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Collection Development for Distance Learning

Anne Marie Casey

The *ACRL Guidelines for Distance Learning Library Services* (ACRL 2000) define distance learning library services as, "... those ... in support of college, university, or other post-secondary courses and programs offered away from a main campus, or in the absence of a traditional campus, and regardless of where credit is given. These courses may be taught in traditional or non-traditional formats or media, may or may not require physical facilities, and may or may not involve live interaction of teachers and students. The phrase is inclusive of courses in all post-secondary programs designated as extension, extended, off-campus, extended campus, distance, distributed, open, flexible, franchising, virtual, synchronous, or asynchronous."

This is a very broad definition and necessarily so because distance learning programs in higher education are provided in a multitude of ways. Some of these lend themselves to the provision of library services much more easily than others. For example, at a branch campus where a physical library exists, it is far simpler to extend basic library services to students who live in close proximity to that branch than it is to a sole student taking a correspondence course in a remote area. One of the great challenges in defining ideal library services to the remote learner has been that conditions vary greatly in the type of programs libraries must serve and in the funding available to do so.

In the last decade, with the advances in technology and the widespread accessibility to it, distance learning library services have become more standardized and grown closer to traditional library services as they too offer more materials electronically. The most efficient way to provide information to remote students today is through the World Wide Web. This is as true for on-campus “distance” students and faculty researching from dorm rooms, offices, and homes as it is for the true distance learner who is at a significant geographic distance from the campus library. There are some differences in the collection development patterns for electronic resources for distance learners but these are not as significant as the patterns were before their proliferation.

To understand the collection development of electronic resources in today’s libraries that serve distance students, it would be helpful to see them in the context of collection development for distance learning programs in print-based libraries.

Collection Development for Distance Learning in the “Print Era”

In a review of the literature, the amount of material written on collection development for distance learning library services is small and consists to a large degree of case studies. The small body of literature concerned with collection development and distance learning is logical in light of the fact that the most prominent concerns of distance learning librarians have been the dissemination of information to remote students and faculty rather than the collection of it. The literature traditionally has focused on instruction, reference, and document delivery. Especially in academic institutions where distance learning courses are the same as those taught on-campus, although often in different

formats, the prime objective has been to get the material that already existed in the library collection out to the distant students.

Traditionally, distance learning library services have not had the resources to focus on much other than the immediate needs of filling remote students' requests as quickly as possible. It is often the case that staffing devoted to distance learning students in libraries is minimal. Many libraries have small numbers of staff devoted to distance learners or staff who split their responsibilities between on-campus and distance learning needs. Distance learning librarians have historically left collection development to their on-campus colleagues because they needed to focus their limited resources on the delivery of library materials. At Central Michigan University (CMU), Off-Campus Library Services (OCLS) is a separate department that provides library services and materials exclusively to students and faculty in off-campus or distance learning programs. OCLS librarians have relied on the libraries' subject bibliographers to maintain the collections and have added to them primarily in the areas only taught off-campus, such as vehicle design administration.

In spite of the small body of literature on collection development for distance learning library services, those that are available give a good picture of the collection development practices in the print era. Despite differences in approaches, some trends evolve in the ways that libraries all over the world handled collections for distance learners. The library services described in these articles vary in some ways, but appear to have had a

common approach to collection development in the pre-electronic days. This approach can be summed up in three phrases, multiple copies, deposit collections, and referrals. The most consistent trends in early distance learning library services were to collect multiple copies of books that were requested by distance learning students, to deposit core collections of materials in places that were close to clusters of distance students, and to refer students to other libraries in their areas.

Collecting multiple copies of books that appeared on the reading lists of faculty in the distance programs was often determined to be the best way to deal with the competing needs of students on-campus with easy access to the library and students off-campus who needed longer borrowing times to compensate for mailing. Some libraries, such as Deakin University and the University of New England in Australia as well as the University of South Africa, devised formulae for the number of copies that the library should purchase based on the number of students registered in distance learning courses (McKnight 1998; Schmude and Luxton 1986; Willemsse 1986). From 1955-1970, when the University of New England Collection for distance students was housed at the State Library in Sydney, it was not unheard of for up to 50 copies of the same book to be purchased (Schmude and Luxton 1986). At the University of Manitoba, to support courses taken off-campus, copies were added quickly to the library's collection by purchasing the books at the university bookstore so they would be on the shelves as fast as possible (Angel and Budnick 1986). National University in California, where the author was employed from 1987-1991 and functioned as head of serials, purchased multiple subscriptions to periodicals to be placed at each of the branch campus libraries.

