10.8 Institutional Support for Distance Education

Editorial

The library of my childhood memories was just down the street. It held several dim, musty-smelling rooms filled with towering book stacks. This was a place of enforced silence, broken only by the occasional whisper. I remember being shushed and frowned upon by serious, sour-looking librarians for rattling the dividers in the card catalogs as I shut the drawers.

I have observed libraries change over the years. The library building located near my current office reflects this change. It has walls of windows; it is decorated with plants and comfortable chairs; rows of computer terminals have replaced card-filled cabinets; the book stacks are well-lighted.

There is one particular thing that these two libraries have in common: proximity to me. But then, I'm not a "distant" student—remote from my university and the resources that I need for study and research. Many neophyte distance educators mistakenly assume that all the reading and research materials needed by a student can be found on the Web or in neighborhood public libraries. And librarians, who know the most about meeting distant students' information needs, are rarely consulted when distance learning programs are being planned and implemented.

This month's article looks at those needs and the librarian's roles and responsibilities in meeting them. Librarians' contributions can make the vital difference between a frustrating and a fulfilling learning experience for distance students. The author looks at issues that surround the provision of library and reference services to distance students and suggests a number of strategies for both librarians and the institutions that house them to improve the available services.

Mauri Collins
Editor

Institutional Support for Distance Education

Elizabeth A. Buchanan, Ph.D.
School of Library and Information Science
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
PO Box 41
Milwaukee, WI 53201

Introduction

Formal, accredited distance learning opportunities are growing at exponential rates. Recent statistics reveal that some 85 percent of higher education institutions offer some form of
distance education and, while such growth is commendable, it is prudent to examine institutional support mechanisms for distance students early on. As these programs grow and expand, institutional support systems likewise must grow.

Policies and procedures to support distance learners are mandatory. While support such as advising services, job placement services, and tutorial assistance is available, the provision of and access to library materials and services is of particular importance to distance learners. A common error surrounding the provision of library resources and services is that distance students "can get 'it' on the Internet." Many think there is no need to provide additional services. Students are often left alone to locate and acquire materials, spending great amounts of time downloading electronic reserve materials, accessing supplementary resources, and deciphering electronic indexes and databases. In extreme cases, electronic indexes and databases are restricted by licensing and are, therefore, off-limits to distance students. Metcalf (1999) notes that "with the recent growth of distance education… [librarians] never even get to see, let alone instruct or communicate with, many of our users. Who knows how many people are not finding what they need from the expensive services we offer online, or are settling for less than they should?" (42).

If colleges and universities want to succeed in the online education environment, they must begin to reassess the ways distance students are treated across the board. The income from their tuition dollars, while often greater than on-site tuition, is a significant factor in the continuing success of distance education enrollment. While students are clearly benefiting from the convenience and availability of online courses, additional support mechanisms must be established and sustained if distance education is to continue its successful run: Students will likely tire of their "second-class" student status unless sound institutional precautions are taken.

A number of strategies and procedures can be established to ensure the best educational experience for distance students. These can be identified as instructor strategies, library strategies, and institutional strategies; a growing and adequate research base surrounds instructional strategies, but greater attention must be devoted to library and institutional support mechanisms. Each is extremely important, and institutional cooperation and collaboration will lend to stronger, more pedagogically sound distance education programs.

Unfortunately, lack of holistic and strategic planning plagues many institutions. According to the 1998 National Survey of Information Technology in Higher Education, which polled a representative 600 institutions, Kirk and Bartelstein (1999) report less than one-third have a plan for distance learning through the Internet. And, given that Web-based delivery is quickly becoming the norm, replacing satellite and compressed-video delivery, these institutions must begin to develop solid, working plans for distance education programs.

Planning for Library Services and Distance Education

McManus (1998) offers a pessimistic vision for libraries in 2020, one that hopefully will not come to fruition: "Unless we are cautious in how we define and program [extended campus] services…distance students will sit at their home PCs and electronically debit $20 per course to the university and $400 to Time-Warner. That is, the library will not be a key player
in distance education…” (432). McManus rightfully suggests that libraries in particular must have a major role and involvement in the development and early stages of distance education programs. The library, as a cornerstone of higher education and a seminal resource for students and faculty, can make distance learning either a most pleasant or most distressing experience for remote students.

