The Birth of Virtual Libraries

Edward D. Garten
University of Dayton, USA

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenal growth of distance learning programs in higher education worldwide has had immense implications for the provision of library services to students learning at a distance. Major trends such as telecommuting and the changing profile of traditional college students have fueled the demand for distance education. More adults, in particular, are working full time, balancing family responsibilities, and seeking to return to study at the post-secondary level on a part-time basis. Distance learning has become an attractive alternative, especially for working mothers, military servicepersons, and rural residents (Hanson, 2001). One of the most startling new forms of higher education in the last decade has been the development and proliferation of the online or virtual college or university (VCU). The VCU is used today to describe a broad range of entities and activities: corporate training centers, nonprofit and governmental education activities, multistate and international learning collaborations, as well as the distance learning efforts of individual institutions (Epper & Garn, 2004). This proliferation of distance learning opportunities, especially in the form of the virtual or online university, has had considerable implications for the provision of library services to distance students; indeed, it has been argued that distance learning without access to electronic information resources and services is simply impossible (Faulhaber, 1996). Concurrent with the emergence of the virtual university has been the rise of the virtual library. This article defines the virtual library and situates it within the context of contemporary electronic learning.

DEFINITION OF THE VIRTUAL LIBRARY

In the broader historical sense, the term *virtual library* became trendy in the mid-1990s, but never captured professional use in a formal sense to connote an operational definition as did the phrase *digital library*. Then, the terms digital library, electronic library, and virtual library often were used interchangeably. Critically, the term *digital library* arose and evolved within the broad library community beginning in the late 1960s. During that period, many physically based academic libraries initiated innovative long-term projects to facilitate access to their continually expanding hard-copy collections. These programs integrated emerging information technologies with traditional printed materials, thus making libraries among the first integrated users of alternative media such as microforms, audiotapes and other sound recordings, and electronic files—all predecessors of today's online commercial database systems and aggregated digitalized collections (Pacifici, 1997). Today, by most measures, the term digital library when used in this broader sense has won the day in terms of common use; perhaps, in part, because of the belief on the part of many information professionals that the word *virtual* was so vague. *Virtual library*, however, is increasingly the term of popular choice when one refers to the aggregated digital learning resources *and* librarian-assisted services that support the curricula offered by totally online or *virtual universities*. Increasingly librarians who may support distance learning as found in more traditional and residential universities will also employ the term virtual library when referring to the amalgamation of resources and services that they provide their students at a distance. While there are no limits on the size, content, or relative value of data afforded students by a virtual library, its definition is always shaped by the pedagogical needs and expectations of its parent learning community. Today the term virtual library is nearly always associated with those library support services offered to students and faculty in the distance delivery and online learning environment.

THE VIRTUAL LIBRARY: CRITICAL ELEMENT IN TODAY'S DISTANCE LEARNING

The term distance learning as employed here follows the scope and definition as found in the Association of College and Research Libraries' *Guidelines for Distance Learning Library Services* (ACRL, 2000). Distance learning refers to any program of instruction in which students and instructor are not simultaneously present in a single on-ground classroom on the campus of a college or university. It also applies even when students and the instructor are present together in a classroom, if that classroom is located at a learning center, on a branch campus, or at any other facility that is geographically removed from the main campus, and which exists expressly to bring higher education to students away from the main campus. The *Guidelines for Distance Learning Library Services* make clear that students engaged with distance learning communities are fundamentally entitled to library services and resources equivalent to those provided to students and faculty at traditional campuses. Electronic library services are increasingly available to online students and offer the full range of resources from hard copies of books to full-text copies of articles. Distance learning students need to have communication access to librarians fluent in electronic information delivery who are informed about resources local to the students' learning environment, and who can provide specialized assistance with discipline-specific databases.

Prominent and rapidly growing virtual universities today include such market leaders as Capella University (www.capella.edu), Park University (www.park.edu), Jones International University (www.jones-international.com), Northcentral University (www.ncu.edu), the Kaplan Higher Education system (www.kaplanhighereducation.com), Devry University (www.devry.edu), the American Public University System (www.apus.edu), Walden University (www.waldenu.edu), and the University of Phoenix Online (www.uopxonline.com). Clearly the largest of these is the University of Phoenix, now exceeding 50,000 students both on-ground and online, and which has helped establish some of the early best practices in information resource provi-

sion to learners. Some virtual universities are privately held, while others are publicly traded on the market. Most are for profit and highly entrepreneurial, continually carving out new markets to meet growing demand for workplace-related credentialing. While offering some programs at the associate's and bachelor's degree levels, these institutions are much more characterized by and known for their often extensive graduate programs at the master's and doctoral levels. Others are increasingly well regarded for their online workplace certification and licensure programs. All of the leading virtual universities today have gained critical recognition within the broader higher learning community through the attainment of regional accreditation. Online graduate education increasingly has become mainstream and subject to less of the criticism earlier voiced by more traditional universities (Garten, 2001).

Students and faculty associated with these relatively new higher learning providers expect that most learning resources they require will be provided online and in full-text format. Prior to the development of the fully articulated virtual library, most students studying in remote locations simply accepted the reality that they would likely need to travel to a nearby academic or public library to fulfill their course-related information needs (Barnard, 1999). Today, most such students and the faculty who teach them believe that graduate online course assignments, even those requiring more in-depth research, can be met more efficiently via full-text databases and document delivery services offered by virtual universities or traditional universities having major distance learning programs.

Most librarians have resolved themselves to the new realities of online learning, an environment in which there clearly appears to be a fundamental shift in the minds of many graduate students (particularly professional working adults) relative to the importance of the library in their academic and workplace credentialing (Garten, 2001). Indeed, it is essential to note that most librarians now have eagerly embraced the importance of a well-conceived and robust virtual library to quality distance learning, but at the same time are mindful of the changing conception students hold relative to what a library should be and how it should serve them in the online learning environment.

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