The University of British Columbia maintained a separate, uncatalogued Extension Collection, which consisted of duplicates of books in the library's collection (Whitehead 1987). At CMU, OCLS maintains a small uncatalogued collection of multiple copies of titles that are frequently requested and, in the past, also maintained a separate collection of textbooks for faculty to review while preparing for courses (Garrett 1988).

The establishment of smaller library collections in areas where distance learning classes were offered has been another common way to ensure that students would have ready access to the most important materials needed for their studies. There are numerous avenues for establishing local site collections. Park University in Missouri established local collections of books, periodicals, and audio-visual materials at the base libraries of the military installations on which its courses were taught (Peterman and Schultis 1993). Old Dominion University in Virginia set up core collections in the community college libraries where it had partnerships (Pettingill 1998). Laurentian University in Ontario moved core collections around by sending them to the areas in which a course was being taught and moving them when the course was over. It also established some permanent core collections in local libraries that were given honoraria for their assistance (Kelly 1987). The Open University of Sri Lanka and Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University in Thailand both set up small core collections in designated public libraries throughout their countries (Wijesinghe 1988; Cusripituck and Puttapithakporn 1988). Small remote center libraries were established at Deakin University, the University of the South Pacific, the University of Queensland in Australia, and Indira Gandhi National Open University in India (Day and Angus 1986; Campbell 1988; Williams 1986; Kanjilal and

Tripathi 1995). The University of Wyoming set up a major branch library in Casper and also purchased materials to be housed in a community college library where one distance learning program was offered (Johnson 1987). CMU donated subscriptions to appropriate indexes to military libraries and other local libraries in areas where classes were held.

The third approach to collections that distance learning libraries have taken was referral to other libraries. This could be done in a variety of ways. In the days of primarily print-based libraries, it was common practice to informally refer students to libraries in their home areas that might have collections that would be useful to them. Until the late 1990's CMU librarians visited the major libraries in each of the areas where classes were taught whenever they traveled to those areas for instruction. Normally the visits took place annually. They maintained library guides that described the collections available at all of the local libraries and handed them out to students at instruction classes. Although many distance learning library services have ceased to informally refer students to other libraries, it is not uncommon today to click on a distance learning library services link on a major academic library's web page and find a list of libraries open to the public in the areas where that institution offers courses. The *Guidelines for Distance Learning Library Services* (ACRL 2000) state that it is the responsibility of the sponsoring institution to provide library services and materials to its students so most libraries provide informal referrals only as an adjunct to their main services.

Many distance learning library services also contract with other organizations to provide materials to their students. Of the 169 respondents to the questionnaire for the *Off-Campus Library Services Directory*, 3rd ed., 73 referred their students to commercial document providers and 85 arranged library privileges at local libraries for distance learning students at their institutions (Casey and Cachero 1998). Contracting with other organizations may become more a trend in the future as companies such as Jones e-Global Library are created to provide library services, for a fee, to institutions that are not able to set up appropriate distance learning library services of their own (Heilig 2001).

Collection Development for Distance Learning in the “Electronic Era”

Some of the earliest electronic materials to appear in distance learning library services were subscriptions to electronic databases for the librarians who provided support.

Library services subscribed to collections of online databases, such as DIALOG and BRS, so that the librarians could perform mediated database searches for the students. In the 1980’s, libraries began to subscribe to individual indexes on CD-ROMs. The yearly subscription rates for the indexes on CD-ROM were generally more cost-effective than the online connect charges for database collections.

In 1987, Cardinal Stritch College in Wisconsin subscribed to Infotrac and Business Collection, a set of full text articles, on CD-ROM. The librarians began sending mediated searches to distance students from these databases rather than from the more costly DIALOG. In 1988, students surveyed were very satisfied with the search results. The librarians were able to do more extensive searching on the CD-ROMs because they

did not have to worry about online charges. They also were able to fill a substantial number of requests for articles from the Business Collection rather than turning to ILL to fill them (Ruddy 1988).

At CMU, the OCLS librarians in each of the regional library offices had subscriptions to at least two bibliographic databases on CD-ROM and added new subscriptions as needed to cover new disciplines or geographic areas. They used the CD-ROM databases for mediated searches and only turned to the online services for the odd topic that was not found on the CD-ROM's. As in the case of Cardinal Stritch College, the OCLS librarians were able to do far more extensive searches when they did not have to worry about connect charges.

