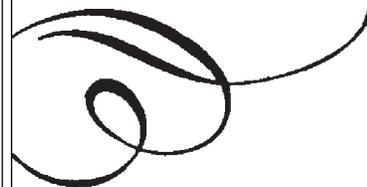


POSTSECONDARY DISTANCE LEARNERS AND PUBLIC LIBRARIES: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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INTRODUCTION

Elsewhere in this issue Anne Haynes describes the challenges and opportunities *within* an academic library system that offers services to distance learners. This article also addresses the challenges and opportunities presented by the library needs of distance learners, but *outside* an academic library system.

THE CHARGE

A college or university that offers distance education courses is responsible for providing adequate and appropriate library support, as outlined in Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs, which calls for “library resources appropriate to the program” and lists these seven:

- Reference and research assistance;
- Remote access to databases;
- Online journals and full-text resources;
- Document delivery services;
- Library user and information literacy instruction;
- Reserve materials;
- Institutional agreements with local libraries (11).

The Guidelines for Distance Learning Library Support stipulate that “the originating institution is responsible for providing or securing convenient, direct physical, and electronic access to library materials for distance learning programs equivalent to those provided in traditional settings and in sufficient quality, depth, number, scope, currentness, and formats to: 1. meet the students’ needs in fulfilling course assignments (e.g., required and supplemental readings and research papers) and enrich the academic programs . . .” (par 14). Are distance learners aware of what their college or university libraries have to offer, and do they make good use of the services and resources?

THE CHALLENGE

A study in Australia in 1987 revealed that 43% of the 1195 distance learners surveyed used public libraries

more frequently than any other kind of library, including their home library (Grosser and Bagnell 306). A later study of 190 Australian distance learners, 104 of them Ph.D. candidates, found that only 19.7% reported using public libraries (Macauley 193). However, one must bear in mind that at least 99 of the respondents were employed by an academic institution (191). A comprehensive survey of library preferences of distance learners in the United Kingdom showed that students chose to visit their public libraries even though 75% of those queried lived less than 25 miles from the nearest university library (Stephens, Unwin, and Bolton 29). There are no recent published surveys of such scale in the United States, although in 1991 Power and Keenan cited studies that showed “40 percent to 70 percent of extended campus students depend primarily upon local libraries . . .” (442). Jennifer Sutherland, a library school student at the University of Denver, conducted an informal e-mail survey of 71 distance education students in 14 states during the fall of 2000. She found that 73% borrowed materials from their local public libraries rather than from their home library (19). The reasons they gave included location, ease of use, and resources (20). Reference service was among the top five public library “resources” listed by 62% of the students, while 31% availed themselves of interlibrary loan services but only 6% cited the use of online databases (22).

Most surveys of the library usage patterns of distance learners are often not made public, as they are institution specific. However, librarians at the State University of West Georgia (SUWG) have reported the results of the first two of three surveys of their distance learners – in 1991, 1995, and 1999. Data from the 1991 survey indicated that 35% of the students used nearby public libraries rather than the SUWG library services or resources, while the number in 1995 was 31%. The figures were discouraging to the SUWG distance librarians, who had made great efforts to publicize the services and resources they had to offer (par 16). In contrast, Adams and Cassner’s 1997 survey of distance learners of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln found “very little use” of public libraries (4).

The dearth of published empirical evidence makes it difficult to determine whether facts and figures support the anecdotal evidence that distance learners tend to rely on public libraries instead of or in addition to their “home” libraries, those supported by the institution from which they take courses and where they pay tuition. However, conversations with fellow distance librarians and postings to various listservs lend credence to the lament a public librarian, “Distantly Disturbed,” sent to the LIRT News “Tech Talk” back in 1997:

“I work in a medium-sized public library in a community of about 100,000. Recently we’ve been getting requests for assistance from teachers who are enrolled in Master’s and Ph.D. programs offered through distance education at a university in another part of the state. We simply don’t have the depth or level of resources to help these students. In some instances we don’t even have the resources to help them find materials that will meet their needs. . . . Needless to say, frustration on all sides is running rampant. What are we to do?”

Why do distance learners look to their public libraries for support rather than to their home libraries? Comfort and convenience appear to be two prime factors, as shown by the 58% in the Sutherland survey who indicated ease of use as a reason for choosing nearby public libraries (20). Often students have been familiar with their public library and its personnel since childhood. Even if an academic library is nearby, parking at a public library is usually decidedly much less difficult than trying to find a parking spot on or near a college or university campus. In addition, public libraries may have faster Internet access than the students’ Internet Service Providers. Ironically, some students are uncomfortable with computers and afraid of the Internet, despite having opted for distance education in an electronic environment. They actually think they can complete their course work by using only print information sources, in particular those they can find at their public library. Others have expressed a desire to be in an actual library building, public or academic, comfortably surrounded by books on shelves.

