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Information and Interaction Needs of Distance Students: Are Academic Libraries Meeting the Challenge?

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Introduction

Auburn University (AU) is a public, land-grant university with more than 25,000 students enrolled in 13 schools and colleges at the undergraduate, graduate, and professional level (Auburn University 2012). Library services to students, faculty, and staff are provided through a main site, Ralph Brown Draughon Library, along with two additional branch libraries, one for the College of Veterinary Medicine and one for the College of Architecture, Design, and Construction.

Reference and instruction services are offered through 17 subject specialists, including a health sciences liaison who serves the School of Nursing, Harrison School of Pharmacy, and the Department of Communication Disorders.

As the new health sciences liaison at Auburn University, one of the first phone calls I received was from a distance student in the MSN (Master of Science in Nursing) program, looking for help in CINAHL (Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature). As an online student, she lived several hours away and could not physically visit the library for support.

This interaction raised the question of current library service to all students and faculty in Auburn's completely online MSN program, and more generally, the question of standards and best practices for academic library service to all those whose studies are carried out from somewhere other than a traditional campus.

Methodology

Standards for distance learning established by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) and literature from 2007 to the present on library involvement in distance education were examined for this review. Relevant literature was identified by searching Library Literature & Information Science Index; Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts; and CINAHL. The initial search strategy was:

> (distance education OR online OR virtual) AND librar* AND nurs* AND (outreach OR service OR instruction), limited to peer-reviewed and a date range of 2007 to the present.

Subsequent searches were not limited to nursing and additional articles were found by examining reference lists.

ACRL Standards

ACRL established guidelines for what were termed "extension students" in 1963 and has continued to update those guidelines. In 1998, the title changed to "Guidelines for Distance Learning Library Services" and in the last update (2008), the document transitioned from a guideline document to become "Standards for Distance Learning Library Services" (ACRL Guidelines Committee 2008). The standards include a 13-point Bill of Rights for the Distance Learning Community and additional sections which spell out specific, expected requirements

for funding, personnel, education for librarians, and management. Much of the document deals with requirements at the institutional rather than the library level; this paper will focus on two of the more library-centric portions:

- Right of Access - "Members of the distance learning community, including those with disabilities, must therefore be provided effective and appropriate library services and resources, which may differ from, but must be equivalent to those provided for students and faculty in traditional campus settings" (ACRL Guidelines Committee, Bill of Rights 2008)
- Human Contact - "direct human access must be made available to the distance learning community through instruction, interaction, and intervention from library personnel" (ACRL Guidelines Committee, Bill of Rights 2008).

Literature Review

Right of Access

The technical aspect of providing access to distance students is becoming easier and easier. Bower and Mee (2010) point out that "libraries have evolved from repositories of locally housed print collections centered on the 'library as place' into 'gateways' for electronic delivery of diverse resources and services" (470). The University of North Texas Library is not alone in fashioning a new policy which focuses on "acquiring resources to include and emphasize electronically available indexes and journals, and electronic books" (Thomsett-Scott and May 2009, 113). However, Lockerby and Stillwell (2010) note that "supporting online programs is much more than a collection of e-books and article databases with full text" (780). Students must know about and be able to use resources effectively and faculty must know what resources and services are offered by the library in order to serve as guides to and facilitators of

those resources. Gonzalez and Westbrook (2010) point out that "students can be unaware of the role of librarians in their academic experience" (639), and several studies mention that lack of awareness of library resources and services is a significant problem among online students and faculty (Hoffman 2011; Shell et al. 2010; Sullo, Harrod, Butera, and Gomes 2012; Thomsett-Scott and May 2009). Additionally, in graduate programs such as an MSN, students tend to be older, working adults, who have been out of school for several years (Renner, Vardaman, and Norton 2007; Whitehair 2010). These students are "less familiar with the use of computers and technology for their educational and information needs" (Renner, Vardaman, and Norton 2007, 87) and are often facing information resources which are "vastly different from their previous experience" (Whitehair 2010, 98). They may, literally, not know "where to start" as they look for information. How do librarians market the resources they have and the services they can provide to those who have a need but not an awareness of potential aid? The ACRL requirement for "direct human access" may provide an answer (ACRL Guidelines Committee, Bill of Rights 2008).

