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Building Collaborative Reference and Instructional Services for Distance Education Students

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BUILDING COLLABORATIVE REFERENCE AND INSTRUCTIONAL SERVICES FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION STUDENTS

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Introduction

To meet the needs of rigorous educational programs, academic libraries must make a commitment to serve growing distance education (DE) populations. Students who participate in distance education are typically older, nontraditional students with unique characteristics who need special services provided by their university library in order to obtain an education equal to their on-campus counterparts. Creating a successful reference and instructional service for distance education students not only takes planning, collaboration, and assessment, but also requires knowing your audience, constantly experimenting with new technologies, expecting the unexpected, and being ready to problem-solve at a moment's notice. In this article, the authors will discuss the process of creating reference and instructional services for distance students and faculty: challenges to expect, ways to address these challenges, and the constant need to plan for the future.

Addressing the Guidelines

As distance education programs began to grow rapidly, the guidelines established by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) and other accrediting associations provided direction for academic libraries to become more involved in distance education. The ACRL guidelines state "library resources and services in institutions of higher learning must meet the needs of all their faculty, students and academic support personnel, regardless of where they are located." (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2004).   The guidelines further state that services for off-campus students and faculty must be equal to those for on-campus

students. ACRL argues separate funding, planning, and promotion of library services for distance education programs should be implemented (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2004). The guidelines provide libraries with a worthy goal; however, in practice, they present many challenges to librarians who seek to meet the information needs of DE students.

In this article, distance education is primarily defined as a program of delivering instruction and services to students via online applications; however, some students participate in a blended environment of online and a few on-campus classes. The library and information needs of this population are different from traditional on-campus students, and providing reference and instructional services poses many challenges, not only because of the distance factor, but also because of the students' age, family and work obligations, and the great variation in the level of their technical and research skills.   Distance education programs and library services must be designed to meet the distinctive educational needs of these students.

Trends and Challenges

A decade ago, Gloria Lebowitz noted an emerging trend: the majority of students participating in distance education programs were older than traditional college students, had careers, and attended school part-time. Career and family obligations prevent many from relocating to further their schooling, thus leaving them with few options for additional educational opportunities (Lebowitz, 1997). The increase in technology during the 1990s supplied the means to develop more distance education programs and this growth provided a convenient option for

people wanting to participate in degree and certification programs (Cooper, Dempsey, Menon, & Milson-Martula, 1998). The merging of technology and the need to obtain additional education created explosive growth in the number of both distance education students and programs.

Over time, the focus of distance education programs in institutions of higher learning shifted from the traditional face-to-face onsite visits, to teleconferencing, to online technologies, thereby enabling students to participate in classes from home by providing them with very flexible learning schedules. Because of these developments, Jill S. Markgraf (2005) argues students must be proficient with emerging technologies in order to succeed; however, many students lack these skills. Cooper et al (1998) believe there are vast differences between on-campus remote users and distance education students who live away from campus. The authors' state on-campus remote users are usually motivated, proficient with library research and technology, and are familiar with electronic resources; however, distance education students are often older. Many have little familiarity with electronic resources or have limited technical knowledge (Cooper et al, 1998). This shift in technology provides the means for distance learning students to take classes, but also causes great challenges for them, especially if they are not members of the "technologically savvy" Millennial generation.

Anecdotal evidence suggests many distance education students gain their technical skills in the workplace while others have no computer-related experience at all. Even for students with computer skills, those proficiencies may not translate well into the use of library electronic resources for research purposes or in the use of course management software. Furthermore, those who lack keyboarding and mousing skills entirely are at an even greater disadvantage when using online resources. All of these factors lead to a demand for additional assistance from librarians and staff at the point of need. These transactions can become very time consuming and often have to be conducted via telephone or

e-mail, although some students do visit the library in person when they feel their needs are great. Further anecdotal evidence suggests many students in this population prefer some sort of human contact when they need to be introduced to new technology or resources. For convenience, distance learning students often use public libraries and other college libraries close to their homes or places of business. Nevertheless, problems can arise because services such as document delivery, interlibrary loan, and in-depth instruction are rarely provided by libraries other than that of the student's home institution. It is ultimately the final responsibility of the home institution to provide and communicate these services to the students (Parnell, 2002).