While the library, as we know, will continue to exist as a brick-and-mortar facility, its services and resources will change; the conception of the library must change also. The library’s role in instruction is assuming a newfound importance in our information-laden environment, and critical research skills and strategies are more important now than ever. Library services and resources are changing. With the growing number of distance learners, the library must evolve into a proactive entity reaching out to students, instead of being a passive entity, awaiting visitors. Luther (1998) rightly notes that in libraries "the focus is shifting from place to person…access needs to be defined by who the users are in terms of their affiliation, rather than where they are geographically when they access a database" (24). This is particularly important for serving international students participating in distance education programs. For instance, the library services program at Deakin University in Australia (http://www.deakin.edu.au/library/ocserv.html) serves as a strong model. Its library Web site offers sections specifically addressing distance students and what services are provided for them, and affords such services as subject searching, online renewal of materials, borrowing and delivery systems at no additional cost to students, and a network of supporting libraries throughout the region.

The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL 1998) issued new guidelines for providing distance learning library services. The ACRL addressed and redefined such areas as management, finances, personnel, facilities, resources, services, documentation, and library education for the distance learning environment. The ACRL, in taking initiative in providing these guidelines, is cognizant of the importance of changing policies and procedures in light of distance learning. Other formal organizations must follow this lead and offer standards of practice. The guidelines, fundamental for libraries’ success in serving distance education programs, are available at http://www.ala.org/acrl/guides/distlrng.html.

Libraries serving distance education students should practice the following strategies:

1. **establish relationships with vendors and service providers to allow off-campus access to licensed databases and indexes.** Site licenses are often restrictive and dial-in access prohibitive. New policies must permit access by distance students, regardless of their location. A dedicated connection with ample lines must be established to fulfill the information needs of distance learners.

2. **create a full-time distance education librarian position.** This professional would work closely with departments and instructors to ensure access to materials and services. This person would need to develop instructional tutorials that can be accessed via the Internet, as well as provide telephone and email assistance to bibliographic instruction. If the distance education librarian were responsible for upkeep
of Web sites for distance education students, he/she would need to update these pages frequently, indicating what services are provided for students and, if a service is not provided, alternative means should be suggested (Linden 2000).

5. **provide timely access to course materials through electronic reserve, document delivery, or interlibrary loan.** Course materials must be ready prior to the course inception, as many distance students visit their campuses once early in the semester to complete scheduling, obtain course materials, and meet with faculty members. The earlier the materials are available, the more convenient for distance students.

7. **provide a toll-free number specifically for library-related requests and services.** If the distance education librarian is unable to take the call, a voice mail system must be in place and return calls guaranteed in a twenty-four hour time frame.

9. **make certain electronic reserve articles are clear and scanned at the highest possible resolution.**

11. **provide the file size so the student has a sense of the time it will take to download the file.** Documents should not exceed fifteen pages, as modem connections may not support file transfers of large size. Larger documents should be broken into multiple parts.

13. **be sure that hard copies of all documents are available prior to the beginning of class, in conjunction with the department from which the distance class originates.** Students should have a choice either to purchase the requisite documents or to download and print the documents.

15. **explore long-term partnerships with other libraries and library systems.** For instance, in Wisconsin, a proposal is pending in the state legislature to establish a collaborative program of library services for distance students in the University of Wisconsin system. This proposal calls for various collaborating libraries from higher education institutions and private academic libraries throughout Wisconsin to join together to serve the needs of distance students. Through an agreement of the state’s libraries, a number of services would be readily available, including interlibrary loan (with delivery to the closest library to a student or delivery to the student’s designated address), full text document delivery via e-mail, and access to course materials.

17. **carefully examine the distance education programs offered through the institution and employ a planning committee as new courses and programs come online.** Luther (1998) recognizes the differences between graduate programs or courses which typically require many more library resources "in terms of research materials than other classes offered, which may be non-credit, skills-based" (26).

