

The Role of the Librarian in Distance and Distributed Learning

Judy Block, Eastern Michigan University

Distance education (DE) brings the resources and educational opportunities of academia to the learners desktop but considerable planning must be done beforehand to assure a quality experience for the student. The librarian is an instrumental player in this work. Buchanan (2000) states, "The library's role in instruction is assuming a new importance in our information-laden environment and critical research skills and strategies are more important now than ever" (p.44). The DE librarian's contributions in shaping the research components of all courses are vital to under girding the student's research skills to produce college level papers and research projects. When faced with these tasks, it is often the library where the student seeks advice and consultation. This paper looks briefly at the history of distance education and summarizes the active learning support role librarians provide to distance learners to enhance their skills and knowledge when navigating the multitude of library resources.

Distance Education Growth

Distance education is not new; its beginnings come from the Correspondence Model of 1840, where class content and student responses were communicated via the mail system. Major universities, such as Penn State, have been "recognized leader(s) in distance education for more than 100 years." But in the last decade, distance education has truly exploded in size and importance. According to the most recent National Center for Education Statistics study, course enrollments and the number of post-secondary institutions offering distance education doubled from 1997-98 to 2000-01. A more recent study by Babson reports that growth continues to increase rapidly, with 3.2 million higher education students (17% of all students) taking at least one online course in the fall term of 2005, an impressive increase over the 2.3 million reported in 2004. On an individual institutional level, Eastern Michigan University's Continuing Education Department has experienced similar significant enrollment growth, rising from 31,792 in 1995-96 to 73,591 in 2005-06. This growth is enabled, as Restauri (2004) states, by changes in technology that have allowed for easier, faster, and less costly access to the Internet. These faster, cheaper connections allow for the use of video, feature-laden databases, interactive web sites, and other tools to provide a learning experience much richer and productive than even five years ago.

Library Services to the Distant Learner

Due to this dramatic growth, it is more important than ever that library services be available to support these learners. Johnson (2004) remarks support services for the distant learner are a key to learner success and are vital to a successful learning program. Through active support services, distance learners are able to have access to a wide range of library services and technology provides unlimited opportunities today for librarians to assist these students. However, as noted in the Babson report and confirmed by my experience at EMU, librarians must also be cognizant that this population tends to be a group that did not have access to current technology or even the Internet in their high school years or previous undergrad experience. Consequently, care must be used when utilizing and teaching students about the new resources and tools available to them as students. For example, at EMU a typical distance learner is in their 40's and early 50's, and they are returning to academia to obtain additional education for upward mobility or a career change. While they are motivated and eager to learn, they do not want thick manuals; when library instruction is given, whether in person or online, they want succinct, measured step-by-step directions. This type of direction is even more critical than usual with this population not as adept as typical undergrads with these tools and technologies. It can require a bit of extra guidance to make sure these students understand how to conduct their research, gain ready access to databases away from campus (e.g., home or work), and learn skills to narrow their search efficiently.

A typical scenario for the distance learner at EMU is reflected in this email: "Thank you so much for your assistance. My greatest frustration is the technical part of my classes. It takes 15 minutes for my dial-up service to download emich.edu (the email program) and until now, I didn't know that it was downloading, I just thought it was not opening up." Another scenario that is prevalent can be seen in this email: "Thank you for your tutorial on writing the research paper, it really saved me. Being away from school for 30 years, writing my first paper was a bit intimidating for me. But the tutorial saved the day!! Thanks again." As you can see, the DE Librarian has to be thinking of how to make the distance learning program better meet student needs, considering their rustiness with academic research skills along with their technology adeptness.

In order to meet these needs, beyond methodical instruction, a real focus on user-friendly services provided in a non-threatening environment of interaction is crucial. Some services provided for distance learners differ from those provided for on-campus students as the physical library very often is not within easy access. For example, interlibrary loan books can be mailed directly to a student's home address, while they are only delivered to the on-campus library for pickup for non-DE students. Additionally, while library face-to-face contact is normal for an on-campus student, distance learners more typically interact with the librarian via email, telephone, fax or at a Regional location. This makes the standard library orientation at the beginning of each academic semester even more important for distant learners, as it provides a human face behind the emails and phone calls which often follow later in the semester. EMU's Halle Library provides access to more than seventy partially or totally full text databases that help students identify articles in journals, magazines or newspapers at <http://portal.emich.edu/remote/htm>. Yang states that, "libraries should subscribe to as many full-text journals as possible and build more interactive online tutorials" (p.95). Also, every quarter, I publish an online DE Newsletter consisting of a review of new literature that is appropriate for DE faculty, support staff and administrators. In this way by collaborating with faculty, I can help EMU's Distance Learning program meet its goals of "accommodat(ing) the informational needs of the distance learning community" and assist(ing) distance learners to become independent in library literacy skills."

When these requests for help occur, it is rarely at a reference desk, but often in a phone call or email. In responding to a request for help, EMU's DE Library has a goal of a maximum 24 hour turnaround time. In addition, a DE web site is available, <http://people.emich.edu/jblock>, which provides user-friendly resources such as: links to the Internet Public Library, Ask.com, and the Michigan Electronic Library. Other resources developed for DE students include tutorials for the disciplines of business, education, nursing, construction management, industrial technology and quality control. Feedback has been positive, as students (and their faculty) appreciate the targeted help. Other services include traveling to regional centers around the state - Brighton, Detroit, Flint, Jackson, Livonia, Monroe, and Traverse City - to provide in-class bibliographic instruction.

Conclusion

Distance education support affects both the pedagogical aspects of teaching and learning, and the organizational, economic, and technical structures. The field of distance education continues to grow rapidly. Due to continuing unprecedented demand it is vital that we in the library profession respond accordingly. All educational innovation we are able to bring to this endeavor through a distance learning presence will solidify and enrich the learner's experience in the academic world.

References

- Allen, E. and Seaman, J. (2006). Making the grade: Online education in the United States, 2006. BABSON Research Group, Sloan Consortium. Retrieved March 2, 2007, from http://www.sloan-c.org/publications/survey/pdf/making_the_grade.pdf
- Buchanan, E. A. (2000). Going the extra mile: Serving distance education students with resources and services. *Syllabus*, 13, 44-47.
- Johnson, M. (2004). Enhancing study skills: Developing self-help materials for distance learners. In J. E. Brindley, C. Walti, & O. Zawacki-Richter (Eds.), *Learner support in open, distance and online learning environments* (pp. 117-124). Oldenburg: Bibliotheks- und Informationssystem der Universität Oldenburg.
- Outreach Marketing and Communications (2007). Penn State online. Retrieved March 8, 2007 from <http://www.worldcampus.psu.edu/>
- Restauri, S.L. (2004). Creating an effective online distance education program using targeted support factors. *TechTrends*, 47, 21-41.
- Yang, Z. (2005). Distance education librarians in the U.S. ARL libraries and library services provided to their distance users. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 31, 92-7.