



Chapter IX

Institutional and Library Services for Distance Education Courses and Programs¹

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Institutions are quickly embracing distance education in the forms of online or web-based courses and programs at phenomenal rates. Often, however, significant institutional structures, including such areas as registration, advising, library, and technical support are overlooked until too late. Institutions must have clear, well-planned strategies in place in order to maximize their students' learning experiences and overall satisfaction with distance education programs to avoid attrition and maximize retention. This chapter provides many useful and easy to implement strategies for institutions considering distance education, as well as for those already engaged in serving students online.

INTRODUCTION

With the emergence of distance education in the form of web-based or online education, new challenges materialize for students, faculty, and institutions. These challenges range widely from adequate library support to student mentoring and advising to institutional coherence and transparency in

serving their distant students. This chapter provides an overview of best practices—potential solutions to these many challenges.

This work has grown out of the author's experience as a Distance Education Coordinator and later as a faculty member teaching distance courses. Distance education has reached yet another new phase, a phase in which a systemic change in perspective must occur. Instead of maintaining that it is the student who is remote or distant, institutions, including faculty, staff, and particularly librarians and information specialists, must see it is indeed *they* who are remote. These entities can begin to address the many challenges surrounding efficacious distance education programs by adopting a student-centered perspective in the institutional approach to meeting distance education students' needs. This chapter must be considered a work in progress, as best practices for intuitions must be revisited and continually revised as distance education continues to mature and change. It is an attempt to raise awareness of services and support that contribute to the most rewarding experiences for distance education students. This chapter concentrates primarily on institutional and library services, as best practices and guidelines for online faculty and instructors can be easily identified in the literature.

Recent data from the National Center for Education Statistics (1997) reveals great increases in the number of institutions offering distance education programs or coursework. An analogous rise in formal, well-planned institutional support policies appears to be missing, as many institutions concentrate first and foremost on converting curriculum to an online format and secondly on the delivery and technological infrastructure. However, distance students need *and deserve* accommodations above and beyond their on-campus counterparts; while many of these recommendations will apply to and will assist all students, institutions must be cognizant of the extenuating circumstances that contribute to a distant student's frustrations, and in many cases, attrition. The recommendations here are predicated on some institutional monetary commitment as well, though many can be accomplished with small budget lines. It is the hope of the author that institutions and programs of all sizes can adapt the recommendations on a scale appropriate to them while avoiding budgetary crises.

By initiating, maintaining, and guaranteeing a sound policy for services and support of distance education students, an institution will promote the most efficacious and enjoyable learning experience for every student—near and far.

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