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Listening from a distance:  
A Survey of University of Illinois Distance Learners and its Implications for Meaningful Instruction

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### Abstract

In Spring 2009, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Library conducted a significant new survey of distance learners enrolled in off-campus or online graduate programs. Exploring distance learners' perceptions about and use of library services, the survey of 146 students reveals opportunities to better meet the research needs of distance learners whose graduate work may demand extensive use of library resources. The survey affords insights into distance learners' communication preferences, and their particular research needs. Findings from this survey have informed one academic library's strategy to begin addressing important questions in library instruction for distance learners.

### Introduction

As colleges and universities increase enrollment in online and off-campus courses, academic libraries are experiencing an increase in the number of long-distance patrons who lack the option to visit the physical library. The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Standards for Distance Learning Library Services state, "Members of the distance learning community...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" (ALA, 2008). The effort to identify the most effective services for distance learners can be informed by routine surveys of distance learners about their library use.

In April 2009, the University of Illinois Library conducted a web-based survey to gather information about how distance learners use the library from afar. This survey was prompted in part by an imminent change in the library's staffing structure in place to meet the needs of distance patrons enrolled in University of Illinois courses. At the University of Illinois, the majority of students enrolled in online or off-campus distance education courses are graduate students. When the survey was developed, little was known about distance learners' awareness of the library, their expectations of the library, or the library resources they use. The survey's objective was to gather baseline data about whether distance learners use the library, services used, preferences, and attitudes. Future services will certainly provide valuable data for assessment of distance library services. The results of this initial survey will inform practice as the University of Illinois Library plans services in reference and instruction and implements strategies to communicate effectively with distance learners.

### Background

At the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, more than 1,500 distance learners are enrolled in online or off-campus courses (i.e., courses that meet in-person at off-campus locations) administered by the Academic Outreach unit of the Office of Continuing Education. The majority of distance education courses administered by Academic Outreach are graduate-level courses. The departments represented by Academic Outreach course offerings include:

- College of Agricultural, Consumer & Environmental Sciences
- College of Applied Health Sciences
- School of Art and Design
- College of Education
- College of Engineering

- School of Labor and Employment Relations
- Graduate School of Library and Information Science
- Department of Mathematics
- School of Social Work

Historically, library services for online and off-campus students were coordinated and primarily administered by a librarian hired by the Office of Continuing Education Academic Outreach unit. In an effort to streamline services and processes, Academic Outreach and the University Library decided to reexamine the role of the librarian in distance education. Over the course of the 2008-2009 academic year, multiple library departments worked with Academic Outreach in order to incorporate library services into the larger workflow of the University Library. Services examined included interlibrary loan services, reference, course reserves, and instruction. This survey was a major component of that effort.

### Literature Review

Much of the literature about library services for off-campus, online, or distance students focuses on evolving practices and services. Although the results of recent surveys of off-campus academic library users have not been published in abundance, surveys conducted between 1998 and 2005 confirm that survey data can inform academic libraries about the specific needs of off-campus student patrons. Because off-campus students are unlikely to visit the physical space of their academic library, reaching out to distance patrons through survey instruments may be even more critical than for on-campus students. In reporting the results of a 2000 survey of University of Iowa students, Dew argues that conducting surveys of distance learners offers librarians the opportunity to “reverse roles, listen instead of talk, and let the students tell us a few things” (Dew, 2001). Dew’s point is illuminated in a 1999 survey of graduate students enrolled in the Texas A&M University System (Tipton, 2001). One hundred and two graduate students enrolled in courses through the Trans-Texas Videoconferencing Network were surveyed to measure satisfaction with library services and patterns of library use. Forty-five percent of respondents had used the online catalog, and 45% reported using journal databases. Thirty-five percent of respondents indicated that they had not used the services of any Texas A&M Library. The survey revealed confusion among some distance learners about whether they were entitled to library services, and how to obtain library services.

In Dew’s survey of University of Iowa off-campus library users, respondents were presented with a list of library services and asked to rank the three most valued services. The survey found that “virtual reference” (primarily email reference at the time the survey was conducted) was the most valued, ranked first by 71% of respondents. Remote access to full-text databases was ranked second (65%) and document delivery was ranked third (60%). In contrast, user education services, including instruction and tutorials, were ranked very low (Dew, 2001).