Human Contact

Just as libraries are seeking to become an academic "third place" to maintain face-to-face interaction and a sense of connection with on-campus patrons (Montgomery and Miller 2011), distance education also seeks connection by building a sense of community, shown to "be beneficial to student engagement and persistence, course satisfaction, and perceived learning in online courses" (Reilly, Gallagher-Lepak and Killion 2012, 100). Online community members share insight and provide assistance to one another, but the question arises, in what ways can libraries and librarians become members of that online community? Three solutions suggested in the literature are 3-D virtual environments, subject guides, and embedded librarians.

3-D virtual environments:

Puterbaugh, Shannon, and Gorton (2010) suggest the use of 3-D virtual environments (e.g., Second Life) for library support of distance education and received mostly positive responses from nursing students and faculty surveyed about the use of Second Life. However, Davis and Smith (2009) found that embedding librarian instruction and support into a course via Second Life produced "no significant changes in the knowledge, confidence, perceptions of challenge, or behavior of the student population" (131). In addition, several studies list formidable challenges with using Second Life or other multi-user, virtual environments including:

- the need for sufficient computing/technology support (Blankenship 2010, Ralph and Stahr 2010)
- a steep learning curve for librarians and students (Blankenship 2010; Davis and Smith 2009; Ralph and Stahr 2010)
- the need for additional staffing to provide some services (Ralph and Stahr 2010)
- a need for students to have adequate hardware and software in order to successfully run virtual environments (Ralph and Stahr 2010)
- a concern that using virtual environments will not be taken seriously (Puterbaugh, Shannon, and Gorton 2010).

Instead, the most often reported methods of connecting to distance students were subject guides and/or embedded librarianship.

Subject guides:

Subject guides, (including LibGuides, a commercial product) evolved from print pathfinders or guides developed by librarians to assist patrons looking for information about a specific subject (Roberts and Hunter 2011).

Whether developed through a commercial, open source, or "home-grown" product, they generally offer a virtual space to collect, organize, and present a set of resources, often repackaged for a specific audience (Little 2010; McMullin and Hutton 2010). As online content, they are available to users 24/7/365, regardless of location or time zone, and with the addition of RSS feeds, video content, chat services, and social media such as Facebook and Twitter, have the capability of offering an interactive and somewhat more personalized source of information that can be used by each student as needed (Hemming and Montet 2010; Robinson and Kim 2010). Several authors note that one significant advantage of subject guides over webpage links is that they can generally be created and instantly updated as needed by distance or subject librarians rather than having to wait on someone from systems or electronic resources (Arvin 2009; McMullin and Hutton 2010; Robinson and Kim 2010). Subject guides can be linked from a library's web page but Gonzalez and Westbrook (2010) recommend putting them "where the student is" (652), i.e. the institution's course management system. Course management systems (CMS) such as Blackboard are "key technological tools in distance and online education" (Robinson and Kim 2010) and are used to provide virtual classrooms where instruction takes place. Instructors and students interact with one another through email and discussion boards, and relevant resources such as subject guides can be featured and hyperlinked. Other suggestions for optimal use of subject guides include:

- breaking down content in smaller segments and creating guides for a specific assignment or course rather than a general subject area (Gonzalez and Westbrook 2010; Hemming and Montet 2010; Little 2010; McMullin and Hutton 2010; Roberts and Hunter 2011)
- creating a consistent look and feel across guides (Gonzalez and Westbrook 2010; Little 2010)

- including video content (Hemming and Montet 2010), polls, feedback forms, and tutorials (Little 2010)
- adding humanizing elements such as an individual librarian's contact information, photos, and a chat service (Hemming and Montet 2010; Little 2010)
- providing course faculty with editing rights in order to add additional content (Roberts and Hunter 2011).