As well as providing mediated searches for distance learning students, some library services also placed CD-ROMs at remote sites. Park University purchased CD-ROMs to place in base libraries on installations where its courses were being taught. In FY 1992-1993, 36% of the Park University distance learning acquisitions budget was dedicated to this (Peterman and Schultis 1993). In a survey conducted in 1989 of distance learning librarians who had CD-ROMs in their libraries, 36% reported that they used the CD-ROMs for distance learning students. Of these, 73% used them from the main campus library while 27% had placed them at remote sites (Power 1992).

As more and more print materials, especially reference materials and indexes and abstracts, began to become available electronically, libraries devoted collection

development money to them. Students in libraries found that the electronic indexes were easier to use than their print-based counterparts. Certainly a more complicated and sophisticated level of searching is possible in most electronic databases. Since distance learning students did not have easy access to library materials, the idea of making the electronic materials available to remote students was seemingly the answer to the perennial dilemma of providing students with timely and appropriate library materials.

In a paper presented at the 1998 International Conference on New Missions of Academic Libraries in the 21st Century, Uma Kanjilal sums up neatly the appeal of electronic or virtual libraries for the distance learner when she wrote, “The advantages of digital libraries from the point of view of distance learners are manifold. The basic advantages that one can see of such systems are that:

- They provide access to knowledge bases in a wide variety of media.
- They are accessible from the students’ workplaces or homes, at their own convenient time, therefore cutting down the trip to different libraries.
- They help in avoiding the unnecessary duplication of material in different regional or study centers and making it a cost-effective mean (sic) of providing library services.
- They provide broader, faster and better delivery of sources and information.
- They can avoid loss of material in transit” (Kanjilal 1998, 3).

In order to make their electronic databases available to remote students, some libraries purchased systems that would make bibliographic databases available through their

online public access catalogues (OPAC), which could be accessed remotely through a dial-up connection. In the mid 1990's, CMU launched its Infoshare system, which was part of the NOTIS OPAC. In addition to the libraries' catalogue, access to four databases, ERIC, IAC Expanded Academic Index, IAC Business Index, and PsychLIT, was made available via Infoshare. Remote students within the state of Michigan could dial into a statewide network for free to access the OPAC and databases. OCLS also paid for a free local access number that dialed into the Michigan system in the greater Washington, DC area, which had a significant concentration of CMU's distance learning student population in the early 1990's. Although access was available long-distance to CMU distance learning students in many other areas, it was not well used outside of Michigan and Washington, DC because of the cost and some complications with the dial-up process.

Difficulty in connecting to the libraries' online resources was a frustration a decade ago that slowed down accessibility on the part of distance learning students and active collection building of electronic resources on the part of distance learning librarians. In 1993, the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota embarked on a project to establish access for its distance learning students to the library's electronic system (Zietlow and Kragness 1993). One of the major obstacles to students' ability to set up an account to access the online library resources was that each student needed to apply at the Computing Center on campus during normal business hours. The extension librarian arranged for the distance learning students to apply through the remote site libraries and the librarians took on the responsibility of verifying that the students were eligible for

accounts, a function normally done by the Computing Center. Despite the efforts of the librarians, only a small number of distance learning students had set up accounts at the time of the report. Those who did have accounts were still responsible for any long distance charges they incurred dialing into the system.

In the mid 1990's the Internet emerged as the means to provide electronic resources to remote students in an easy way. Bibliographic databases, reference tools, periodicals and books became available on the World Wide Web. In some cases, the information on the World Wide Web was available free of charge to anyone. Most libraries started to construct web pages that linked to freely available reference tools, books, journals, and other web sites for their students. Subscription databases were also available and could generally be viewed by any student at a workstation in the library.

However, library site licenses for subscription materials generally restrict their use to members of an institution's community, such as students, faculty and staff. In general, the vendors set up access to any users on computers with an IP address registered with the vendor as valid for that institution. The IP addresses used are normally those of the computers in the library. Most libraries have set up systems to authenticate their remote users to enable them to access restricted databases. A common way to do this at the turn of the century has been to set up a proxy server that authenticates valid users and "fools" the vendor's computer into thinking that the user is at a computer with an IP address in the valid range. The ability to provide access to a substantial body of library material

through the World Wide Web has revolutionized the collection development practices of distance learning library services.