A second survey of distance learners at the University of Iowa was conducted in 2003 and reported in 2004 by McLean and Dew. While Dew’s first survey primarily included graduate students, the results reported in 2004 also included undergraduates. Understanding that there may be a difference in the information seeking needs of undergraduates versus graduate students, Dew attempted to differentiate between library use by graduate-level distance learners and undergraduate distance learners. In comparing responses from graduate students and undergraduates, Dew and McLean reported that undergraduates ranked full-text databases most highly while graduate students continued to rank reference most highly. This point of comparison provided important information about the needs of graduate students enrolled in off-campus courses versus undergraduates. The 2003 survey also included questions about use and evaluation of library services developed as a result of the 2000 survey. Responses were overwhelmingly positive, with over 70% characterizing library services as “excellent” or “good” (McLean & Dew, 2004).

The 2004 survey of Iowa distance learners was reported in conjunction with the results of a similar survey conducted at the University of the West Indies in Mona, Jamaica (McLean & Dew, 2004). Respondents reported overwhelming satisfaction with library services, though the survey also revealed a strong interest in new services, particularly in the area of web content, more full-text databases, library instruction, and speedy document delivery. In an interesting point of comparison, both the survey from Iowa and the West Indies indicated that distance learners utilized libraries closer to home when possible.

Twenty distance learners enrolled in an Ohio State University continuing education course were surveyed about library services at the conclusion of an Applied Gerontology Education course (Rodman, 2003). Students in the course reported materials access problems, but more than half of the respondents said that the library service they most valued was electronic reserves. In addition, students responded favorably to library resources embedded in WebCT. Rodman's findings demonstrate that distance students may be receptive to accessing library resources through their courseware. This form of embedded library instruction has been heavily discussed in the literature as a means of reaching students (for example, see Buehler, Dopp, & Hughes, 2001; Scales, Wolf, & Johnson, 2007; and Cassner & Adams, 2008). Herring, Burkhardt, and Wolfe (2009) note that surveys and focus groups of students had indicated that students were unaware of existing library services at Athens State University. In response, the library began embedding library information and instruction into Course Management Systems like WebCT and Blackboard.

In a survey of students enrolled in online courses through the Penn State World Campus (Moyo & Cahoy, 2003), 75 respondents indicated that they most valued the library's online offerings, particularly full-text databases and the library catalog. Students reported a low level of interest in the library's homepage designed for distance students, and minimal use of the online reference collection and subject library homepages. In contrast to the Iowa surveys, only 27% of Penn State World Campus students had used document delivery services, and only 10% of Penn State's distance learners reported using virtual reference services. The survey revealed a low interest in library instruction. When asked to evaluate the ease of library website use, 69% of World Campus respondents found it "easy" or "very easy" to access library services through the website and the majority of students found the library adequate to meet their needs. Respondents with lower satisfaction were able to offer explanation and provide suggestions for improvements, yielding requests for tutorials, reference help, and improved document delivery. Like the Iowa and Jamaica surveys, a high proportion (61%) of Penn State World Campus students indicated that they used a local library to supplement the Penn State Library's services. This survey informed the authors' conclusion that Penn State Library services to World Campus students would be enhanced through building electronic collections, and implement "point of need" services, including virtual reference and embedded instruction and tutorials.

Undoubtedly, many academic libraries conduct surveys of distance students without publishing the findings, though the results of some surveys of off-campus library users have been disseminated in the library and information science literature. The surveys discussed here indicate relative levels of distance-patron satisfaction with library services, but also point to areas for growth in off-campus library services. However, in the evolving landscape of library services, new surveys are necessary. Research is lacking about whether off-campus students are using services like virtual reference. Information is also needed about how distance students prefer to communicate with the library, and about how the growing population of off-campus students learns of the library's services. With these gaps in information in mind, the goal of a survey of off-campus library users at the University of Illinois was to understand how off-campus students now experience the range of instructional and reference services offered by the library, and what they expect of library services.

### Methods and Procedures

A web-based survey of enrolled University of Illinois distance learners was conducted in April and May 2009. Because distance learners could be located anywhere, the researcher cannot meet in-person with each respondent, or bring groups of students together for a physical focus group (McMain & Jerabek, 2004). A survey questionnaire was built and administered with WebTools, the University of Illinois' secure web-based survey tool. In order to respond, recipients of the survey link were required to authenticate using their campus NetID and password. Although identities were not recorded, WebTools prevented individual respondents from taking the survey more than once.

