Chapter 1

Invisible Community?
Bringing Online Graduate Students to the Library

Sheila Bonnand
Montana State University, USA

Mary Anne Hansen
Montana State University, USA

ABSTRACT

In this chapter, Montana State University librarians share how they have expanded efforts to reach out to and provide equitable instruction services for its online graduate students, a population often underserved. After piloting a synchronous, online instruction program using web conferencing, librarians surveyed a targeted graduate program to determine if underserved students became more efficient researchers as a result of library instruction participation via web conferencing and if they are now taking fuller advantage of library resources and services. Students and faculty surveyed were positive about the newly created connection to the MSU community. However, findings revealed that many online graduate students work in research environments lacking the breadth and depth of resources they need. Further, many lack a connection to the MSU community and do not know that their institution's library resources are available to them. This discovery means that academic libraries should strengthen activities designed to build community among online students.

INTRODUCTION

The Montana State University Library (MSU) has long been committed to its online and distance users. As the number of these users increase and fully online programs develop, the need for services that provide library support equivalent to that provided to on-campus students has become more pressing. One of the ways the Library has expanded its ability to reach online students is by providing library instruction opportunities using web conferencing software. This innovation, piloted in 2009, is now is

an established component of the Library's instructional services program and has been especially successful with graduate level courses.

For the first few years of the project, however, the collection of evaluation data from these online instruction sessions consisted primarily of feedback surveys targeted at those students who had participated in library instruction. In 2012, MSU librarians decided that more thorough assessment was needed to determine the overall impact of the web conferencing instruction project. They designed a questionnaire targeting both students who had and had not participated in online synchronous library instruction.

An unanticipated part of this research project came from a review of student comments from both the questionnaire and earlier feedback, as well as faculty comments. This was the idea that instructional outreach efforts could also play a role in providing online students with a stronger relationship with the institution and even contribute to a sense of community among these online learners. For example, the following unsolicited comment came from a graduate student emailing a faculty member after participating in an MSU Library instruction session via web conferencing, and it seemed to exemplify the sentiments of a number of survey respondents about their experiences with this real time library instruction.

Although I wasn't able to attend the live web conference I enjoyed viewing it later on. What a great way to build community in an online environment! I wasn't really sure of what to expect, but I liked that students were able to type their questions and get immediate feedback. It was also beneficial to have a visual guide (being able to see their computer screen) to see what was being discussed on each database. Thanks for the experience!

This chapter describes the web conferencing pilot project, the ongoing real-time instruction service, and the subsequent research project that was designed to explore more in-depth whether or not online graduate students found that their participation in real-time library instruction made a difference in their graduate research experience. The idea of a community-building in the online environment as an outcome is also shared. The chapter concludes with discussion of future research possibilities into the outcomes of synchronous library instruction with online graduate students.

BACKGROUND

Montana State University is a land grant institution with a Carnegie 1 research designation. While primarily a residential campus, MSU has been involved in providing online and distance instruction since the early 1990's. Like many universities, MSU has established initiatives to increase online options for students at all levels, and especially graduate students. The MSU Department of Education, in particular, has moved most of its graduate programs online or to a blended model. Online courses and entire program options offer educators throughout Montana and beyond the ability to pursue graduate degrees and certificates without having to leave their jobs or uproot their families. According to the MSU Extended University's annual report, thirty-seven hundred MSU students were taking online credit-bearing courses in 2010 (Montana State University Extended University, 2010, n. p.). MSU's enrollment for 2010 was well over thirteen thousand, meaning approximately twenty-seven percent of students were enrolled in an online class. MSU's current strategic plan calls for increasing online credits and courses forty percent by 2019 (Montana State University, 2012, 18).

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