

LIBRARY ISSUES

BRIEFINGS FOR FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATORS

Editors: Ann P. Dougherty, *Mountainside Publishing*; Richard M. Dougherty, *University of Michigan, Emeritus*

Contributing Editors: Steven J. Bell, *Temple University*; William Miller, *Florida Atlantic University*;
Barbara Fister, *Gustavus Adolphus College*; Larry Hardesty, *College Library Directors Mentor Program*;
Mignon Adams, *University of the Sciences in Philadelphia*.

Vol. 32, No. 6

July 2012

Distant Learners and the Library in 2012

by Mignon Adams

Once thought of as an add-on or the province of for-profit institutions, distance education is now an integral part of American higher education. Over 30 percent of all higher education students now take at least one course online; that's more than 6 million students in 2010, up a half million from 2009. The trend continues to grow. Because of the importance of distance education to the current mission of many institutions, administrators need to be aware of all the elements of an excellent program. Those in the office that oversees distance education should maintain contacts with campus people beyond the faculty who teach in the program. Those faculty members will be helped if they are aware of the ways that libraries and librarians can help them enrich their courses.

Acceptance of and Reasons for Online Ed

Programs taught entirely online are now not only seen as acceptable but as equal. But accrediting associations expect distance students to have access to the same services as do on-campus students, including career services, academic advising, and library materials and services. The recent *Interregional Guidelines for the Evaluation of Distance Education (Online Learning)* state the need for students to have access to the library and information resources, for them to be proficient in the use of electronic forms of learning resources, and for the institution to budget and provide resources specifically for online learning, including library and information resources.

Since 1995, academic libraries have been adding more and more electronic materials. In the past ten years they have begun to provide other services such as online reference and self-initiated online docu-

ment delivery. So while libraries are in an excellent position to have their resources fully integrated into the distance programs, that does not always happen. The popular model for online instruction does not encourage library use. Students who enroll in online courses often have very little experience in using an electronic library (or any library at all).

Consider one hypothetical student, Cathy, an ambitious single mother who works during the day and fits her college work around her three-year-old's sleeping schedule. While the university where she is enrolled in a distance program is only two miles from her home, Cathy finds that each trip to campus cuts into her time with her daughter, her study time, or her work. She appreciates being able to purchase textbooks online, and last semester purchased two books from Amazon she needed for her research rather than make a trip to check them out of the library. She has never visited the physical library, although for one course her instructor told the class to read an article from an electronic journal. She tried, late at night, but was unsuccessful and did not try again. Instead, she found information on the topic through Google.

Another hypothetical student, John, lives in a rural area 300 miles from the institution where he is completing his undergraduate degree after a 30-year hiatus. His classes have not asked him to use materials beyond those provided as part of the course. John hopes he can actually see his soon-to-be alma mater by attending his graduation. While

Coming Soon —

Securing Academic Libraries

he has good computer skills—he uses a computer daily in his job—he has not used a library since his first college days.

Both these imaginary students have issues in common. They are both adults, with limited time to visit a physical library. While each has proficient computer skills, neither has experience with an electronic library. Their instructors have provided no information or instruction, and their respective libraries have made no attempt to reach out to them.

Adding to the difficulties is that the staff responsible for overseeing the programs and course software may be administratively and psychologically far removed from the library staff. Librarians may not have considered how services might be changed to fully meet the needs of distant users. Remote students often find library websites difficult to use and unfriendly to them. Faculty may be unsure of copyright requirements and may choose not to use library materials to which they have full rights.

Model for Online Instruction

Increasingly universities are adopting the model of instruction first popularized by the University of Phoenix and similar very large for-profit institutions. Courses are often of a shorter duration than a semester, such as 8 weeks. They are designed jointly by a subject matter expert (SME) and an instructional designer. Course objectives, learning activities, discussion questions, and assessments are built into the course and cannot be changed once the course is set—usually several weeks before the course starts. After the first or second time the course is taught, subsequent courses are often taught by multiple adjuncts.

Responsibilities of the teaching faculty are to grade the assessments, participate in the discussion, and answer questions from students in a timely matter. They can usually create content in the announcements area of the learning management software used, but cannot make changes in the objectives, learning activities, or assessments.

This widely adopted model of course design has several implications for the libraries of the institutions that use it.

Because the course is essentially set in stone, librarians must be involved in the initial planning stages or they will not be involved at all. The abbreviated term length means that there is limited time for students to carry on an involved project, such as an extensive research paper. If materials needed for investigation are not immediately available, students will not be able to use them at all.

Learning to Navigate the Web

All college students need to be able to locate, evaluate, and use information in a legal and ethical manner, and at most institutions librarians are involved in teaching and promoting information literacy. Distant learners need formal programs in information literacy perhaps even more than do on-campus students. These learners are not likely to see promotional materials and displays in the library, nor will they be privy to knowledge from fellow students. Given their age, distant students probably did not learn in previous schooling the skills needed to search a database effectively or how to sort through the incredible amount of information a simple Google question returns.