For the purpose of this survey, "distance learner" was defined as any student enrolled in an online or off-campus course administered by the Office of Continuing Education Academic Outreach unit. The Office of Continuing Education emailed a link to the online survey to more than 1,500 distance learners.

A total of 146 people responded to the survey, answering 17 questions. Two of the survey questions were open-ended and fifteen were multiple-choice. Several multiple-choice questions included

open-ended “other” options, in which respondents shared additional qualitative data. Questions covered a range of topics: use of existing library services, interest in potential library services, and communication preferences. In addition, the survey collected demographic data on several points, including academic department, degree sought, and distance from campus.

## Analysis and Results

**Use of library services.** Sixty-four survey respondents (42%) indicated that they use the library website on a “weekly” basis, and 30 respondents (20%) indicated that they use the library website on a “monthly” basis. When asked what library services they had used over the last year, respondents overwhelmingly indicated use of electronic journals and course reserves, a finding aligned with surveys conducted by other researchers.

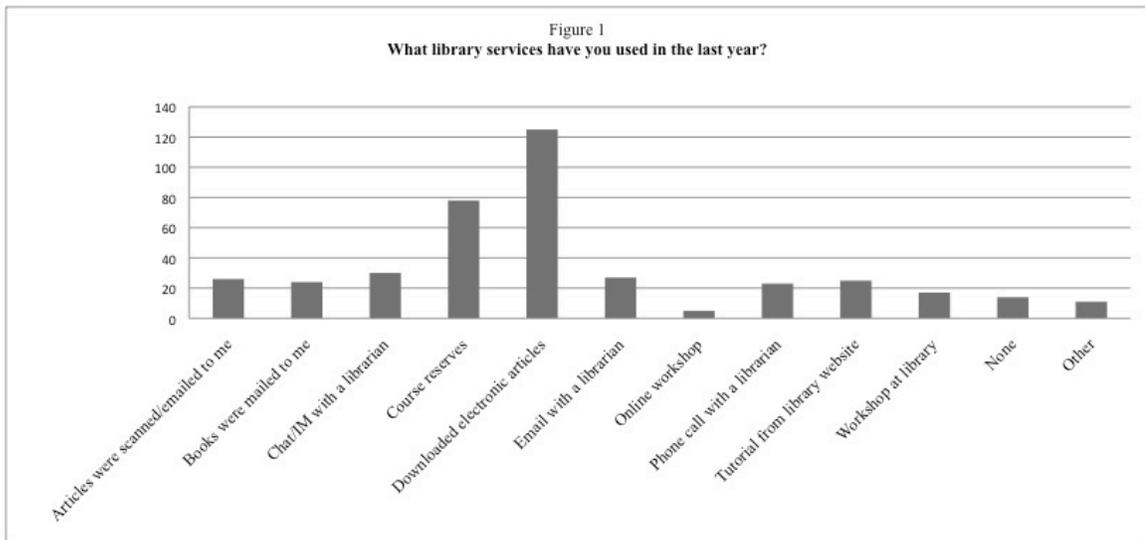


Figure 1. “What library services have you used in the last year?”

Participants were asked to check all services that applied. While distance learners are making relatively robust use of electronic journals and course reserves, responses to this question indicated that few distance learners use document delivery, instruction, or virtual reference services offered by the University of Illinois library. While the data show that students use the library, open-ended responses may explain why distance learners do not heavily use virtual reference or online library instruction. For example, one respondent said, “I don’t think the web site is easy to use. I was not aware of your webinars or IM a librarian. Perhaps I am doing these things late at night and not when a person is available. I would like a intro page with tutorials on how to do... different search engines and different resources the library has to offer.” Another respondent expressed a desire for “better advertisement of services; I feel there is a lot the library has to offer that I’m not aware of.” These qualitative statements indicate that libraries should implement more robust communication strategies and instructional modules targeted to distance learners.

The survey also indicates that University of Illinois distance learners are unaware of the expertise of subject specialist librarians. Seventy-three percent of respondents said they had never contacted a subject specialist. Of the 26 survey respondents who indicated they had contacted a subject specialist, 11 were from the Graduate School of Library and Information Science. At the University of Illinois Library, the Library and Information Science Librarian is extensively embedded in online Library and Information Science courses. In contrast, subject specialists in other disciplines may not have the same level of contact with distance education courses. This suggests that distance learners may be more likely to contact the subject specialist in their discipline if the subject specialist is closely associated with their courses.