Savvy library users are aware of the free or low-cost interlibrary loan service at their public library, especially if they are residents in a state in which libraries have reciprocal agreements that include academic libraries as well as public libraries. One example is Louisiana (Wittkopf, Orgeron, and Del Nero). Colorado has a similar network (Wessling), as does Utah (Brunvand et al.). Students in Florida had access to speedy document delivery via a courier service among public and academic libraries in that state. (Smith, Race, Ault) – until the state legislature cut funding for the program.

Distance learners may use nearby brick-and-mortar libraries because they do not know what their home library has to offer. Sadly, the students’ lack of awareness of their home library’s offerings may in some cases be the fault of the parent institution. Many a distance librarian has spoken of the difficulties of obtaining the names of students in their parent institution’s distance education courses. They may feel “blindsided” because they are often the last to know about the distance courses and programs of their own college or university (Butler par 11).

Sometimes heroic efforts by distance librarians to contact all students to describe available resources and to offer their services simply do not succeed, as shown by results of the State University of West Georgia survey cited earlier. In the 1991 survey, only 8% of the students reported using the home library; the figure in 1995 was 17% (par 16).

Unfortunately, there are negative aspects to students’ preference for public libraries. One is a result of their unrealistic expectations. They don’t understand that “public libraries were not created to support a university or even college-level curriculum” but are “the public’s source of general information. . . .” (Culpepper par 5). Nor do the students realize that the databases in a public library do not necessarily index scholarly materials. As a result, they *satisfice*, or settle for whatever is available at the public library. As Grosset and Bagnell found, “Convenience factors encourage students to use information resources near them, such as the public library, although those resources may be less than ideal for their purposes” (314). A more conscientious distance learner’s quest for information, requests for assistance, or need for scholarly resources can be ineffective and frustrating unless the public library’s mission includes “collecting and providing access to materials appropriate for the student’s research” (Caspers 306). Few public libraries have such a collection. The result may be a lament similar to the one expressed earlier by “Distantly Disturbed” in the LIRT News “Tech Talk”: “. . . frustration on all sides is running rampant. What are we to do?”

OPPORTUNITIES: PUBLIC LIBRARIES

Is there a way to turn that rampant frustration to something mutually beneficial despite the limitations of a public library’s resources? After all, as a tax payer and local resident, a distance learner is among a public library’s “primary clientele” and education of the public is a part of the public library’s *raison d’être*. The Web site maintained by the Shy Librarian lists the mission statements of 54 public libraries, most of which include a mandate to assist or support education. Ten of the statements specifically mention lifelong learning and one goes so far as to state, “We will assist students of all ages in meeting education objectives established in

their course of study.” Despite the predominantly non-scholarly nature of its collection and perhaps the staff’s lack of experience or training in meeting the research and information needs of graduate or undergraduate students, public libraries can still play a valuable role as part of a distance learner’s *total information network*.

They can offer distance learners valuable services, services within the capabilities of most public libraries (adapted from Dority 25):

- Proctoring of exams;
- Coaching in research and writing skills;
- Collections of information in several formats on financial aid and online learning;
- Information about how to evaluate online learning programs;
- A central spot where local online learners can meet one another to share “war stories.”

A prime example of a library that supports distance learners in its community is the Willkinson Public Library in Telluride, Colorado. It sponsored a two-day Distance Learning Expo in May 2001 to increase awareness of the possibilities of education at a distance (McGinley). The library also provides reference and research assistance, extra time on library computers, and generous interlibrary loan service (McGinley 41). Members of the staff were delighted when one member of the community received a Ph.D., thanks in large part to the library’s support of his distance education studies (Kennedy).

A public library in a small town in the State of Washington demonstrates the direct and long-lasting benefit to the residents of offering services to distance learners. As economic changes resulted in increasing unemployment in the 1990’s, the library director began to encourage students to take extension courses from a state university. Like the Telluride librarians, she and her staff offered a full range of services and made the library’s physical, print, and electronic resources available to the distance learners. Their efforts were so successful that not only did residents begin to find employment opportunities but in time the university established a branch campus in the town (Reng). Appendix B, “How your Public Library Can Assist Distance Learners,” is a summary of her efforts.

The staff of the Palm Springs Public Library in California obtained grants and worked with the city and with corporate sponsors to create the Palm Springs Virtual University, which offered interactive courses from one university at the library. Four others were scheduled to participate as of August 1998, and additional universities had expressed interest in participating (Levinson 66).

One need not go out of Indiana to find public libraries that support distance learners in their community. Batesville, Delphi, Gary, and Greenwood public libraries are just a few examples of libraries that give distance learners access to courses through videoconferencing or satellite broadcasts. URLs for their distance learning Web sites are listed in Appendix A.