**Institutional Support Mechanisms**
In addition, institutional support and services dictate the success or failure of a distance education program. While individual departments and instructors must uphold their end, institutional mechanisms assume a highly significant role. Distance students are faced with the challenges of tracking down the appropriate contact person for administrative questions; they must obtain registration materials, transcripts, and other official business in a timely manner through telephone or e-mail contacts; and they must seek their own guidance and career assistance from outlets removed from the campus. These can be challenging obstacles, and they often lend to the high attrition rates associate with distance learning. Institutions must take precautions to avoid such attrition and, ultimately, the collapse and failure of their distance programs. These programs cannot operate alone. They require highly organized and strategically developed plans for the provision of services and resources to distance learners.

Institutions of higher education must be willing to change and adapt to new circumstances and new student needs. Such institutions as Deakin University, Western Governors University, and the Open Universities reveal a commitment to planning and to providing resources and services to distance students analogous to those provided to on-site, traditional students—or, they have shown the importance of providing services and resources above and beyond those for on-site students.

Strategies for Institutions

Institutions that serve distance education students should practice the following strategies:

1. establish policies on the management of distance students, especially concerning residency status. For instance, how will international students participating in Web-based programs be considered? How long will non-residents be considered? Will all distance education students receive a non-resident tuition waiver as the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee School of Library and Information Science has initiated? If so, it should be clear whether these policies apply if the students should take on-campus coursework. Early administrative consideration of this critical issue will help students make informed decisions regarding the costs of their studies.

2. provide a toll-free telephone number specifically for distance students. This number should allow the students’ calls to be transferred to any department or individual as needed.

3. provide e-mail help lines for reference and service questions. Turnaround time should be no more than twenty-four hours.

4. provide a contact person or a distance education liaison who maintains regular hours and availability. This person should answer questions regarding administrative details of the student’s enrollment and progress in the institution.

5. devise mechanisms whereby distance students are easily provided with an
identification card or number. Requiring them to obtain a photographic identification card from campus entails an additional trip to campus. While many schools are no longer using social security numbers for student identification, distance students should be given an identification card or number for use upon admission to a class or program. Then, should the student use library facilities such as circulation or reserve, or other services such as gymnasiums or bus passes, each department must accept either the card or the number alone. A graduate student in the UW-Milwaukee School of Library and Information Science program relayed a frustrating experience: "If a distance student takes a class on campus, we do not have a student ID and cannot easily access the library. I had major problems because I didn't know what I needed to do to get the card and had no time to get to the office to take care of it. Another student using the library from the same class let me photocopy the articles I needed. After that experience I will try hard NOT to come to campus to take another class."

11. eliminate segregated fees for services that distance students will obviously not use, such as bus passes, campus student groups, and gymnasium visits. A distinct fee structure must be created by institutions to ensure fairness and equity for all students.

12. provide career assistance, guidance, and other tutorial programs through electronic means. Distance students must have access to the same materials and personnel as those housed on-site in guidance and career placement offices. Workshops and lectures should be video streamed and archived on the institutional Web site.

13. develop delivery mechanisms with campus or other bookstores, or ensure that course textbooks are available through online sources such as Amazon or Barnes and Noble. Distance students should be able to procure their texts as easily as on-campus students, and this may require a toll-free order line and direct delivery without additional delivery costs.

14. provide advanced course schedules (at least one year ahead of time) to allow students to plan their workloads accordingly. The profile of a typical distance education student is that he/she is working at least part-time and needs the flexibility of forward planning.

Conclusion

Distance education is a core educational strategy. It holds great potential on a number of levels. Yet the potential for failure, or for mediocre distance programs, is high, unfortunately. Developing proactive, strategic plans requires the commitment of entire institutions, as have been described herein. Going the extra mile will ensure pedagogical integrity, student satisfaction and, ultimately, the success of distance education programs.
References


Author Notes

Elizabeth A. Buchanan, Ph.D.
School of Library and Information Science
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
PO Box 413
Milwaukee, WI 53201
Phone 414-229-3973
Fax 414-229-4848
E-mail buchanan@slis.uwm.edu