**Learning about the library.** Through several questions, the survey attempted to understand how distance students learn about and communicate with the University of Illinois Library. This is particularly important because the library cannot assume that distance learners will enter the physical library building if they wish to consult with a librarian.

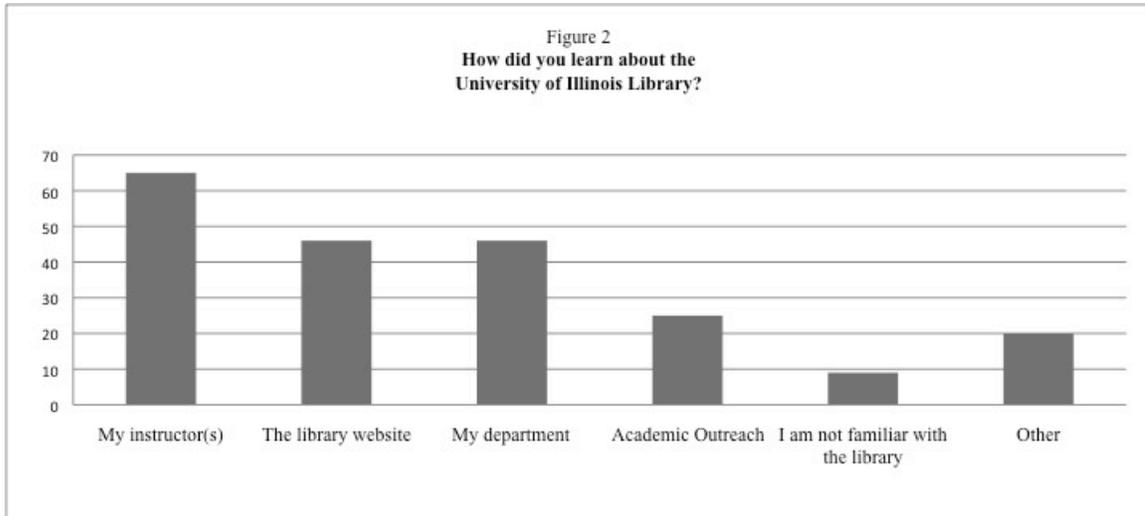


Figure 2. "How did you learn about the University of Illinois Library?"

As indicated by Figure 2, online and off-campus students are learning about library services from campus units other than the library. A sampling of "Other" responses included, "The email asking me to take this survey," "I was an undergraduate at the university previous to beginning my doctoral program," and "During orientation for the GSLIS distance (LEEP) program." Under "Other," several students indicated that they had attended the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign as undergraduates.

When asked how they would prefer to learn about services from the library, distance learners indicated a preference for email and use of the library website. Seventy-one percent of students said they would like to receive email from the library, while 59% of students said they would like to learn about services from the library website.

**Communication with the library.** Students were asked to rank their preferred methods of seeking help from the library. Eighty percent of distance learners surveyed listed email as their first choices for communication with the library. Phone and chat/IM were both preferred by 48% of students. These responses are a contrast to the way participants report they actually communicate with the library. For example, while 80% indicate they would like to seek help via email, only 18% of respondents indicate that they have exchanged email with a librarian in the last year. Similarly, 15% indicate they they had spoken on the phone with a librarian, and 20% said they had used the library's virtual reference services (via chat/instant message) to seek assistance from the library.

**Desired library services.** In order to gauge potential areas for growth in programming, the survey also sought to gather information about services that distance learners desired. One question was particularly revealing: "The library hosts one-hour, online webinars on several topics, including Library Research Skills, Finding Electronic Resources, and RefWorks. How likely are you to attend a webinar taught by the library?" Sixty-four percent reported that they were "somewhat" to "very" likely to attend a webinar convened by the library.