There are some challenges associated with using subject guides including:

- the initial learning curve for librarians and the time required to first create and then update guides (Gonzalez and Westbrook 2010; McMullin and Hutton 2010)
- the need for "buy-in" from faculty in order to place guides into an online classroom (Gonzalez and Westbrook 2010; McMullin and Hutton 2010)
- the need to market guides (McMullin and Hutton 2010), although Gonzalez and Westbrook (2010) claim that course and assignment guides "market themselves" (652).

Embedded librarians:

The term, embedded librarian, has many meanings, including librarians who physically conduct office hours in an academic department and/or attend and participate in subject specific classes, but it can also refer to "any librarian who takes an active role inside the online CMS classroom" (York and Vance 2009, 199). Hoffman (2011) suggests that a significant benefit of embedded librarianship is "the development of the student-librarian relationship" (453). Muir and Heller-Ross (2010) state that "embedded librarianship has resulted in improved student learning and increases contact with library resources and services"

(95). Embedded librarians can interact with students in many ways including:

- having a library link inserted into every course contained in the CMS (York and Vance 2009)
- providing online, synchronous (real time) presentations (Hightower, Rawl, and Schutt 2007)
- creating video tutorials which users can view as needed (Hemming and Montet 2010; Kealey 2011; Lockerby and Stillwell 2010)
- answering questions and/or posting tips via email or in discussion boards set up specifically for library and research questions (Hemming and Montet 2010; Muir and Heller-Ross 2010; Sullo et al. 2012; York and Vance 2009)
- reviewing assignments with a research component (Hoffman 2011; Sullo et al. 2012)
- providing links to research guides or help sheets (Sullo et al. 2012).

Challenges of CMS embedded librarianship include:

- a time commitment that tends to be higher than providing traditional library reference and instruction (Hemming and Montet 2010, Hoffman 2011; Muir and Heller-Ross 2010; York and Vance 2009)
- a need to learn about the institution's CMS (York and Vance 2009)
- time and technological expertise needed to update tutorials which may quickly become outdated (Hemming and Montet 2010; Kealey 2011)
- developing the required collaboration between faculty and librarians (Muir and Heller-Ross 2010; Sullo et al. 2012).

Best practices to optimize embedding in online courses include:

- saving full interaction activities (discussion board, synchronous instruction) for classes which include an assignment requiring students to use library resources (Hoffman 2011; York and Vance 2009)
- posting contact information and including photos and background to personalize librarians (Hemming and Montet 2010; Sullo et al. 2012; York and Vance 2009)
- having the instructor introduce the librarian to the class (Hoffman 2011; Sullo et al. 2012; York and Vance 2009)
- providing online office hours (Sullo et al. 2012)
- marketing the service through email, flyers, and personal contact (Hightower, Rawl, and Schutt 2007; York and Vance 2009).

Conclusions

In some ways, providing resources and services to distance students is no different than providing them to traditional students who now seek information and library assistance from basically anywhere and everywhere except the library itself. Changes such as increasing the amount and percentage of electronic content, providing multiple ways to contact reference

librarians, extending service hours, and streamlining search interfaces, are all actions which benefit everyone, not just those in a different zip code or time zone. But distance education students do need additional ways to connect, not only to a community of fellow students but also to a community of library support. Just as libraries attempt to make the physical library a desirable "third place," they must also look to make the virtual library a welcoming destination for those at a distance. ACRL Standards and library literature stress the need for human interaction, and although some are trying newer technologies like 3-D virtual environments, the most successful connection seems to be initiated in part through the use of subject guides and/or embedded librarianship. Although both subject guides and embedded librarianship present challenges of their own, primarily time and technology related, the interaction they engender seems to build relationships between librarians and students which in turn facilitates the development of a sense of community and assists in enabling the library's mission of connecting needed library services and resources to users, regardless of location.

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