In 1995, the CMU Libraries formed a cross departmental committee, the Automated Information Sources Access Committee (AISAC), to recommend a vendor for subscription databases that would be made available through the Libraries' Web site, which was under construction at the time. AISAC members solicited suggestions from library staff and faculty and arranged for vendors to demonstrate products at public meetings in the library. Select members of AISAC were charged with gathering additional information on particular vendors. After all of the information had been presented, AISAC was charged with delivering a recommendation of the best subscription service for CMU to the Dean of Libraries. This was a significant recommendation because of the amount of acquisitions dollars that would be pledged to one electronic system. At the final AISAC meeting where the decision was made about which vendor to recommend, the majority of committee members argued in favor of one product that had a sophisticated search engine and offered the subject matter in its databases that was the most important to CMU. However, the OCLS committee member argued in favor of recommending OCLC's new FirstSearch product, which at the time, was the only one that was set up for easy accessibility by remote users. She pleaded her case to the committee that access outside the library was far more important to the distance learning population than to anyone else at the time and it would be unwise to choose a vendor which would not be able to accommodate distance learning students.

The committee agreed to recommend FirstSearch and the Dean followed through on this recommendation.

This illustrates an important change in the collection development practices in academic libraries in the last decade. Because of the enormous cost of major online resource subscriptions, the decisions in many libraries to acquire them have been made by cross-departmental committees. The needs of the distance learning users have been considered in a much more prominent way than they had in the past. Indeed, Ann Pettingill (1998) describes the process of selection decision-making at Old Dominion University by the electronic resources committee there as one in which the needs of the distance education population drove the process.

CMU regularly adds subscriptions to electronic resources to its collections. As the Head of Collection Development receives licenses for these to review, she examines them to be sure that they allow access to remote users. If they do not, CMU asks for a new license that does and will not subscribe to publications that will not change a license to allow access for remote users.

Another significant change brought on by the World Wide Web and the ability to set up remote authentication systems that can validate different groups of users into different subscription databases is that distance learning library services can now subscribe to resources that only the distance learning populations need and can set up their systems to

validate only those users. This has enabled distance learning library services to have more independence in collection building.

Another area in which distance learning library services have used electronic methods to build their collections has been through the method of tracking requests. It has long been common in distance learning library services to perform mediated searches and send library materials directly to the students. Requests for reference support and document delivery traditionally have been captured in databases so that a very clear picture of the students' needs has emerged.

At CMU, the OCLS librarians historically practiced traditional collection development methods by reading reviews of new publications, participating in narrowly defined approval plans, and accepting requests from faculty members to a small degree. They also compiled bibliographies of books in the CMU collections that corresponded to classes being taught off-campus and so were able to recognize gaps in the book collections in particular areas and select new materials in those areas. However, a substantial amount of the OCLS acquisitions budget has traditionally been spent to maintain subscriptions to periodicals heavily used by distance learning students. Since all of the document delivery requests are captured in a database, yearly lists of requests of items not owned and requests that are filled are generated. Every year at subscription renewal time, the Director of OCLS, who is the libraries' subject bibliographer for distance learning collections, makes decisions about dropping expensive titles that are no longer requested heavily and about adding new titles that have had significant requests

over a period of three to five years. The OCLS librarians also track reference requests and as patterns emerge for assignments that require particular sources of information, they attempt to locate electronic resources that will answer the students' needs. CMU is not unique in this approach to collection development. When San Jose State University in California established its Monterey County Campus, it set up a branch library with some collections that duplicated those at the main library. In the first year of operation, the staff studied student requests and ILL patterns to determine gaps in the branch campus library collection. They used this data to assist them in building the branch collection (Silveria and Leonard 1996).

This means of determining new materials to select is being advocated in libraries in general (Murphy and Rupp-Serrano 1999). Newer interlibrary loan software makes it easier to collect and analyze requests for items not owned in the library so that heavily requested items can be added to the collections. One author describes collection development based on patron demand as the "just in time solution" (Holleman 1998). In this case, traditional library services are beginning to adopt some of the collection development practices of their distance learning counterparts.

Another advance in electronic access that has impacted the collection development practices of the OCLS librarians is an increased dependence on ILL to supply materials not owned in the CMU collections. Over 90% of ILL article requests are received in two weeks or less because so many are now sent electronically. Since the off-campus courses at CMU are taught in compressed formats varying from five to eight weeks in length,

traditional ILL turnaround times were not quick enough for OCLS to turn to ILL very often to supplement materials not held at the CMU Libraries. Beginning in November 1999, if a student has a minimum time of two weeks to wait for a document to be supplied and the material is not held at CMU, OCLS automatically turns the request over to ILL. This has resulted in an increase of 14% to the document delivery fill rate from November 1999 to June 2001. This process allows OCLS to shift acquisitions commitments from individual subscriptions to new electronic resources with wider full text availability.