In an effort to provide reference assistance and instruction, it is helpful to determine the type of information the students need and the types of technologies available to them. Depending upon the population, knowing the level of students' technical abilities is advantageous because some can become easily frustrated with using library resources from a distance when they lack the proper research skills and technical abilities. Students' lack of technological skills and their frustrations are evident in the results of a survey conducted by Lesley Moyo and Ellysa Cahoy with students from Penn State University's World Campus. Several identified themselves as adult learners even though they were not asked any questions related to age. Many commented they became frustrated and discouraged when using technology, because it was either completely new to them or changed so rapidly they could not keep up with the changes. The authors concluded librarians must "understand the peculiarities and challenges of serving patrons at a distance" before developing ways to assist them (Moyo & Cahoy, 2003). Knowing your audience is of the utmost importance.

Other trends related to distance education and the services libraries need to provide are becoming evident. Higher education is experiencing rapid growth in distance education programs as more people take advantage of the flexibility the programs offer. Moyo and Cahoy (2003) contend "virtual academic communities" are being

created, and they believe libraries are very important in making these communities successful. As more and more students are studying via distance education, students, faculty, and librarians are learning library resources are still vital to the educational process. Students cannot find all the resources they need on the free Web; they need credible resources that are easily accessible, but often do not know how to effectively use ones provided by their libraries. They will need librarians to help them locate, access, and evaluate information resources (Ramsay & Kinnie, 2006).

For example, the University of Rhode Island serves a growing number of DE students; online courses there have more than doubled since 2004. In order to reach out to distance education faculty, URI librarians started a program where they embed themselves into WebCT as a teaching assistant if a professor signs up for the service. They send e-mails or post discussion threads in WebCT to teach students about the research process and resources. They post the steps of the research process for students to use as they move through such assignments as finding subject encyclopedias and using the online catalog. Later, accessing journal articles is discussed when students need more current and focused information. They advertise point of need instruction and reference help to the students through course management software (Ramsey & Kinnie, 2006). In the future, libraries need to consider providing more of the following: full-text, fast document delivery services, point of need assistance using as many forms of communication as possible, and knowledge of other local libraries' resources. More outreach to faculty and administrators may be necessary to educate them about the information needs of DE students and the challenges they face, as well as to learn about their expectations for students and libraries related to the provision of resources and services (Moyo & Cahoy, 2003).

Lack of awareness of library resources and services appears to be another major problem recognized by many academic libraries. The Penn State survey illustrated distance education students enrolled at the university wanted access to credible, good quality information, but were not aware of the many resources available to them; therefore, they were not taking full advantage of the library resources of their home institution (Kelley & Orr, 2003). Faculty members may also not be aware of the numerous resources available to students and the assistance librarians can provide. They may assume students already know how to use the library or that they can find everything they need on the Internet (Lebowitz, 1997).

The expectations of both faculty and students about the library can be a stumbling block to providing services. Parnell (2002) contends many faculty members and students cannot differentiate between the library's online subscription resources and the free Web or believe that the Internet is an alternative to library resources. In either case, they must be educated about the differences and taught to evaluate the resources used. Even in the cases where faculty members are very knowledgeable of library resources and use them in their online classes, they may embed persistent links to those resources; consequently, the students may not be aware that they are using library resources instead of free Web sources (Parnell, 2002). Communication, collaboration, and instruction among librarians, faculty, and students are the keys to providing consistent expectations, knowledge, and learning outcomes.

Of these, collaboration with the teaching faculty is essential for reaching students who may never use the physical library of their home institution (Markgraf, 2005). Students enrolled at the University of Maryland's University College noted the two best ways to communicate with them about library services is through the library's home page and their instructors (Kelley & Orr, 2003). Nichols and Tomeo (2005) assert librarians must remember the library's web site is the library to distance students and faculty and it must be well designed to avoid patrons' confusion and frustration. In a study of 100 academic library web sites, they found many universities do not link to the library from their home pages or from the distance education programs' homepages; therefore, students may

assume there are no library services available for them (Nichols & Tomeo, 2005).

