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Serving Unaffiliated Distance Learners: Strategies that work

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Serving Unaffiliated Distance Learners: Strategies That Work

Abstract:

Dealing with unaffiliated distance learning students can be a daunting task for many public as well as academic librarians. This article will discuss strategies for providing reference to these students by gathering information on what services they are offered via their home institutions, and helping them navigate the often confusing landscape of library resources and services. Authors will outline the challenges and opportunities for public libraries presented by distance learners and suggest some services that might be provided for them. Finally, we will discuss the opportunities for outreach to distance learning students from both public and academic libraries.

Keywords: reference, distance learning, online learning, public libraries, academic libraries

Enrollment in distance education programs in the United States is surging. The recent economic downturn has displaced hundreds of thousands of workers, many of whom are older adults looking to learn new skills or gain new certifications delivered by a convenient distance education program. Internet savvy teens and twenty-somethings are also drawn to distance learning as a comfortable medium in which to learn and study. This article will give an overview of how this growth in online and distance education has affected public libraries, placing a strain on often overburdened and underfunded institutions. Strategies will be offered for both public and academic libraries to plan and deliver the best service to their patrons.

Distance learning, or distance education, is best described as learning that takes place when the student is not "on-site" or at the physical location of the instructor and/or classroom. Put simply, the instruction must be delivered to the student, often by technological means. While distance learning might have once taken place via postal correspondence, the modern distance learner most likely uses the Internet and its

many forms of communication including email, instant messaging, streaming video, and webcams. In

Fall of 2008, enrollment in online courses increased to 4.6 million students, 17% more than in 2007."[1]

Increasingly, college level distance learning has become synonymous with online learning. In 2006-2007,

Parsad and Lewis found 77 percent of all higher education enrollments in distance courses were in online

classes, and 12 percent were in "hybrid/blended online courses."   Only 10 percent were in other types of

classes.[2]

This boom in online distance learning has challenged librarians at institutions providing distance courses,

requiring them to offer equal access to library services and resources for students at remote locations.

The Association of College and Research Libraries' (ACRL) Distance Learning Section established

"Standards for Distance Learning Library Services" which state that all higher education students are

"entitled to the library services and resources of that institution, including direct communication with the

appropriate library personnel, regardless of where enrolled."[3] For the typical academic library, this means

providing books and articles, database access, interlibrary loan services, electronic reserves, information

literacy instruction and advice from reference librarians, all for students who may live tens, hundreds, or

even thousands of miles from the college and the library. For this article, we will refer to the library at

the institution where the distance learner is enrolled as the "home library." The home library is

considered responsible for meeting the research needs of the distance learner enrolled at their institution.

But for many reasons, students may not always be aware of the services provided by their home

institution or library. They may seek out assistance at any library close to their home or place of work,

not always realizing that public and academic libraries are not interchangeable.

Library as Place

There are many reasons why a distance student may choose to use their local library as a place to study

and research. For some, it is simply the need for a physical place to go, a place that may be quieter and

have more study space than their home or office. For the "nontraditional student" who may be returning

to school at a later age, enrolled in classes while also working full time, or perhaps raising a family while enrolled in college, a busy home may prevent them from finding the atmosphere they need to complete their course work. In this case, the students may use the library as simply a work space, and never seek assistance from the local librarians. Often, distance students simply miss the library as a place, even if their home institution offers access to an adequate online library. In the words of one distance student, as relayed by Fortin, "sitting in the silence of my home office I missed the spirit of collaboration among students in a library, the hum of activity."[4]

Unfortunately, the choice to use a local public library can sometimes be based on assumptions that the home institution does not offer online library services, or that those services and resources are not sufficient. While this may or may not be true, and distance librarians may have made efforts to reach online students, the students' perception of the offerings at the home library may still drive them to use another local library.[5] This will be addressed later in this article as a marketing and outreach opportunity, but it also means that students may be requesting assistance and services from local public and academic libraries that are not their home institution. It may be taxing to the local library, especially in the current climate of budget cuts and staff reductions in public libraries. In 2009, at a time when the services offered by public libraries were most in need, many budgets were slashed resulting in reduced hours and branch closures across the country.[6] According to the April 2009 issue of American Libraries, 41 states [confirm if it's 41 states or 41% of states?] had reduced funding for public libraries in that fiscal year, and 20% of those were anticipating further cuts.[7] Even under these economic conditions, public libraries often have resources that can suffice for certain types of distance learning work, and if they do not, librarians can recommend that students visit a local community college or university library, and steer the students in the right direction in order to access the more appropriate resources available to them through their home institution.