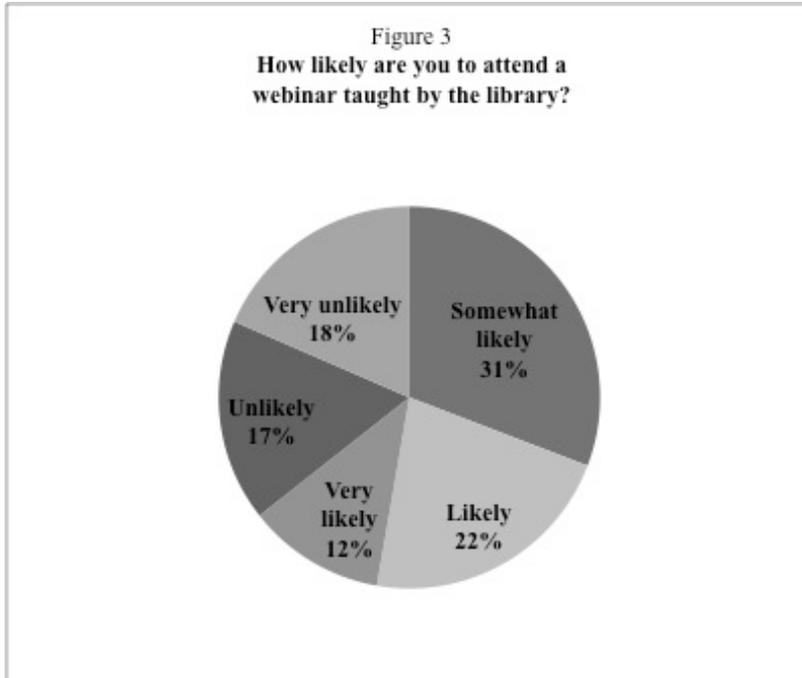


Figure 3. “How likely are you to attend a webinar taught by the library?”

**Perceived importance of services proved by the library.** To solicit more nuanced information from the students, the survey included an open-ended short-answer response to the statement, “The most important services that the University of Illinois Library provides to me are.” Not surprisingly, the most common answer was related to accessing online research resources. One student said, “The ability to access the library journals and collection despite not being an on-campus student. Without having the Academic Outreach Library, it would be very hard to complete my research projects as effectively with these services.” Another expanded on this service, “electronics have made it much easier but there is still no substitute for a knowing reference librarian or the multitude of choice you have available. I would rather pay more in fees than loose library services.”

**Wish list of services.** The University Library also sought to understand what services students perceived to be missing. The open-ended question, “I wish the University of Illinois Library offered services such as:” gathered a wide range of insights. Several students replied in a similar way to this statement, “Right now I believe the library offers everything that I need at the moment.” But there were several indicators that students needed further instruction. One student requested “better communication with offcampus students (I had a hard time finding out how to get an article emailed to me)” and another asked for “more webinars (especially on reworks).” It did not come as a surprise that a few students asked for “better advertisement of services. I feel there is a lot the library has to offer that I’m not aware of.” Such statements remind us that distance learners want us to reach out. Their inability to walk across campus to speak with a librarian in-person must be addressed in as many ways as possible. And finally, one student understands the nuances of online learning and asked for “a designated librarian for distance learners - someone who could, over time, become very familiar with the needs of distance learners.”

## Discussion

As the library’s approach to serving distance learners continues to develop and evolve, surveying off-campus and online students lays a foundation for exploration of effective library services designed specifically for students who use the library from a distance. The data collected in this one-time survey suggests that an annual survey would provide useful data for assessment of the library’s performance in serving distance learners. This survey conducted in Spring 2009 has afforded the University of Illinois Library new insights into the information seeking needs of online and off-campus students enrolled at this institution.

The findings of this survey suggest that the library has a stronger role to play in information literacy instruction for distance learners. Survey respondents indicate awareness of library privileges when it comes to borrowing materials and accessing subscription-based resources. However, the library does not provide widespread opportunities for information literacy instruction, and this survey did not investigate how students perceive their own information-seeking abilities. The library could begin to address this gap in knowledge by identifying opportunities to integrate librarians into course-related instruction and by assessing the results. There is much in the library literature about forging relationships with teaching faculty and while this may be complicated by the nature of online courses, it is worth noting that reaching out to students in their curricular environment may be the first step in making a personal connection with the students. The library could also further develop library-related tutorials and web-based instruction modules for course management software. This focus may also have the added benefit of being applicable for on-campus classes that use course management software. The expansion of library instruction for distance learners will build awareness of library services, increasing opportunities for a sometimes alienated user population to interact with librarians. Further, targeting library instruction to distance learners will expose online and off-campus students to information literacy concepts that build higher-order thinking and support scholarly advancement.

In the context of library services, the term “distance learners” is a blurry distinction because some campuses, including the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, have broadened the traditional on campus curriculum to include courses that meet online. Thus, the results of this survey may be applied to a wider selection of students. To illustrate this point, the University of Illinois has produced a variety of instructional videos to help distance learners with discrete and targeted tasks such as locating books in the online catalog. These videos do double duty for online and on-campus students. Online and on-campus faculty may both benefit from this web-based guides and instruction. For example, a web-based guide about submitting online course reserves is useful to faculty working from anywhere. Gauging demand for digital and web-based instruction among distance learners enables the library to further justify the use of personnel and resources for the creation of instructional materials.

