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Distance Learners: Not Necessarily Distant

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At colleges and universities across the country, distance learning courses are becoming more prevalent. It has been estimated that in the year 2002 over 2 million students enrolled in distance learning classes and programs at the college level, up from 710,000 in 1998. The International Data Corporation, in the same report, projected that approximately 85% of all two- and four-year colleges would be offering distance learning courses this year, up over 20% in just four years[1]. Due to this trend in higher education, library services for distance learners has become a topic of discussion, inspiring the ACRL Distance Learning Section to establish the Guidelines for Distance Learning Library Services. This document outlines the steps necessary to insure that library services available to the distance learning community are equivalent to those provided to the traditional on-campus community[2]. Unfortunately, many college and university libraries found themselves in the position of playing "catch-up" once their institutions began offering distance learning courses, often without consulting the library about its preparedness to provide services such as home-delivery of books and articles, or toll-free telephone reference.

The ACRL Library Data Tables for 2000 show that of 1135 institutions (those surveyed that grant bachelors, masters, professional, and doctoral degrees), 72% are offering some measure of distance learning. Of these, approximately 90% are providing library services for the students enrolled in distance learning classes, although 92% of them report that they receive no additional funding for this purpose[3].

In addition to supporting students enrolled in online or distance courses, libraries must account for other remote users. Although students aged 25 and younger are still the majority, enrollment numbers for older students continue to grow[4]. Students beyond the traditional age are more likely to have jobs and families, and perhaps less likely to spend time on campus at the library, especially during traditional business hours. Students are increasingly foregoing the physical library in favor of doing their research online. Even with those living in the dorms or close to campus, those who were once traditional library users have become modern remote users.

The purpose of this paper is to examine many of the issues involved in providing library services to distance learners, and to discuss the growing overlap of services for traditional on-campus students and distance learners. Is the distinction between the two groups enough to merit a separation of services, or should libraries simply strive to meet the needs of all patrons, regardless of status or qualification? At some schools with a wide variety of course-delivery methods and a large student population, it might be considered a waste of time to differentiate between the distance learner and traditional student, or it might be increasingly difficult to identify the many categories of students. For this reason, it is proposed that libraries begin to consider blending distance library services with traditional services.

Defining the Distance Learner

[1]International Data Corporation, "Online Distance Learning in Higher Education, 1998-2002." Cited in Council for Higher Education Accreditation. "Distance Learning in Higher Education." CHEA Update 2 (June 1999). Available from http://www.chea.org/Research/distance-learning/distance-learning-2.cfm (accessed March 24, 2003).

[2] Association of College & Research Libraries, Distance Learning Section Guidelines Committee. 2000. "Guidelines for Distance Learning Library Services." Association of College & Research Libraries Web Page. Available from http://www.ala.org/acrl/guides/distlrng.html (accessed March 24, 2003).

[3]Association of College & Research Libraries. 2000. "Summary Data: Trends in Distance Learning Library Service." ACRL Library Data Tables 2000. Available from http://www.virginia.edu/surveys/ACRL/2000/trends.html (accessed March 24, 2003).

[4]National Center for Education Statistics. 2001. "Postsecondary Education." Digest of Education Statistics, 2001. Available from http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2002/digest2001/ch3.asp#1 (accessed March 24, 2003).

When establishing or evaluating services for distance learners, the library's first task may be to define the "distance learner" and establish eligibility criteria for special services. At many schools there is no official definition of a distance learner. Perhaps it is someone who is enrolled in a course that is coded as a distance learning course, or a student who takes no on-campus courses. It may be a student, regardless of how close he/she lives to the university, who takes only courses designated as distance learning courses (this designation is probably tied to method of course-delivery). It could be a student who lives further than a specified distance from campus and therefore must commute to school. If a student living on campus takes only online courses, could this student potentially be categorized as a distance learner? Students themselves may not self-identify as distance learners, even if they are eligible for special services. Each library must have some sort of criteria for determining a student's status as a distance learner, or decide on a case-by-case basis. This could be an impetus for libraries to work more closely with college or university administration to more readily identify distance learning courses or students, so that both the library and the university as a whole might provide student services more effectively. The University of Arkansas Libraries require that distance learning students register with the library each semester by completing an online form[5]. Other schools simply list eligibility requirements, like the Ingram Library at the State University of West Georgia[6].

