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# Making the Connection: Library Services for Distance Education and Off-campus Students.

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*MAKING THE  
CONNECTION:*  
**LIBRARY  
SERVICES**  
*for*  
**DISTANCE  
EDUCATION**  
*and*  
**OFF-CAMPUS  
STUDENTS**

BY RANDY McDONALD  
AND MARTHEA TURNAGE

Enrollments in post-secondary distance education programs continue to skyrocket. Hardware and software advancements over the past decade have made it possible to deliver greatly improved services to distance education and other off-campus students accessing an academic library's resources while away from campus. Librarians have long recognized that the needs of distance and off-campus students differ from those of traditional, on-campus students. In 1991, E.J. Burge analyzed two studies concerned with the relationship among libraries, distance educators, and distance learners and found that the library was isolated from the learners (Niemi 6). Similarly, faculty who teach distance education courses also have specific library needs unique to the distance education environment.

In the last decade, librarians have adapted to the challenges posed by an increasingly physically isolated yet electronically linked community of education stakeholders. During this time, librarians have embraced changes in service delivery in numerous ways. From developing online orientation and instruction tools to creating electronic services that facilitate distance learning, librarians are key to all emerging electronic education structures.

Academic librarians must work collaboratively with other members of the university community to create innovative solutions designed specifically to meet these emerging needs. The methods used by academic libraries to address these needs depend upon the types of human and material resources available on that campus, the types and amounts of funding available, computing support, and communication between all of the entities servicing distance education efforts. This article addresses innovative methods used by Stephen F. Austin State University's Ralph W. Steen Library to address the needs of distance education and off-campus students and faculty.

### **PROVEN PRACTICES**

Librarians at SFA have played a vital role in supporting distance education as it has evolved through the years. In addition to offering traditional services to distance students (e.g., interlibrary loan, reference assistance via telephone, and faculty reserves), the library offers desktop interlibrary loan delivery, Web access to full-text bibliographic

databases, online reserves, delivery of reserve materials to cooperating libraries, and expanded snail mail for physical resources in the library. Using both standard and emerging services, librarians are continually engaging the most effective means to promote the success of distance education students.

At SFA, the Office of Instructional Technology (OIT) coordinates the overall distance education efforts for the university, which includes maintaining Web course servers, training faculty, and providing general support for distance education students. Faculty members who are developing Web courses participate in a 30-hour series of Web course development workshops. These workshops focus on instructional design principles, online pedagogy, and the technical aspects of using the university's adopted Web course development and delivery software, WebCT.

One of the proven practices at SFA has been to ensure that librarians play a vital role in the workshop

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series. During the workshop series, faculty is introduced to SFA's distance education librarian who provides information on the library's role in supporting distance education. MacDougall describes the modern librarian as a "hybrid manager who can bring to bear professional knowledge of the description of information knowledge and information management, apply information technology to optimal service delivery and offer excellence in negotiating skills" (MacDougall, 2). Each of these facets is brought to bear during the workshop as the librarian provides information,



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demonstrations, and handouts explaining connectivity options, copyright issues, and information about TexShare, information literacy services, online forms for reserves and interlibrary loan, library cards, document delivery, and reference services. Faculty leave the workshop with a wealth of information that will enhance the learning experience for them and their students.

## RECENT ADVANCES

A new component of student and faculty computing support at SFA is a streamlined procedure for offering technical support through the library's information desk. Student assistants take phone questions or face-to-face questions and log reported problems into Help Star software, which attaches a query reference number. The student assistant routes the problem to the appropriate technology unit for a diagnosis. The query includes student or faculty contact information so that the library can follow up with the caller. The following are examples of logged problems:

- Student upgraded her laptop and now cannot get into her WebCT course
- Student PIN number worked last semester but will not work this semester
- Doctoral student cannot get into any of the university's electronic services
- Student Internet provider is a cable company and the student cannot use the library proxy server
- Student wants to use online registration, WebCT, and the library. Is there one password and PIN number?

The new information desk procedures have been operational two full semesters and, according to an annual library survey, students were satisfied with the service offered.

