as well as reflecting on what had been discussed at our meetings, in preparation for future meetings.

With a sense of urgency, the library administration had requested a preliminary report by mid-June. In order to meet this deadline, one working group member prepared a draft of the preliminary report. We then devoted one meeting to critiquing this draft. We found working with drafts an effective operating style. Prior to meetings each member could make revisions and generate ideas for group discussion. Then, when we met as a group, we discussed the revisions while we continued to entertain new ideas. Discussions ranged from philosophical approaches to identifying areas needing further data gathering, and finally how to bring focus and direction to our preliminary report.

The chair of the working group then prepared the final copy of the preliminary report and delivered it to the library administration by the deadline.

Administrative response to the preliminary report was completed by late June, and a critique returned to the working group.

Administrative support was positive. A few specific changes to the preliminary report were made and some additional information was requested. The working group was asked to include an indication of those services for which there should be charges. We were asked also to provide cost estimates and specific target dates for implementation. In addition, the library administration asked that we include scenarios for different levels of funding as part of the final report. The scenarios would describe the information needs of the distant learner and illustrate how those needs would be met at each level of service.

The working group convened in early July to discuss the critique and to decide what else needed to be done. Faced with an August 1 deadline for the final report, and with vacations on the calendar, the working group was motivated to work quickly.

The working group focused on shaping the extended campus library program proposal into a three-tiered levels of service plan. The first tier included those services that could be immediately available to distant learners, with few additional resources required from the University Libraries. The second tier expanded the services and anticipated the need for some additional resources, while the third tier projected complete services with sustainable funding when a fully operational Division of Continuing Studies distance education program was in place. Since the seven education centers were still in varying stages of development, it was vital that the levels of service be flexible and provide for different needs.

At this juncture, the working group again assigned tasks to each member. One member was asked to prepare scenarios outlining what services a distant learner could expect from the library, and how each level of service was to be implemented. Another member was charged with preparing a draft of services, with target dates and costs. Other members continued reading and synthesizing the literature.

As we continued to comb the literature for ideas, and as we debated service issues, our programmatic recommendations began to jell. We came to the conclusion that the geographic distances in Nebraska, coupled with the relatively small number of post-secondary public institutions, were constants and also major obstacles. We realized that comparing our proposed program of extended campus services to that of Central Michigan University or an urban, populous state seemed less and less feasible than initially considered. Accordingly, telephone interviews were conducted with University of Wyoming and Utah State University, states with similar geographic and population dynamics. By placing these calls late in the process, we were able to ask specific questions to fill in the gaps in our proposal, and to draw upon the experience and perceptions of other libraries in accommodating the factors of geographic distance and scattered population.

As we began to write the final report, we worked and reworked drafts. Our meetings again functioned as review sessions where we fine-tuned concepts. As the chair of the working group prepared drafts, members offered substantive criticism and guidance as well as editorial comments.

Since the report was being written for administrators in the Division of Continuing Studies, we wanted to avoid library jargon. Library services needed to be explained concisely and portrayed as one component of the overall picture of the University Libraries' service, and yet as an integral part of the Division of Continuing Studies program. We also needed to make the report understandable to administrators who in all likelihood would not be conversant with the daily operations and organizational structures of libraries. Furthermore, we wanted to emphasize communication and cooperative development between the University Libraries and the Division of Continuing Studies.

The final report was completed by the August 1990 deadline. The document included an introduction to possible library services for distant learners, described a three-tiered approach to providing services, and provided cost projections for each level of service. Recommendations were sequenced by academic

semester and month. Substeps were provided, but were not necessarily listed in priority order. Target dates and projected costs were identified through January 1991. Beyond that date, the plan was more open-ended and less specific, to ensure flexibility in responding to curriculum developments, budgetary constraints, and the future direction of the Division of Continuing Studies program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

The final document was approved by the library administration and was sent to the Dean of the Division of Continuing Studies. The recommendations contained in the final report have been incorporated into the planning process of the Division of Continuing Studies.

KEY ELEMENTS OF THE PLAN

Underpinning the proposal for service to distant learners at the education centers are several assumptions. These assumptions closely parallel statements in the ACRL Guidelines and also reflect the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's role and mission statement.

1. The University of Nebraska-Lincoln is ultimately responsible for providing support services to meet the library needs of distant learners at the education centers.
2. The University Libraries have the primary responsibility for identifying, developing, coordinating, and providing library resources and services.
3. Effective and appropriate services for distant learners may differ from services offered to on-campus clientele. Services to distant learners as well as on-campus students are based on academic course requirements.
4. Resources and services of "unaffiliated local libraries" may be used to support information needs of distant learners. Unaffiliated local libraries are libraries located near the education centers, and may include public, community college, and state college libraries.

The first tier of services includes services currently in place at the University Libraries, and requires few additional resources. The emphasis is on utilizing circulation, interlibrary loan, designated subject specialist librarians, and reference services as currently operational for on-campus users. Few additional costs are projected.

The second tier of service assumes the presence of a distance education library services coordinator. The position is envisioned as a dual appointment between the University Libraries and the Division of Continuing Studies. The coordinator's initial tasks include conducting site visits to each education center and developing a list of recommendations to enhance and expand library services for distant learners. Other recommendations are the examination of the issue of bibliographic control and the development of policies for purchasing limited resources to meet distant learners' collection needs.

The third tier of service assumes a complete program in place with sustainable funding. The report recommends the development of a survey instrument to assess needs of distant learners and teaching faculty, as well as the development of a bibliographic instruction program designed specifically to meet needs of the extended campus community. A third recommendation is the development of a full-scale marketing program for library services to distant learners.

SUMMARY

The process of utilizing the working group concept in developing an extended campus library services program was effective. The four librarians on the working group appreciated the challenging opportunity to combine both professional knowledge and creativity in the development of a program. Also, the planning approach provided numerous opportunities for input by librarians and library staff. Units that would ultimately be affected by the provision of services to distant learners were involved in the development of recommendations.

In addition, the interaction with the Division of Continuing Studies was positive. The fact that the

University Libraries' participation was sought out at the beginning was a welcome indicator of campus recognition of the role of the library. The process effectively helped to build stronger ties on campus.

At present, this is a time of transition for both the University Libraries and the Division of Continuing Studies. It is crucial for all parties involved--the University Libraries, the Division of Continuing Studies, distant learners, teaching faculty, and the education centers--to emphasize communication and cooperative development. All have a vested interest in the dynamic growth of extended campus educational programs that are a component of both higher education and economic development within Nebraska.

Postscript. Since the programmatic plan was developed and approved, the state of Nebraska has elected a new governor, and the state has experienced a major economic downturn in revenues. The new budget climate is significantly different. Also, the University of Nebraska system is under the direction of a new president, while key administrative posts at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln are still in the process of being filled. The University of Nebraska-Lincoln faces budget cuts in the 3-5% range. Thus, program enhancements are on hold. But the plan is in place and should be usable whenever funding allows for implementation.

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