To raise awareness and provide communication to students and faculty, librarians should consider participating in online courses through a course management system. They can observe discussion threads pertaining to research and interject appropriate comments as necessary. Participation within a content management system provides librarians with more access to students, additional knowledge of the curriculum, and information to evaluate the students' research skills. However, lurking involves a considerable investment of time, the expectations of those involved may differ greatly, and some participants may be concerned about privacy issues related to instruction, communication, or grades (Markgraf, 2005). Markgraf states "the librarian is wise to look, listen, and learn so that he/she can best determine how the library can support online faculty and students. To be able to observe and participate from within the course management system provides an ideal vantage point" (2005); however, the advantages and disadvantages of lurking must be considered carefully before embarking on this endeavor.

Information and Library Services at the University of Maryland, University College serves a large distance learning population with online studies accounting for almost 50% of their total enrollment. In 2001, UMUC librarians conducted a needs assessment to identify trends in the use of their libraries' resources and services by the distance learning population (Kelley & Orr, 2003). Their findings provide a good summary of points to consider as librarians begin to develop distance education services or find themselves in the position of playing catch-up as more programs are offered. In general, students and faculty are using the physical library less and turning more to online resources; this is especially true for students who take their classes online. Materials and services need to be integrated into electronic tools as much as possible whether it is through the library catalog, databases, or course management software, and access to full-text materials is extremely

important. Also, online instruction regarding the library's resources that can be accessed 24 hours a day is preferred by many students (Kelley & Orr, 2003).

When embarking on the process of creating new reference and instructional services, librarians need to educate themselves about the current trends in distance education, the degrees or programs being offered through distance education at their institution, how the courses are taught, the enrollment figures, and the expected growth rate of the programs (Lebowitz, 1997). Also, it is important to acquire information regarding the demographics of the student population in an attempt to determine their overall level of technical abilities. This information provides librarians with an idea of the types of technology the students may be comfortable using and can help pinpoint technologies they may be willing to learn. It is important to remember some students will need a personal touch or human interaction to be successful in navigating library resources and the human element should always be an option as a means of assistance, especially as rapid change will continue to occur as new technologies develop.

History of Distance Education at East Carolina University

East Carolina University (ECU) located in Greenville, North Carolina, has a longstanding commitment to distance education. Over the last 60 years, ECU provided courses through extension, where professors traveled throughout eastern North Carolina to hold classes, correspondence, on-site visits, and teleconferencing. With the development of course management software, the university adopted newer technologies to provide instruction at a distance. Since the beginning of the 21st Century, ECU's distance education population has grown exponentially. The university's commitment to distance education is summarized well by Dr. Elmer Poe, Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic Outreach, who stated, "ECU has a tradition of service to our region and our region is large geographically, people are spread out. So the idea that somebody

can't come to campus is not a new idea to us. We take education to them" (Tuttle, 2007).

In the fall of 2007, the university's population numbered more than 25,000 students making ECU the third largest academic institution in North Carolina and the largest producer of distance education students and programs in the University of North Carolina (UNC) system. The latest figures show 18% of the university's total enrollment are students who are enrolled in distance education courses only. Other students participate in a blended environment; for example, on-campus students taking an occasional Internet course or distance learners who are required to meet on campus at certain intervals in their program but take the majority of their classes via the Internet (Office of Institutional Planning, Research, and Effectiveness, 2006-2007). In 2000-2001, the university's distance education enrollment totaled only 899 students; currently, 5,270 distance students are enrolled, and the curriculum has grown significantly, now offering more than 50 degree and certificate programs (Office of Planning and Institutional Research, 2000-2001).

Other demographic information illustrates that students at ECU reflect national trends. The average age of ECU distance learners is 36, 68% are women, and 86% have two or more children at home and are employed. Most students choose distance education because of work; others for ease of accessibility. Community college graduates/transfers compose 68% of the ECU undergraduate population in distance education, and the teacher education programs attract the majority of students accounting for 45% of the distance education enrollment figures (East Carolina University Purple Alert, 2006.)