For some time the Steen Library has used EZProxy software to allow distance and off-campus students with other ISP providers to gain access to fee based services provided by the library. Until recently, the username and password for login to EZProxy were different from those used to login to WebCT. The university's student information system, which students use to register for classes, required a different

login routine; and student email required yet an additional routine. Students were frustrated because of having to remember and use multiple URLs, usernames, and passwords in order to access the services they needed. A new solution was needed to bring these disparate systems and services together under one single login experience.

To meet this need, SFA implemented an enterprise applications system in the summer of 2002. This single sign-on portal integrates the administrative applications of the student information system SCT, the academic teaching tools of WebCT, and many other services. Campus Pipeline software provides a front-end to the system, managing the sign-on experience and adding graphical functionality to services such as student email and campus calendars. The integrated portal is named "mySFA."

In early 2003, SFA system programmers were successful in enhancing the portal by incorporating a seamless link through the SFA Steen Library's EZProxy software. Now when any student, staff, or faculty login to the mySFA portal from off-campus, they have access to all of the SFA database subscriptions just as though they were on campus. Distance education students and faculty especially enjoy the seamless system because it enables them to conduct literature research and access library databases without having to login a second time using a different username and password.

## FUTURE INNOVATIONS

Distance and off-campus students have often been limited in their ability to access the services of an academic librarian in a timely fashion. Although email and other asynchronous methods have been used successfully in the past, they do not provide the instantaneous assistance demanded by some requests. And while the telephone has long been available as well, students often must face the barrier of incurring long-distance charges to reach a librarian by phone. Another barrier for distance and off-campus students in accessing library assistance is that students conducting online activity through modem connections usually have access to only one line, so they are unable to speak to the librarian giving assistance while following online the instructions

being provided. This is especially frustrating when the librarian is giving instruction in how to use the library's electronic information retrieval systems.

Librarians at SFA teamed with instructional technologists to investigate what technologies might be used to address these barriers. Later this year, SFA plans to conduct pilot testing of online chat sessions between students and librarians. This functionality is made possible through the mySFA portal environment mentioned above. mySFA includes a "Groups" feature that facilitates communication between persons who are subscribed to a group, much like the concept of a listserv. However, this functionality is superior to that of listserv technology in that group members may enjoy not only the ability to send email to one another but may also access other tools, such as a group homepage, discussion board, and live chat.

SFA librarians are now engaged in the pilot testing stage of using this new chat capability. The typical scenario includes a student connecting to the Internet and accessing the mySFA login page. After logging in, the student then clicks in to the group tool in the portal and selects the "Chat with a Librarian" group. Reference assistants who are standing by at posted hours see when a person enters the chat room and begin chatting with them to determine their needs. By having two windows active in their Web browsers, patrons may carry on a conversation with the librarian while simultaneously following along online with any instructions that may be provided.

Preliminary tests have shown that the "Chat with a Librarian" group tool will prove very easy to use for faculty, students, and librarians. This tool has some limitations compared to other software designed specifically for online reference assistance. For example, two windows must be opened and manipulated to conduct a session such as the one mentioned above. This requires the user to have an elevated level of computer skills. However, this solution does have benefits that proprietary online reference solutions do not. Because this tool is integrated seamlessly into the campus portal, users enjoy being able to access their Web course, library databases, and live reference assistance all in one consistent user interface and with one username and

password. For the university, leveraging the functionality of existing technology allows librarians to address the needs of patrons at no additional costs in hardware or software. In these times of budget cutbacks and limited funds, this benefit is especially valuable.

## CONCLUSION

The number of students and faculty involved in distance education will continue to grow. As the demand for online library services increases and the technologies continue to change, librarians must continue to build cooperative relationships within the library and beyond. Communication among students, technologists, faculty, and librarians is vital to the success of university-based distance education programs. At Stephen F. Austin State University, we are fortunate to have avenues of communication open between Information Technology Services, the Office of Instructional Technology, and Ralph W. Steen Library. Such working relationships are critical in order to build the technical infrastructure, provide the instruction, and deliver the services necessary to enable faculty and students to access the resources they need to accomplish their academic goals.

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