Public libraries may also serve as the initial connection point to statewide online resources such as Indiana’s INSPIRE. State-Wide Licensing of Information Resources: A 50-State Survey, conducted in 1999, found that most states had similar statewide licenses to databases sponsored by their state libraries and/or legislatures. For example, Utah’s Online Library, Pioneer, is the result of cooperation among public, school, and academic libraries (Brunvand et al.). Likewise, the Texshare Databases provide access to online resources for both public and academic users (Avila). An unpublished update of the 1999 survey by the author indicates that all 50 states provide some kind of statewide access to databases.

Students are not the only ones to benefit from a public library’s support of distance learners in its communities; the library itself may reap benefits. Thanks to the vision of the director of the Fort Bend County Libraries and his efforts to seek grants and support from other entities, the George Memorial Library in Richmond, Texas, has a state-of-the-art distance education facility. It is used to facilitate programs ranging from sign language classes for children to in-service training or advanced degrees for professionals (Lupro and Kennedy). As one colleague has suggested, serving distance learners is “one of the best marketing opportunities public libraries have ever had” (Dority 23).

OPPORTUNITIES: LIBRARIES OF DISTANCE EDUCATION PROVIDERS

As noted earlier, distance librarians make every effort to alert their students to the services and resources provided by the parent institution, invite students to use them to the fullest, and provide the means to access both services and resources. Being aware of their students’ possible tendency to turn to public libraries may provide distance librarians an opening to instruct students on the differences between popular and scholarly resources, both print and electronic. Although they attempt to dissuade their students from expecting public libraries to meet their research needs, at the same time they apprise the students of the services they can fairly and reasonably expect from public libraries. The library Web sites of distance education providers reflect such efforts. For example, the University of Minnesota’s Distance Learning: Using Libraries in your Community site and Kansas State

University's Getting the Books and Articles You Need site acknowledge that public libraries may be convenient, but the sites also carry this statement: "However, for the purpose of academic research and study, most public libraries' collection of books and journals are quite limited compared to the wealth of materials available through [the home library]." Both invite their distance learners to turn to them first. Wright State University Libraries' Distance Learning Support page also cautions students that public libraries have "some of the resources" they will need for their research but warns students that "they will not have many of the scholarly books and journals that professors require for your term papers and research projects. These scholarly resources are more easily located in the [Wright State] Libraries' web site."

The librarians who serve distance learners are cognizant of the impact their students can have on public libraries and have taken steps to anticipate and ameliorate possible problems. Their concern was evident at the recent Off-Campus Library Services Conference, April 2002, where several distance librarians met to discuss plans to invite public librarians to join them and their colleagues in a constructive dialog. They agreed that "Outreach to local librarians to establish reciprocal agreements and/or to ensure that the librarians have information for efficiently referring [distance] students to the home library is important" (Caspers 207).

Written contracts between distance education institutions and public libraries are not unusual. Chattanooga State Technical Community College has formal contracts with four public libraries. The State University of West Georgia has contracted with a public library as well as with the library of a community college (Goodson par 11). Nova Southeastern University has negotiated agreements with public libraries in various locations (Tunon). Presenters at the Fifth Off-Campus Library Services Conference in 1991 had much to say about contracting with public libraries. Dollerschell described the beginning of a partnership between the Goddard Library, University Center Rochester, Minnesota, and the Rochester Public Library, a partnership that is still in effect and that has expanded to other area libraries. Scrimgeour and Potter shared information about the written Memorandum of Understanding between Regis University and a public library. Although Regis now partners with a different public library, the underlying principles remain. Collier explained how Central Michigan University contracted for provision of bibliographic instruction by librarians at three college or community college libraries and two public libraries. Slade provided specific guidelines for drawing up agreements and emphasized that the distance education institution should provide resources to cooperating libraries.

Even without formal contracts, distance librarians can do much to establish a good working relationship with public libraries in areas where groups of their students reside. Appendix C is a list drawn up by a public librarian of suggestions for developing such rapport. Dority proposes that distance librarians share their experience and expertise with public librarians, perhaps through a mailing list (25). Good communication between distance and public librarians is the key to success.

CONCLUSION

Distance librarians must walk a fine line between discouraging students from relying mainly on nearby libraries, whether public or academic, and supporting their efforts to establish relationships with those libraries so they can use their services after graduation, when they may no longer have access to the services and resources of the distance education institution. Library Support for Distance Learners by the University of New York at Oswego attempts to maintain a healthy balance by emphasizing its own services and resources while noting the helpfulness of public libraries' reference collections and interlibrary loan services. Excelsior College's Find a Library Near You provides links to state libraries, public libraries, health libraries, and statewide resources to supplement its document delivery service through a contract with the Sheridan Libraries of Johns Hopkins University. Other libraries that serve distance learners may provide similar information and links to the libraries' Web sites but passwords protect the information. For example, Walden University and Nova Southeastern University ensure that their students are aware of the policies and limitations of nearby public (and academic) libraries before granting access to links to their sites.

