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Reference Services for Off-campus Students

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If you have not heard yet, distance education is hot. The craze is sweeping the education world. In K-12 through doctoral programs, whether it is called distance education, distance learning, extended campus, off-campus, or some other name, campuses have been opening up to nontraditional students. Correspondence courses have always been around, but the new trend is to use computer technology to enhance the learning process whenever teachers and students are not in the same place at the same time. With advances in telecommunications and the Internet people can earn high school and college credits and even undergraduate and graduate degrees without the traditional campus and classroom experiences.

Distance learners tend to use both their public and academic libraries when doing research for their classes. Public librarians serve patrons regardless of their motivation, and some students find it more convenient to use their local public library. However, the academic institution is responsible for providing library services to all of its students. That responsibility cannot be assumed by the public library, because it has a different mission. Academic libraries are designed to support the curriculum of

their institution while public libraries strive to serve the needs of their entire community.

Many of the two- and four-year colleges and universities in Oregon have successful distance education programs that include high-quality library services. In fact, it is fair to say that Oregon colleges and universities are among the leaders in providing library services to off-campus students. At the recent Eighth Off-Campus Library Services Conference, which drew over 200 librarians from around the globe, Oregon was one of the most widely represented states. Academic librarians are working hard to make the most of changes in technology and the subsequent evolution of service opportunities.

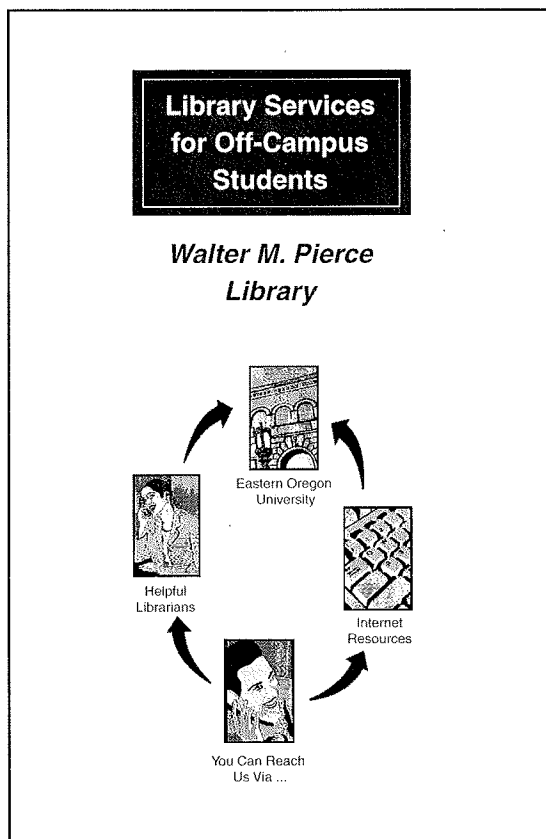
These new kinds of educational delivery methods are creating new kinds of students. People with full-time jobs and family responsibilities can benefit from the convenience of asynchronous courses or local branch campuses that offer classes. Asynchronous courses, those not requiring a student to conform to a specific class schedule, are particularly meaningful to students with busy daily lives. Rural areas are especially well served by distance education programs. The lack of local educational opportunities can be a contributing factor to the phenomenon known as "brain drain"; i.e., motivated people move from the country to the city in pursuit of their livelihoods. In rural communities, an extra effort must be made to provide local educational opportunities so that individuals with aspirations aren't exported from the region.

Eastern Oregon University is the only four-year institution in the eastern half of the state, so naturally it has been involved in distance education for many years. Part of the educational package EOU offers to students, no matter where they live, is library services. Providing traditional services through new technology to a group of students who are familiar with neither is an interesting endeavor. Because many students rarely meet with other students as a group, or even with their instructor, reference librarians must consider how to adapt traditional services to fit the needs of off-campus students.

These distance learners are a distinct demographic group from their campus-based counterparts. They are often older and may have been out of the academic environment for many years. If they have ever done library research, it was in a library very different from what they will encounter now. Many are new users of computer technology and are not comfortable with electronic resources. They are, however, more committed to their educational goals than many students who attend college straight out of high school.

Off-campus students have essentially the same information needs as other students, plus some issues that are specific to remote access and delivery. Questions usually come via the phone, fax, or e-

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mail. The phone is preferable, because with e-mail and fax, the opportunity for a full reference interview is lost. Nothing is more frustrating to students than to have their questions responded to by a string of questions—nothing except not getting a reply promptly.

In order to serve off-campus students well, three general areas require special attention and some creative thinking. Other important issues, such as document delivery and collaboration with other libraries, of course should not be overlooked, but these three relate most directly to reference services.

REMOTE ACCESS TO THE CATALOG AND OTHER ELECTRONIC RESOURCES

Many questions can be answered by students searching the catalog or indexes themselves, but many students are not computer savvy. Libraries need to make sure that students can actually use what they are offering. A simple interface is essential. We need to watch out for library jargon (such as OPAC, ILL, citation index, and so forth) that may confuse novice searchers. Remember, an off-campus student can't just ask the person next to them for help.

RESEARCH GUIDANCE

Off-campus students may never have been inside an academic library before. Libraries need to market their services, perhaps with an eye-catching brochure sent along with every course syllabus. Research guides can be added to the online elec-

tronic system. These guides can include the kinds of information a librarian would tell a student wandering around the library with a puzzled look. Library instructional sessions incorporated into a class are ideal but are often impracticable.

CONTACT POINTS

Ideally, a library will have one contact person for all off-campus issues. Many libraries separate interlibrary loan and document delivery operations from reference services, but the two operations need to be in close contact. Students should be able to contact the library in several ways: an e-mail address, a phone number, a computer conference, and even office hours, in case they do come to campus.

In short, distance education programs require academic librarians to do everything they already do, but in significantly different ways. Library service to off-campus students is an art form, evolving as new ideas are shared and new technologies are implemented. Also, more institutions are realizing that these adaptations and additional services cannot be successful without additional funding. Change is constant, but it isn't free. With more and more institutions getting into this field and campus-less institutions like Western Governors University joining in, things will get more interesting before they become routine. As much as we may wish library services to off-campus students to be just like traditional academic library services, there is no way around the fact that these different students have different needs. **Q**