With the advent and growth of easily accessible virtual libraries for all patrons, collection development practices among distance learning and traditional librarians are becoming more similar. However, differences in some collection philosophies between the two groups are still evident. Pamela Grudzien, Head of Collection Development at CMU, in an interview on February 6, 2002, spoke at length on some significant differences she has noted in the selection behaviors of the libraries' subject bibliographers and the OCLS librarians who funnel all requests for electronic purchases through her. Grudzien stated that a significant difference between the two groups of librarians is in how they respond in their discussions about new electronic products on the libraries' collection development electronic list. The OCLS librarians are much more like public librarians in that they look at a new electronic product in terms of how the distance learning clientele will be able to use it whereas the subject bibliographers think more in terms of how they will instruct students to use the product. OCLS librarians often advocate for a new online resource because it will answer the needs of assignments in particular courses while the

subject bibliographers think more in terms of the database being useful for a discipline and being desired by faculty in that discipline or needed for accreditation of an academic program.

Grudzien also stated that OCLS librarians become frustrated quickly at the slow speed of the process. They chafe at the amount of time it takes to set up and run trials and the time it can take to make decisions to start a new subscription. The distance learning students, who are working adults whose average age is 37, have more time-sensitive demands and the librarians feel a strong urgency to answer their needs. Most of the faculty who teach in the distance learning programs at CMU are adjunct and rarely take the role in collection development that their full-time campus counterparts do. Part of the role of the subject bibliographers at CMU is to maintain contact with the departments for whom they make selections, so collection development in the libraries is determined to a degree by the teaching faculty. OCLS is often able to make much quicker decisions to add a new online resource or to discontinue one because the librarians do not rely on anyone outside the department for guidance in these decisions.

In 2001, the OCLS librarians made two significant decisions in regard to electronic databases. In one case, they decided to drop the full text subscription to a business database. Although the journal coverage was substantial and a large percentage of the periodicals were not owned by CMU, it was a very expensive product that was not getting high use among the students despite a continued effort of marketing on the part of the OCLS librarians. When the new subscription price revealed an increase of over

\$10,000 per year for the full text version, the OCLS librarians decided to drop it with little discussion and no outside consultation.

At about the same time, the OCLS librarians decided to subscribe to the E*Subscribe full text database of ERIC documents. OCLS had been looking at this product from its inception to answer the growing problem of students who could not locate microfiche reader/printers in local libraries to read the ERIC documents that were reproduced on microfiche and sent to them. The problem was a particular issue for education students outside the U.S., who had to wait a substantial period of time to receive the microfiche through the mail and then could not find machines to print out the reports. The challenges for some of these students had become so daunting that they had begun a campaign of complaints against OCLS in general that were being sent to the administrators of the distance learning programs on a regular basis. As soon as this database was priced in a way that OCLS could afford it, a subscription was set up and immediately advertised it to the education students. The education subject bibliographer had also been looking very closely at this product for the main library but as of the current time, had not made a decision to subscribe because there was no apparent support for it from the education faculty at the university.

Conclusion

In the era of primarily print-based materials in libraries, collection development was not a large part of the work of distance learning librarians. Their main impetus was to get the material already in the institutions' collections out to remote students. The most

prominent impact they had on libraries' collections was in adding multiple copies to mail to remote students or to be housed in sites near where the remote classes were being taught. As library materials became available electronically, distance learning library services worked to find ways to make these available to the distance learning students. Early efforts were difficult because of the challenges of setting students up with accounts to dial into online systems or the costs of dialing in long distance for many students. The introduction of the World Wide Web as a widespread tool for the dissemination of information in our society has revolutionized the ability to bring library collections to the remote user in a place of his or her convenience 24 hours a day and seven days a week. It has also changed the role that distance learning librarians play in collection development in their libraries. As advocates for the distance learners, the distance learning librarians often shape the priorities in libraries of where to spend the money for electronic resources. In addition, with their own web sites, which are their own avenues of dissemination, distance learning library services can create virtual libraries tailored to their students without having to depend entirely on institutional purchases.

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