Distance librarians want to provide their students with access to the resources and services necessary for their academic success as well as for lifelong learning beyond the attainment of the degree. If using both the home library and a local public library is in the students' best interest, their librarians will not discourage equitable use of the public library. However, they will make every effort to avoid a scenario such as that described by Dugan, in which a distance learner expects the library (in this case an academic library) to meet all his information and research needs.

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APPENDIX A

Examples of Indiana Public Libraries Serving Distance Learners

Access to Education at the Gary Public Library: Northwest Indiana’s Newest Distance Learning Site. 9 Aug. 2002. <http://www.gary.lib.in.us/access_education.htm>

Distance Education & Video Conferencing. Greenwood Public Library. 9 Aug. 2000. <<http://www.greenwood.lib.in.us/video%20conf.htm>>

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Distance Education in Delphi. Delphi Public Library. 9 Aug. 2002. <<http://www.carlnet.org/dpl/distance.html>>

Satellite and Distance Learning Desk. Batesville Memorial Public Library. 9 Aug. 2002. <<http://www.bmpl.cnz.com/bmpl4.html>>

APPENDIX B

HOW YOUR PUBLIC LIBRARY CAN ASSIST DISTANCE LEARNERS

Adapted from “Distance learners: Who do they belong ‘to’?” Panel presentation of the Distance Learning Round Table, Minnesota Library Association Annual Conference, Saint Cloud, Minnesota, October 10, 2001. Original material written by Jody Reng, Director, Plum Creek Library System

1. Make higher education part of your mission.
2. Arrange for a quiet study area. Post information on various extension classes.
3. Become knowledgeable in the area of scholarships and financial aid. Hold workshops on How to Go Back to College, College for Adults, College for Mommies, or College for Senior Citizens.
4. Acquire distance education catalogs from all colleges and universities in the state. If there are popular courses from out of state, get literature on those also.
5. Develop an Orientation for Non-Traditional Students. Include how to contact university libraries, use state-wide access to library resources, and how to search the bibliographic and full-text databases available in your library. Publicize it at the beginning of each semester and/or quarter, depending on where you have students registered. You will find that there are more students than you thought.
6. Ask local colleges to send you registration materials. When students register for particular courses, ask for the syllabi and lists of required readings. If possible, acquire the textbooks and make them available for circulation.
7. Set aside a part of your hold shelf for “reserve” materials for the distance education courses. Use cards to check out materials for short periods of in-house use.
8. Get to know the outreach librarian at the university or college where your students are enrolled. Ask for hints for working with particular professors or programs. Work collaboratively to serve your students.
9. Your attitude can make the difference between success and failure for the non-traditional student.
10. Keep statistics for your Board on how serving distance learners increases your circulation, your

computer usage, and your reference service. Doing so may support your request for a budget increase.

11. Use the idea of “Extension University” for as much PR as you can.

12. Be sure to thank the distance librarians for their cooperation in helping you to provide this unique service to your patrons.

APPENDIX C

HOW TO HELP YOUR PUBLIC LIBRARY ASSIST YOUR DISTANCE LEARNERS

Adapted from “Distance learners: Who do they belong ‘to?’” Panel presentation of the Distance Learning Round Table, Minnesota Library Association Annual Conference, Saint Cloud, Minnesota, October 10, 2001. Original material written by Jody Reng, Director, Plum Creek Library System

1. Look at the registration information for your distance learners. Make a note of where they live and check to see if there is a public library in their community, or ask them which public library they usually use.

2. Call and get to know the public librarian in each community where you have students. Explain what you are trying to do. Let him or her know the parameters of the program. Be sure there is an understanding of how much of the work is to be done by the student and how much by the library staff. The public library staff is used to working with high school students; it is up to you to let them know the difference.

3. Let each public library know the names of the students whom they will be serving and which classes they are taking each semester or quarter. Fill them in on what kinds of requests to expect. If possible, furnish them with copies of the syllabi.

4. Include the phrase “or your public library” in instructional materials about using the library resources.

5. Don’t assume that the public library doesn’t have anything useful. Public libraries have come a long way in the past two decades.

6. If materials are on reserve for a given class, see if copies can be sent to the public library. Whenever possible, send a copy of required readings to the libraries.

7. Remember that not every public library will be dealing with every class. Keep paperwork to a minimum. Work with individual cases.

8. The public library will not be receiving funds to provide this service to your students. Try to make it easy for them to cover the additional workload.

9. Set up a toll-free number so library staff can contact

you for more information.

10. Keep statistics of growth in your distance program. Each satisfied student will sign up for more classes and will tell a friend about the opportunity.

11. Be sure to say “Thank you” to the public library staff members who are offering a new kind of service to help their patrons and your institutions.