Worrying to college faculty and librarians alike is the possibility that students may be sacrificing the quality of their work due to their reliance on local libraries without the adequate resources to support their academic work. De Jong pointed out that students would rather use familiar resources, which may prevent them from discovering and using more appropriate resources available from their home institutions' library.[8] At ACRL's 2004 Distance Learning Section program, librarians expressed a belief that distance students "choose the option of greatest convenience" and seek "instant gratification and course completion over guidance in the use of scholarly resources."[9] The panel of librarians also lamented that public librarians do not have the same contact with the teaching faculty to learn about their assignments, nor do public librarians have the same access to or knowledge of academic databases.[10]

Regardless of the reason, distance students often use local libraries. It is the challenge of distance librarians to "walk a fine line in addressing the issue, as they interact with their institution's administrators, their students, and colleagues in brick-and-mortar libraries."[11]

Step by Step

Librarians who are approached by unaffiliated distance learners can take a few basic steps to assess the level of assistance they will require and the ability of library staff to provide that assistance. First, find out the scope of what they are working on, and what type of resources and services they will need. Public libraries have much to offer, and thanks to well-trained staff and consortial database purchasing, they often have enough expertise and resources to meet the needs of distance learners. Any reference librarian, public or academic, should have the skills to conducte a careful reference interview, bringing to light important details about the projects on which the students are working. For instance, most college-level distance learners are limited in the types of resources they can use in their work. Many are required to use only peer-reviewed articles and research for their work. Luckily, most electronic databases now offer a simple check box to limit search results to scholarly or peer-reviewed sources. Another somewhat

standard requirement is for students to use a designated citation style for their research papers. Most

databases now have features that make citing articles easier. Obviously, these detailed requirements are

the responsibility of the student to adhere to, but it can save a few headaches to go over some of these

basics when assisting distance learners. Since many of these students are coming back to school after

many years away, they may not have thought about some of these detailed requirements, and a librarian's

assistance may ultimately help them to create a better end product.

Technological advances in distance education make possible the delivery of entire courses online, via

software called Course Management Systems. Some widely used brands are BlackBoard, Moodle, and

Sakai. These systems allow students to log in and see all of their course material in one place, organized

by class. Students can read course content online, complete quizzes and tests that are automatically

graded in these systems, contribute responses to class discussion boards, and even upload their papers and

reports inside these online classes. Often, college and university libraries add content in these courses

that list library resources and services; however, this can vary according to the instructor and the school.

Many include links to libraries' online "Ask-a-Librarian" services where students can email, chat with or

instant message a home campus librarian to get assistance with research. When assisting distance

learners, it can be helpful to visit the students' home library website if their research and information

needs are beyond what can be offered by their host library. Most of these library websites will offer a

section or distinct web page that details the services available for distance learners.

Managing Expectations

Most colleges and universities that offer distance education classes provide adequate library and research

services for their distance learners, as described in ACRL's Standards for Distance Learning Library

Services. A frequent problem faced by distance learning librarians is educating the distance students

about the resources available to them. For example, both of the authors of this article work at state

universities that enroll distance learning students. Both schools provide services and resources that

conform to the aforementioned ACRL standards. They offer their distance education students the

following services:

· Remote access to library databases

· Free Interlibrary Loan with electronic delivery when possible

· Electronic delivery of articles or chapters from the library's physical collections

· Delivery of books to distance learners homes for free

· Online course reserve readings

· Online Ask-A-Librarian services such as live instant messaging/chat and email

· Toll-free telephone number for reference/ research questions

· Contact information to get help from the distance education librarian

· Reciprocal borrowing privileges at all of the other state university libraries

However, students do not always live close to one of the other state schools, and in fact may be taking

classes in other states or while in the military overseas. And, as mentioned above, marketing to these

students can often be difficult, and they may never be informed about the services they are entitled to

from their home library.

In today's academic world, where Google searches are ubiquitous and professors are battling to keep

Wikipedia citations out of college-level papers,[12] many traditional, on-campus students don't use the

library and are not aware of its resources. Previously, according to Fisk and Summey, " the academic

library enjoyed a monopoly" on information for college students' papers, but more students are now

relying on Internet sources to meet their needs.[13] Reaching distance students and ensuring they are aware

of what the home library has to offer is truly a challenge. It is the responsibility of the home institution's

librarians "to provide students with reasons for moving away from familiar resources and towards

scholarly resources, and librarians also need to provide guidance to students in the use of those

resources."[14]