Libraries have developed many ways to reach off-campus students. Some have created online tutorials, given live or digitally recorded. They have produced brief videos, uploaded to YouTube, with a link that can appear on their website or in an online course shell.

Libguides. Many libraries use Libguides, a template that allows for easy display of the resources available for a particular discipline (say, biology), or for an individual class (for example, evidence-based nursing practice). Libguides can be embedded into a website or a course shell in Blackboard or another learning management system; information about them can be twittered, placed on a Facebook page, or otherwise integrated into social networking sites. A photo and information about the librarian who works mostly closely with that discipline can be included, along with a chat box.

Chat Software. Using various kinds of specialized software, librarians offer

“Ask-A-Librarian” services that allow users to submit a question online. Some software allows for chat and the ability to demonstrate websites to students wherever they might be. Many libraries also respond to instant messaging and texting. A nationwide collaboration, funded by the Institute of Library and Museum Services and state libraries, provides 24/7 chat. Many academic libraries participate in this collaborative venture.

Embedded Librarians. Going even further, some librarians have been “embedded” in a particular course. While a librarian may be part of an on-ground course or even a campus department, it most commonly occurs in an online course. The Community College of Vermont has offered embedded librarians for almost a decade. At CCV, an instructor may request a semester-long class librarian for a course that requires extensive use of library resources. This librarian will maintain a discussion board forum where instructions can be posted and questions answered. Or a librarian may join the course for a shorter period of time, such as a week or so, to assist students with a specific project.

Many larger libraries have a designated a “distance learning librarian” or office, some of which have been in existence for a long time. The Distance Learning Section, with over 1800 members, is part of the Association of College and Research Libraries. The section maintains a listserve, discussion groups, and annual programs.

At other institutions, there are no designated librarians responsible for serving remote students. Not surprisingly, they have not developed the same kinds of working relationships they have with on-campus faculty and their courses. One reason for this may be the administrative distance between the library and the local distance education staff who build and maintain courses.

Obstacles to Overcome

On many campuses, the office that oversees distance learning may be both administratively and geographically far from the library. The team designing the courses may think that

their partners in creating and developing online classes and programs are the department heads and program directors, not the librarians.

Fear of copyright violations may lead course designers to encourage faculty members to choose additional readings from the Internet. Librarians, who have signed the licensing agreements with each journal provider, know the legitimate use of the articles from the journals they've subscribed to. In addition, they also know how to link directly from the learning management system to those articles, so that a copy of the article doesn't need to be downloaded and then uploaded to the course shell.

Steps for Success

Obviously the library and the distance learning office need to communicate with each other in order to make sure that course designers, faculty, and students are aware of what the library has to offer. Here are some suggested steps:

- Librarians should develop Lib-guides or something similar for each program being taught online. A link to the guide should appear on the default template of the learning management system, so that students do not need to leave the course shell in order to connect to the library.
- If possible, a guide should be developed for courses in which students have a research project or other need for access to a number of resources.
- If not already in place, one librarian should be designated as the contact person for distance programs; this person should be proactive in working with the distance education office as courses are being developed. He or she should be willing to write content and activities that pertain to information literacy.
- Consider "embedding" a librarian in a distance course.
- Librarians should provide information about the use of copyrighted materials from their electronic resources or about copyright in general as it pertains to distance education.

- The librarian should be given a way to reach all faculty teaching in the program—perhaps by being able to send a message through the learning management system or to a listserv or distribution list.
- Each semester the librarian should contact all online faculty with a reminder of what resources and services are available.
- The library collections and services should be evaluated as part of any assessment carried on by the distance education office.

Distance learning is now a regular part of academic communities. Both those who run the programs and those in the library need to make sure that they communicate to ensure the utilization of library offerings.

Assessing What Works

Not just information literacy programs, but all library services should be examined to assure that they meet the needs of distant learners who sometimes cannot make use of services originally developed for on-campus users.

Working adults fit their classwork into the time they have available. For many students this means late at night or early in the morning. If they are able to "ask a librarian" only during normal library hours, that assistance doesn't exist for them. An emailed answer received the next day may be too late for the assignment. Help can be provided in many different ways, including online guides and tutorials or participation in a 24/7 chat service, should the library recognize an obligation to serve its students when they need it.

The brevity of many online semesters means that students have little time to complete lengthy projects or to obtain resources that are not immediately available to them. Recognizing this, instructors typically plan learning activities that are limited in scope and can be finished within an 8-week term. Graduate students are an exception, and graduate students must have access to the world of knowledge that pertains to their topic.

The most responsive libraries are willing to fax articles or adopt the

web-access option available with some interlibrary loan systems. They are also willing to mail or fax books and copies of articles from their print collections, rather than expecting users to make hundred-mile or more trips to the library. Some libraries charge for this service; others see it as a cost of providing library services, just as they absorb the cost of circulating and shelving books at their campus location. Document delivery systems that allow for web access and cut down on the time needed are the most useful for remote students. Some institutions provide links on their sites to academic libraries around the country, including their user policies..

Finally, the library should assess its services to distant learners apart from its evaluation of services for on-campus students. Librarians need to know, as part of its own assessment activities, the demographics of their online users, their needs, and whether library services meet their needs.