**Use of library services.** Sixty two percent of respondents indicated that they access the library website at least once per month. Eighty five percent of respondents had accessed electronic material through the library in the last year and 53% had accessed electronic course reserves. However, many key library services remain untapped by University of Illinois distance learners. Respondents reported lower use of several library services: 20% had used virtual reference in the last year; 18% had consulted with a subject specialist; 17% had used web-based tutorials; and 18% had used document delivery services. These library services are especially significant to the surveyed population because 70% of respondents identified as graduate students. The research expectations in master’s level courses demand that students develop and use research skills to locate information related to their coursework and research. Responses to open ended questions suggest that many distance learners are either unaware of the library’s services, or unaware of how library resources can support their research. To increase use of library services by distance learners, the library must communicate more directly and clearly about its services. This leads us to ask two questions: How can the user-centered library constructively assist distance learners in obtaining materials needed for research? And possibly more importantly, how can librarians extend beyond the complexities presented by materials access to address the distinct information literacy needs of distance learners? Recognizing that all students have different learning styles, librarians can use web-base guides, instruction videos, and podcasts to deliver information literacy instruction to distance learners. Instructional content may be effectively promoted to students by listening to their expressed preferences for learning about the library. In addition, training librarians and staff who provide reference services to readily identify distance learners may enhance the quality and efficiency of reference interactions with distance learners and their unique access needs.

**Learning about and communicating with the library.** In the case of University of Illinois distance learners, this survey suggests that email marketing would be an effective method of building awareness about library instruction and other forms of assistance. The majority of respondents indicated that they would prefer to receive information about the library via email. This finding is not unexpected, given that distance learners must conduct much of their academic work via email, courseware, and online meeting software. In marketing library services to distance students, the library may consider more extensive email outreach for students enrolled in online or off-campus courses. Several underused services

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could easily be promoted via email, including document delivery, instructional material, and virtual reference. For students who reside on campus, it may be more serendipitous to learn about services simply by walking into the library and coming across flyers or by participating in a conversation with a librarian or staff member. A dedicated web portal for distance learners may also clarify available services, particularly for distance learners using the library for the first time. Although most students indicated that they would prefer to communicate with the library via email, it may be possible that knowing more about available services (for example, virtual reference) would change usage patterns among distance learners. For online learners, the library must reach out in as many arenas as possible including but not limited to the library website, emails, RSS feeds, course management software and word-of-mouth from other students and professors. Robust communication about library services could increase the likelihood that distance learners will identify the correct avenue for assistance at their point of need.

A significant number of respondents indicated that they had learned about the library from their instructor or from a librarian who visited their class. This information suggests that students are receptive to learning about using the library in the context of courses that require research. Although there are a few subject specialist librarians embedded in specific courses at the University of Illinois, this is not widespread. Many University of Illinois online and off-campus instructors hold adjunct status. It is possible that adjunct faculty are unaware of the wide range of services the library provides, including in-class instruction by librarians and web-based guides linked to courseware. To forge instruction partnerships with online and off-campus faculty, subject specialists may face new challenges in using distance-learning technology and in learning to address online learning styles in their information literacy instruction. The results of this survey indicate that students enrolled in online and off-campus courses would be receptive to expanded librarian participation in courses. By targeting a variety of communication points, the library has a better chance spread its services, and to capitalize on instruction opportunities. Again, these findings suggest that librarians at the University of Illinois have untapped opportunities to partner with distance faculty to introduce distance students to the library and information resources that support scholarly research. Seizing opportunities for course-related instruction will increase the library's opportunities to meet distance learners' basic need to understand materials access, in addition to engaging distance learners in higher order thinking associated with information literacy instruction.

## Conclusion

The conclusion of this research is that University of Illinois distance learners generally appreciate the library, but the scope of library services accessed is limited. In order to build awareness of the diverse range of services available to distance learners, the library must proactively communicate with distance learners, and work to make connections with students and faculty directly in the context of academic courses. The findings of this survey demonstrate that online surveys are a useful tool in attempting to understand the needs of library patrons who are enrolled in distance education. These findings have informed the University of Illinois Library's strategy to address important questions in library instruction for distance learners.

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