The College of Education, which has the largest contingent of distance education students at ECU, is one of the best examples of Joyner Library's collaborative efforts. The faculty members of the college have been willing to experiment with the library in providing new reference and instructional services to their students. Librarians at ECU have observed that many of the DE students do not have adequate research skills and we have learned that human

contact is the preferred method for introducing new technology and resources to our older/nontraditional distance education population.

Wachovia Partnership East

Wachovia Partnership East, collaboration between ECU's College of Education and Wachovia Bank, started with cohorts in three eastern North Carolina counties. Since it is difficult to retain teachers in rural areas, these students are recruited from their local areas specifically because they are place bound and are therefore willing to stay and teach in their communities. The first group of students from this program graduated in the spring of 2006.

Students spend the first two years in a community college before transferring to ECU to complete their undergraduate degree in education. After the first two years are complete, the students have a choice of taking online classes or a traditional face-to-face setting at the community college with a professor from ECU. Once this partnership was established, it became clear Joyner Library needed to take a role in supporting the students' needs and addressing the challenges they faced. Although the library was not involved in the initial planning process, it became apparent that the library needed to collaborate actively in order for the students to be academically successful.

Our Teaching Resources Center (TRC) librarians realized the cohorts were lacking the necessary state-adopted textbooks needed to complete their coursework. The TRC librarians, the community college librarians, faculty from the College of Education, and representatives from the Golden Leaf Foundation met to devise a solution for this particular challenge. With financial assistance from the Golden Leaf Foundation, Joyner Library purchased the core collection of K-5 teacher editions adopted throughout the region and placed copies in each community college library participating in the partnership. After this initial purchase, only newly adopted textbooks would be acquired and distributed accordingly.

The Distance Education Co-Coordinators, TRC

librarians, and the Interlibrary Loan Librarian provide an orientation for teaching faculty and students. Information packets are distributed, the web page is shown, interlibrary loan accounts are established, and emphasis is placed on identifying key contacts within the library. The students are encouraged to identify themselves as DE students when contacting the library for assistance, so staff members can make them aware of the services specifically designed to meet their needs. In the future, assessment of these introductory orientation sessions will be developed and implemented.

Working with the Wachovia Partnership East program has highlighted several issues that will require solutions in the near future. Cataloging and auditing issues have arisen because a paper trail must be present before the textbooks can be placed in the community colleges. It is very difficult to account for these resources because they are housed outside of Joyner Library. Several students reported other libraries within the UNC system did not allow them to check out books with their university identification card as they were told they could during the information sessions. We realized the problem may extend to all of our distance students and as a result we have begun communicating with various departments on campus to find a solution (L. Teel & H. Walker, pers. comm.).

Our ability to work with the faculty, knowledge of our resources, and contact with distance students have all increased, and the collaboration has provided librarians at Joyner Library knowledge of difficulties encountered by all parties. These are challenges other libraries need to be aware of when developing distance education services.

ECU@Ft. Bragg

Providing resources and services to military personnel presents the newest challenge to librarians at Joyner Library. In 2005, ECU established a partnership with Fort Bragg, a large military base for the United States Army located near Fayetteville, North Carolina. The program is designed to provide soldiers and their dependents the opportunity to earn degrees through distance education. Classes are available to troops no matter where they are deployed and library resources and services must be available as well (The Daily Reflector, 2005). Anticipating the needs of troops presents an exciting opportunity for marketing the library's resources and services, but we anticipate encountering issues which may have never arisen previously.

These new demands may require us to devise creative solutions in order to meet the soldiers' information needs. To date, the only challenge reported by those working with the military students was the need for information explaining how to access and navigate the Joyner Library homepage and its electronic resources. The Distance Education Coordinator quickly created a basic guide to the library and its resources for distribution through the Military Outreach office at ECU (Y. Hollingsworth, pers. comm.). Joyner Library plans to continue investigating the needs of this unique student population and will attempt to raise awareness of the resources and services the library can provide, the challenges we believe the students may face, and ways the Military Outreach office can assist us in helping the students succeed academically.