Attitude is Everything

Some public libraries have seen this use by distance learners as a great marketing tool, and others have seen it is an enormous burden. Leslie Morris's editorial in the *Journal of Interlibrary Loan, Document Delivery & Information Supply* conveyed the expectations of the home institution and library, succinctly summarizing the spirit of ACRL's Standards for Distance Learning Library Services. Morris concluded by stating "distance education students and home libraries should not expect the local public library to accept the responsibility to supply printed matter, databases, and interlibrary loans to students for courses. Public libraries have a different, but no less important, set of responsibilities."[15] While this is true, it will not stop distance learners from choosing the option of convenience, and public libraries will no doubt continue to be a resource for distance students. However library staff feels about distance learners in their libraries, they are here to stay and are increasing in numbers. It is better to be prepared to deal with them, and remain positive about it. Librarians such as Holba-Puacz, Bradfield, and McGinley have welcomed distance students, as they do all local learners from pre-schoolers through adult learners, and see their positive attitude as important in supporting the students. The possible loneliness and isolation of distance learning is cited as a reason for "billing your library as a place where distance learners can come for face-to-face contact [which] may be very appealing and reassuring to those distance learners."[16]

Academic libraries can help by providing information on services they offer to their students who are taking classes at a distance. Make the information easy to find, send out information about library services for distance learners by email or physical mail, and inform instructors about the services and resources that are available to their students. Additionally, work to include library information in course management software for online courses so the information is easy for students to find. Creating partnerships and collaborating with departmental faculty as well as instructional designers and developers is a good place to start.

Marketing and Outreach

Students using the public library are one group of the "lifelong learners" that many libraries hope to serve. Some libraries have embraced this population, and sought to market to them directly, best evidenced by one Colorado library that held a "Distance Learning Expo" to educate their patrons about distance education opportunities. Telluride's Wilkinson Public Library already sought to be the primary location for continuing education in their community, and their distance learning exposition helped meet that goal.[17]

What are academic libraries doing to serve unaffiliated distance students? Certain schools have created an a la carte suite of services that are available to for-profit businesses and schools for a fee. Other schools offer distance education students the opportunity to buy a borrower's card for a fee. And some of the distance education providers will reimburse their students for the cost of a library borrower's card. However, most of these purchased cards come with their own set of rules and limitations, such as limiting the number and types of material card holders are able to check out, limiting database usage to on-campus, etc.

Suggestions for Success

Libraries should take an active approach. Websites should lists services available to non-library card holders. Although most libraries list services available to community users, consider adding a category of services for students of non-local colleges and universities. Put a positive spin on the situation, and make sure to include what services *are* available to unaffiliated distance learners, for instance,

·   using the library to study

·   using books in the building

·   database access

·   word processing

·   Internet access

·   photocopying (list cost)

·   printing out materials (list cost)

·   wireless network access

·   online Ask-A-Librarian services

Then, discuss other services that are available for a fee, or that are possible if special arrangements are made:

·   do they need a local library card to use computers?

·   can they buy a borrowers card for a fee?

·   can they use interlibrary loan for a fee?

·   will your staff proctor exams?

Remind students that their home institution and library are a resource, and may be able to save them the cost of your services which incur a fee. Be honest with students about what is appropriate for the public library to provide and what their home library should offer. Remember they may not be aware of the differences between public and academic libraries, or that they have access to resources through their home institution.

Tactics for Academic Librarians

Get the word out. A growing set of literature details ways to market library services to distance students (see Davis, Fisk and Summey, among many others). Market library services to distance learners in a variety of ways, such as sending out newsletters or announcements about library resources and services to currently enrolled distance learners and faculty.   Include information on reciprocal borrowing agreements, as well as services that are available remotely. Create online point-of-need information literacy tutorials that demonstrate how to log in and how to search for information. A variety of free or low-cost software packages (Jing, for instance) are available that will allow you to create a streaming tutorial in a relatively short period of time.   Educate the rest of your library staff about the services for distance learners, as you never know who will pick up the telephone and come into contact with these

students. Consider creating a distance learning portal that organizes all of the distance education services,

tutorials, request forms, etc. in one easy to find place. Reach out to the faculty to promote student

awareness. Remember that your faculty may be at a distance and may also need to be informed of the

services available to distance users (regardless of university status) and how best to incorporate the use of

the library into their distance and online courses.[18]

Summary

Regardless of whether distance students are aware of the library resources and services available from

their home institution, they may still seek assistance at the public library. Public librarians can prepare

themselves to assist distance learners, and academic libraries should do everything they can to make sure

the students have access to the help and resources they need to complete their coursework. Through a

team of librarians, students at all levels and in all locations should have plenty of assistance to be

successful in their academic pursuits.

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