Remote Access

College and university administrations must address the issue of how distance learners can easily obtain a student ID. Some of Florida's universities have established procedures for issuing traditional University photo-ID cards to students through the mail. This usually requires the patron to mail a passport sized photo and payment to the ID card office, which then issues the ID using the provided photo and mails the card to the student. Florida Gulf Coast

University outlines the procedures for obtaining an official University ID card on their web page[7].

Official college or university-issued ID cards may be mandatory at some schools, since the ID number is linked with campus computing systems and is required for accessing e-mail or web-based courses. Schools in this situation would need to develop a systematic and efficient means of issuing ID cards if they have large populations of distance learning students. Mandatory on-campus orientations for all distance learning students is one way to address this issue, providing an opportunity to have an ID made.

Some schools do not require that students obtain an official University identification, but rather issue a library number directly from the circulation department. For students who don't need a University ID, this is sometimes an easier and cheaper alternative. Often they can request an ID number via email or web form, upon which the number is issued, activated, and emailed to the student within a few days. At the University of Tennessee Libraries, students must contact the Distance Education Librarian to get a non-photo ID card[8]. Since a valid student ID number is often required for remote access to databases, some libraries must devise a way for students to validate or activate their numbers. The University of Florida has created a "Library Number Activation Request" form[9].

Whether students are in another state or across town, many access the library from home or work. Remote authentication to databases and other restricted online library resources has been a very challenging technological issue for librarians in the 21st century. Many libraries restrict access to online databases using IP authentication via some sort of proxy, either a traditional proxy, or Useful Utilities' EZproxy or similar software. Others are using barcode or password access. Students at some schools must contact a librarian each semester to obtain the database passwords. At UNC Charlotte's Atkins Library, students log into a course reserve system to obtain the database passwords[10]. To confuse the issue more, many libraries are using several different methods of authentication, depending on the databases in question (especially schools with access to state-wide collections of databases such as

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[5] http://libinfo.uark.edu/distance_ed/about.asp#eligibility

[6] http://www.westga.edu/~library/depts/offcampus/policies.shtml

[7] http://library.fgcu.edu/Circulation/circpol.htm

[8] http://www.lib.utk.edu/offcamp/services.html

[9] http://www.uflib.ufl.edu/distreg.html

[10] http://libweb.uncc.edu/library/proxpass.htm

Georgia's GALILEO, North Carolina's NC LIVE, The Kentucky Virtual Library, Mississippi's MAGNOLIA, South Carolina's DISCUS, and Virginia's VIVA).

Reference services

Extended hours of reference services are important for both distance learning and non-traditional students. Students with full-time jobs and outside commitments are probably more likely to do their library research at home, before or after normal business hours. After-hours help from a librarian is crucial, especially if these students receive no formal in-person library instruction.

Unlike email, telephone and chat reference services satisfy the distance learner's immediate need for help. Off-campus or non-traditional students should be able to speak to a librarian when necessary and receive feedback or an answer almost immediately, as if they were at the reference desk in the building. When providing telephone reference, many libraries place the needs of the patrons on the telephone second to those of in-person patrons. The traditional thinking behind this policy is probably that the patron who took the time to travel to the library and ask a question in person deserves more prompt service. Perhaps this should not apply to the patron who is paying 10 cents per minute to call the desk, or the person who could not possibly travel to the library due to disability or sheer physical distance. Distance learners need to reach a librarian who has the time to devote to teaching them to use the library's resources effectively from a remote location.

Libraries that have removed telephone service from the traditional reference desk have eliminated the "competition" between in-person and telephone patrons. The resulting issue is then finding the resources to staff a separate service point. In some cases, when telephone reference services are staffed apart from reference desk services, the hours of phone reference differ from those of the library or reference desk. Often the service hours for telephone reference are not listed, and patrons may not know whether after-hours help is available.

Toll-free telephone reference is also crucial for students living at a distance from their home institution. Whether they take courses online or via some other delivery method, or they drive long distances to attend on-campus

classes, or they are on vacation and working on a research assignment, students should be able to reach the library in a timely manner at no cost. Some libraries list a toll-free number on their web page, often on the page of library services aimed at distance learners. Others list a college or university toll-free number that will transfer distance learners to the library. Some list the toll-free number of their distance education department on campus. Some libraries do not list the actual toll-free number on their web page, but do advise students how they can find it. On the University of Alabama's web page, they inform students of a toll-free phone number for reaching a librarian, but the phone number is not included. Students must request the number from their professor or the College of Continuing Studies[11].

