

Library Services for Distance Education Students in Higher Education

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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary distance education has its roots in early forms of postal correspondence study but has evolved to sophisticated, technologically grounded forms of education. It has progressed from simplistic forms of written, correspondence study, known as the first wave of distance education (1870-1970), to early forms of television, satellite, and compressed video delivery and open education, known as the second wave (1970-1992), to its present stage of computer-based delivery, mainly over the Internet and its multimedia component, the World Wide Web (WWW). This form constitutes the third wave or phase.

While the means by which institutions of higher learning deliver education remotely will continue to change, there is at least one constant—distance students will need support from their institutions and, in particular, access to library resources and services to successfully complete their educational endeavors. Libraries' roles are indeed changing in light of Web-based distance learning, as well as such developments as full-text databases, e-books, and on-demand services. For years, libraries have struggled with the tension between “just-in-time” versus “just-in-case” collection development, and the need to now serve remote users *and* on-site students exacerbates this tension. Yet, serving remote students is not novel—the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) issued its first guidelines for serving “extension students” in 1963. The ACRL Guidelines are now in their fourth revision (ACRL, 2000).

What must a library do for its distance students? It is useful to cite the ACRL's definition of “distance learning library services”:

Distance learning library services refers to those library services in support of college, university, or other post-secondary courses and programs offered away from a main campus, or in the absence of a traditional

campus, and regardless of where credit is given. These courses may be taught in traditional or nontraditional formats or media, may or may not require physical facilities, and may or may not involve live interaction of teachers and students. The phrase is inclusive of courses in all post-secondary programs designated as: extension, extended, off-campus, extended campus, distance, distributed, open, flexible, franchising, virtual, synchronous, or asynchronous.

Given the potential range of responsibilities generated out of this definition, newfound roles for the library emerge. First, a change in perspective enables serving distance students appropriately: The library is no longer a passive entity awaiting patrons to walk through its doors, but is now a proactive entity that reaches out through a variety of methods and services to its users.

Secondly, the library must reposition itself as a central entity and key player on university and college campuses. As colleges and universities forge ahead with new online programs—with the National Center for Educational Statistics reporting that 85% of higher education institutions engage in some form of distance education (NCES, 2001)—they must be cognizant of the importance of the library in serving these students. The library should be central as a planning board as new programs are launched; any institution that does not fully involve the library in planning for distance programs is doomed to fail. Specifically, the library's role in planning entails (Buchanan, 2001):

- Employing a full-time DE librarian (or realigning duties so there is a designee for DE students);
- Working closely with programs offering and planning to offer DE to determine resource needs;
- Working closely with IT or Network Operations Personnel to monitor technology needs and resources;

- Developing a virtual student advisory board to enable communication with the students it must serve remotely;
- Holding virtual focus groups to hear from students on library services;
- Participating in regular meetings or contacts with faculty/program representatives to ensure faculty and programmatic needs are being met; and
- Overseeing accessibility measures so Web pages are accessible for screen readers and other accessibility devices.

Thirdly, new services should emerge out of the unique needs of distance learning students.

EMERGING LIBRARY SERVICES

Libraries must serve distance students on a number of levels: access, instruction, and materials are three critical areas involved in serving remote students. Jones (2003) has suggested that services off-campus must always be equivalent to those on-campus. That doesn't necessarily mean exactly the same, but it does mean that distance learning students should have access, somehow, to library/learning resources and services, designed to support the specific programs offered. These services/resources should meet the same standard of academic quality as the same courses offered in traditional settings.

In the realm of access, libraries must provide easy proxy or other remote access to databases, indexes, e-books, and other tools. Regardless of their location, students should have the same means of access to facilitate their studies. Libraries will need clear, concise, and simplistic instructions to set up and use proxy servers, if applicable. Moreover, libraries involved in serving remote students should become more demanding of restrictive vendors to permit easy off-campus access to licensed databases and indexes. The days of on-site use only are gone. Thus, it is critical that libraries have ample user licenses for remote access; students should not be denied access at any time of the day or night because too many users are on a system.

Accessibility also means libraries must provide alternative formats for screen-readers, voice recognition software, and other accessibility devices. Libraries must consider the World Wide Web Consortium's Web

Accessibility Initiative (2003) for guidance on these significant issues.

Finally, in terms of access, libraries must make themselves available to remote students through a designated toll-free phone line, as well as e-mail address, and synchronous chat room. The phone line and e-mail address can be used to leave procedural questions or report problems, and students should be given a standard turn-around time for responses. Typically, a two-day time frame is acceptable, and the policy for weekend responses should be clearly articulated. A designated phone line should be implemented in conjunction with campus network services so students can call to check on network downtime. Planned network outages for maintenance should be announced well in advance so students can plan accordingly. A synchronous chat room can be used for ready-reference questions, as well as for instructional purposes.

Ultimately, remote students need equal access to the library's services. A typical problem facing institutions offering distance learning revolves around expectations—many expect students to rely on their local libraries or, worse, the Internet for their research materials. Universities and colleges have a responsibility to serve remote students with high-quality library resources, and students must have adequate access to do quality work.

The next area where libraries must revise their policies and procedures is instructional opportunities. Bibliographic Instruction (BI) can be offered to remote students through videotapes that can be checked out of the library and mailed to students; pre-recorded BI sessions can be streamed from the library's Web pages; and live BI sessions can be broadcast to students, with accompanying chat rooms open to provide students the opportunity to ask questions in real time. Students should also have easily comprehensible instructional materials available for download from the library's distance education-specific Web page or portal. Where appropriate, tutorials or modules where step-by-step instructions are demonstrated should be developed in html format. Libraries should avoid excessive programming where students will need to download plug-ins or other tools. The bottom line with instructional materials is to keep them simple and easily accessible. This will save the time of students and librarians alike (Buchanan, 2001).

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