Websites as the New Door

At one time students and faculty walked through the front door of their library in order to gain access to its collection. But now the library's website is the major gateway to its resources. For distant students, this is the only entrance they will ever use. While there are many guides and suggestions for creating library websites, there does not seem to be a standard format for the remote student, one who will never be on campus.

A quick look at many library sites for faraway students reveals that the page intended for them may be difficult to find—a small link hidden on the front page, or tucked away under a general "services and policies" links. The content of the pages tends towards rigid definitions of who constitutes a distant student, lists of rules, and perhaps an admonition to apply for a library card.

A few websites welcome distant students, emphasizing positively the services offered. "Never pay for an electronic resource!" says one; "request home delivery," says another. Institutions that want to increase their online enrollment need to ensure that the digital points of entry to their campus

are encouraging and welcoming.

There are still some colleges that allow only the webmaster to enter content on its pages. The URL's for databases and other resources may change from time to time, or new resources may be added. In the lag time between the notice of a new URL and its alteration on the library's page, that resource is unavailable. For those students not nearby, the library has just closed off part of its collections. To avoid this situation, administrators should ensure that the librarian responsible for electronic resources is able to upload and modify links to those resources.

Online undergraduates need easy availability of library resources; the library's website is the key as to whether those resources will be easy or difficult to access.

Copyright Issues

On many campuses, librarians take an active role in helping faculty and students understand and apply the "fair use" provisions of the copyright law. They find that faculty members tend to fall into two distinct groups regarding copyright: those who feel that since what they may copy is for educational use they may copy whatever they want; and those who are so concerned about copyright they think they cannot copy anything without permission or payment. Neither group is right.

In an online course, students may be expected to buy a textbook as they might for any class. Other materials, though, must be made available electronically if they are to be useful. For many materials that might be included in an online course, the answer is simple: the institution's library may already have an electronic subscription. If this is so, and the

license provides for remote access, then the college has already paid (and sometimes paid quite a bit) for all its students to access the article.

Each institution should develop a copyright policy and make sure that its employees are aware of it. As online courses are created, copyright issues should be kept in mind. Librarians can be useful in this process.

Summary

Too often top administrators have considered that establishing and funding an office of distance education is all that is necessary to create an excellent program, without remembering all the different units on campus that must work together. Leadership from the top is essential to ensure that online students have full access to all the services they need, including libraries.

If the distance education is overseen by someone drawn from the existing faculty, the director will know about campus resources and may maintain contacts with service providers. If the head of distance education is someone whose experience has been entirely online, he or she may have little knowledge of or interaction with people across campus. Those programs would be more successful if such directors were to reach out to librarians and others who serve students. Their course management systems will be more useful if they contain pertinent links to the library's collections within the systems themselves.

Faculty who teach online may not immediately see that library resources can be an important part of their classes, even though their land courses may involve library assignments. Librarians need to reach out to faculty with whom they have already

worked, and especially to those who teach only online or part-time.

Librarians should be proactive with all those involved in distance education: course developers, faculty, students and program directors. Good library service for students who are never on campus should include a librarian specifically assigned to remote students, a website that welcomes distant students, assistance outside traditional hours, and regular assessment of services and collections available to online users.

Only when online education receives the attention of many campus units, and those units intend to work collegially amongst themselves, can online education be said to be truly equivalent to a traditional program. —*mignon.adams@gmail.com*

For More Information

Distance Education Programs: Inter-regional Guidelines for the Evaluation of Distance Education (Online Learning). Middle States Commission on Higher Education, 2011. Downloadable from: <http://www.msche.org/publications/Guidelines-for-the-Evaluation-of-Distance-Education-Programs.pdf>

Going the Distance: Online Education in the United States 2011. Babson Survey Research Group and the College Board, 2011. Downloadable from http://sloanconsortium.org/publications/survey/going_distance_2011.

See assessment tools and games at Elgin Community College Library: <http://ecclibrary.elgin.edu/content.php?pid=17821&sid=121432>

The "embedded" librarian program at the Community College of Vermont is described here: <http://hartness.vsc.edu/faccvservices/embed>

For a warm welcome for distance students, North Carolina State University: <http://www.lib.ncsu.edu/distance/>

And a welcome video from the University of Southern California: <http://libguides.usc.edu/distancelearning>



Library Issues: Briefings for Faculty and Administrators (ISSN 0734-3035) is published bimonthly beginning September 1980 by Mountainside Publishing Co., Inc., 321 S. Main St., #213, Ann Arbor, MI 48104; (734) 662-3925. **Library Issues**, Vol. 32, no.6 ©2012 by Mountainside Publishing Co., Inc. Subscriptions: \$84/one year; \$144/two years. Additional subscriptions to same address \$26 each/year. Address all correspondence to **Library Issues, P.O. Box 8330, Ann Arbor, MI 48107**. (Fax: 734-662-4450; E-mail: sales@libraryissues.com) Subscribers have permission to photocopy articles free of charge for distribution on their own campus. Library Issues is available online with a password or IP access at <<http://www.LibraryIssues.com>>