

Chapter 8.13

Online Academic Libraries and Distance Learning

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BRIEF HISTORY OF DISTANCE LEARNING

Historically, distance learning or distance education began as little more than “correspondence courses,” which promised an education in one’s own home as early as 1728 (Distance Learning, 2002). By the 1800s the concept of distance education could be found in England, Germany and Japan (ASHE Reader on Distance Education, 2002).

In 1933, the world’s first educational television programs were broadcast from the University of Iowa and in 1982, teleconferencing began (Oregon Community Colleges for Distance Learning, 1997), often using videotaped lectures, taped-for-television programs and live programming, adding a human dimension. Students and faculty were now able to interact with each other in real

time, enhancing the learning process by allowing student access to teachers across distances.

ACADEMIC DISTANCE LEARNING & THE VIRTUAL LIBRARY

Distance learning can be defined by the fact that the student and the instructor are separated by space. The issue of time is moot considering the technologies that have evolved allowing real-time access. Today, universities around the world use various methods of reaching their remote students. With the use of technology, access becomes possible, whether it is from campuses to remote sites, or to individuals located in their own homes.

The development of course instruction, delivered through a variety of distance learning methods (e.g., including Web-based synchronous

and asynchronous communication, e-mail, and audio/video technology), has attracted major university participation (Burke, Levin & Hanson, 2003). These electronic learning environment initiatives increase the number of courses and undergraduate/graduate degree programs being offered without increasing the need for additional facilities.

During the 2000-2001 academic year, the NCES (National Center for Education Statistics) estimated in the United States alone there were 3,077,000 enrollments in all distance education courses offered by 2-year and 4-year institutions, with an estimated 2,876,000 enrollments in college-level, credit-granting distance education courses, with 82% of these at the undergraduate level (Watts, Lewis & Greene, 2003, p. iv). Further, the NCES reported that 55% of all 2-year and 4-year U.S. institutions offered college-level, credit-granting distance education courses, with 48% of all institutions offering undergraduate courses, and 22% of all institutions at the graduate level (*ibid*, p. 4). It is clear that distance education has become an increasingly important component in many colleges and universities, not only in the United States, but also worldwide.

Although educational institutions create courses and programs for distance learners, they often omit the support component that librarians and accrediting organizations consider critical. It is recommended that courses be designed to ensure that students have “reasonable and adequate access to the range of student services appropriate to support their learning” (WICHE, Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education). Further, courses should incorporate information literacy skills within the course or in class assignments to ensure skills for lifelong learning (American Library Association, 1989; Bruce, 1997).

Distance learning (DL) students are unlikely to walk into the university’s library for instruction on how to use the resources, from print to electronic journals, as well as services such as electronic reserves and interlibrary loan. The elements of

any successful distance-learning program must include consideration of the instructors and the students, both of whom have needs that must be examined and served.

With imaginative use of technology, libraries have created “chat” sessions, which allow 24/7 access to librarians who direct students to the resources that are available online or through interlibrary loan. In addition, librarians assist faculty in placing materials on electronic reserve so that their students can access the materials as needed. Libraries have become more willing to provide mail services and desk top delivery of electronic articles to their distance learning students and, when that is not possible, refer their students to local libraries to take advantage of the interlibrary loan system. Online tutorials have been created to help students learn how to access these resources, while other libraries have specific departments that assist their distance education students and faculty. The role of the library in this process is one of support, both for the students and the faculty.

CHANGES IN DISTANCE LIBRARIANSHIP

Of all of the “traditional” library functions, such as materials provision, electronic resources, and reciprocal borrowing available to the distance learner, there remains a significant gap in service, that of reference. Although chat lines and other 24/7 services are available, these services simply do not provide the DL student the same quality of service that the on-campus student gets when he or she consults with a librarian in person. Newer versions of distance learning course software provide external links to resources, but do not yet include reference service by e-mail and live chat sessions in their basic packages. It will be the responsibility of the library to make these services easily available and known to the distant learner, whose contact to the institution may not include

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