LibQual

Finding a reliable method of assessment to evaluate the library's distance education services has proven difficult. Often we have had to rely on anecdotal evidence gained through interactions with students and faculty in one-on-one situations or on occasions when working with a class as a whole. During the spring semester of 2007, the Joyner Library administration targeted this population for assessment and decided to use the LibQual Survey as the instrument to measure opinions about the library's resources and services. The university's Division of Continuing Studies Office distributed the LibQual Survey for the library. All 6,007 students enrolled in an online course during spring semester 2007 received a request to complete the survey. The response rate totaled only 5.9%, making it difficult to generalize the results of the survey, but the analysis of the statistics and the comments given by the students proved helpful and provided basic

information for further investigation (J. Lewis, pers. comm.).

The analysis of the results revealed several themes to consider for both enhancing the library's services and correcting difficulties encountered by students. In the comments, many praised the library and its services. The students reported being very happy with the amount of online resources available; although, the desire for more electronic journals was often noted. They liked such special services provided as having books mailed to them from Joyner Library and the opportunity to access libraries at other state universities. Many commented being pleased with the assistance they received citing the employees as professional, courteous, helpful, and providing quick responses to their needs.

As at other academic libraries nationwide, students' lack of awareness of resources appears to beleaguer Joyner Library. Comments provided by students revealed they were either not aware the library offered any resources to them at all or did not know about certain specific resources and services. Finding efficient methods to market the library's reference and instructional services will be of great importance in our effort to provide equal access to these students. Some students living within a reasonable driving distance of the university reported having difficulty using the library in person; parking near the library presented serious challenges. Also, several students reported having difficulty getting assistance from knowledgeable staff members during the hours they frequented the library, mostly in the evenings and during weekends. At the present time, several departments use graduate assistants to provide public service during off-peak hours, but because these are the times most distance students visit the library, we will re-evaluate staffing patterns to provide the best assistance we can at times when DE students frequent the building. Increasing the number of full-time staff members during evenings and weekends may be the best option.

Students reported having difficulty using some of the library's online resources most frequently; specifically using databases to find popular and scholarly journal articles. Many respondents asked the library to provide more online guides and tutorials as instructional aids (Association of Research Libraries Libqual+, 2007). As a result of these requests, the Reference Department increased its experimentation with screen casting software and began producing more online tutorials on a wide variety of research-related topics. In the future, the department plans to collaborate with other departments within the library to create additional tutorials to instruct students how to use many of the library's resources and services.

One additional technical problem the library encountered this year is an important one to note for any library working with distance education students overseas. One of our students traveled to Australia for work-related reasons. While there, she tried to access several of our online databases to complete her coursework for the semester. She never gained access to the databases and received error messages stating the connection had timed out. After a thorough investigation of the issue, it was determined the "Time to Live Settings (TTL)" needed to be increased (M. Williams, pers. comm.).

As a result of the LibQual survey results and anecdotal evidence our goal is to improve the usability of the library's web site and experiment with innovative online reference and instructional methods, including Camtasia screen casting software, LibGuides, Facebook and other social networking tools, podcasting, virtual classroom chats through course management software, streaming videos, one-on-one research consultations, and instant messaging, to improve service. These new technologies demand more complicated work, time and patience than the traditional mode of instruction delivery, but we feel it is important to provide assistance and make students and faculty aware of our resources and services through as many forms of communication as possible; however, we will not abandon the traditional methods of reference and instruction for those students who still need human interaction.

Conclusion

Over the past few years, librarians at Joyner Library have gained considerable experience with the needs and challenges DE students face. We often gained our information through repeated interaction with students and faculty and through trial and error. We learned librarians also face unique challenges while serving this population and the authors believe it is important to convey this knowledge to other librarians who face similar challenges developing reference and instructional services for DE students now and in the future.

In the future, as we meet with more students, physically or virtually, our intention is to illustrate the use of research tools, provide practice opportunities, build confidence, and make them feel comfortable using the library effectively. Proper planning, collaboration, experimentation, and assessment shape an effective distance education program, but learning about your distance population, having good problem solving skills, and constant experimentation with technology are also very important components. It is our hope that other librarians will embrace DE students, make them feel a part of the campus community, and use this model to build effective reference and instructional services at their libraries.

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