Document delivery/Interlibrary Loan

Many libraries are exploring electronic delivery of interlibrary loan materials, especially those using Ariel and ILLiad or Clio Web ILL management software. The accelerated delivery time, along with the ability to submit and track interlibrary loan requests online is a benefit to all students, distance learners and traditional on-campus students alike.

The need for separate distance learning services arises when considering interlibrary loan and document delivery. Since delivery of materials costs the library money, caution should be exercised when determining patron eligibility. Home delivery of books and articles that the library owns would certainly be a popular service among all students and faculty if it were free. Patrons willing to pay for these services are often served by a fee-based document delivery department, but most agree that distance students should not be expected to pay extra for access to library materials. In this case a line must be drawn to differentiate off-campus patrons and true distance learners.

Florida State University establishes eligibility for document delivery based on the student's distance from campus, stating on their Library Resources for Distance Learners web page "If you live beyond fifty miles of a State University System Library, the Florida State University Libraries will be your primary research facility. The following services are available to

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[11]

http://www.lib.ua.edu/services/distanceed/dlrequest.shtml

students who live more than fifty miles from any of the FSU campuses."[12] The University of Central Florida Interlibrary Loan department states the following about patron eligibility: "Any currently enrolled UCF student who is NOT enrolled for ANY classes taught on the Orlando campus or at a branch campus to which we send materials.   Please note that students taking even one class taught on the UCF campus are not eligible for this service."[13]

Perhaps, as is the case at these sample schools, a good policy is to establish eligibility criteria for document delivery, but standardize other services for all students, regardless of distance learner or off-campus status.

Instruction/Information Literacy

Some librarians suspect that faculty who teach distance learning courses tend to "dumb-down" the research component of their courses or eliminate it altogether due to low expectations of the library and its services for distance students. There is also the issue of timely delivery of materials, which could influence instructors who may not be able to allow enough time for students to complete a true research project. Barriers to remote access, such as the incompatibility of some proxy servers with some Internet service providers, may also discourage instructors from assigning projects that require library access.

Instruction librarians are now faced with the challenge of ensuring that all students gain some level of information competency, regardless of whether they visit the library on campus. Besides true distance learners who may never come to campus, many courses now have an online component with reduced seat-time in the classroom. Librarians now must encourage the professors teaching these courses to find the class-time to schedule library instruction, and must be available to teach them if the classes meet in the evenings or on weekends. The proliferation of branch campuses, joint-use facilities, and other sites where classes are taught also stretch the library's resources, requiring that a librarian travel if face-to-face library instruction is requested.

[12] http://www.fsu.edu/library/explore/instruct/distlrn.s html#facilities

[13] http://library.ucf.edu/ill/distance.htm

Marketing Services

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of providing library services to distance learners is marketing. How do libraries let students know that these specialized services are available to them because of their status as distance learners? Some students don't consider themselves distance learners, perhaps because they attend classes on campus or because they live in the same city as their school. Again, the issue of what defines a distance learner is important, in providing services and in marketing to them. Unless the college or university as a whole identifies distance learners, either as a student status, or as a function of the classes they are taking, librarians have no way of reaching these students. Even if certain classes are identified as distance learning courses, librarians would have to obtain a list of the students enrolled in that class in order to reach them. One method of accomplishing this is establishing a healthy relationship between the library and the campus distance-learning department, if one exists. Some distance learning departments will include library materials in mass-mailings to distance students at the beginning of each semester.

One sure way to reach the distance students is via the distance faculty. If instructors require papers or projects with a research component, there is an excellent opportunity to provide the class with information about library services and accessing library resources remotely. Many librarians forge relationships with faculty and encourage those teaching online classes to link to specific library web pages. Other librarians create library web pages specifically for an individual class, which acts as subject-specific online library instruction.

Conclusions

There are countless ways to provide specialized library services to a specific population, but the nature of the distance learning phenomenon presents a unique set of challenges. There are enough variables, from student demographics to library policies, to make this a confusing topic. To paraphrase, distance learners aren't always very distant, and traditional on-campus learners aren't always as traditional as we think. To simplify library services, attempts should be made to accommodate all library patrons, offering free, timely (and after-hours if necessary), adequate, quality library services.