Distance education students speak to the library: here's how you can help even more

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Abstract

Distance education students have unique needs from library services. This paper reports on a study of 17 distance learning students and describes what they say they need and want from the library. In talking to these distance students over time, we learned what general kinds of factors help them in their learning experience. Some of these are specifically related to library services, while some are more general but can be applied to the library. They range from changes in the provision of library materials and interpersonal services to large-scale integration of the library with distance learning infrastructure and the governing institution as a whole.

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Introduction

The Graduate School of Library and Information Science (GSLIS) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign offers several scheduling options for students to earn their MS; one of these is the Library Education Experimental Program (LEEP), a distance education option. As part of a larger research project, our research team interviewed 17 students in the LEEP option about a number of topics (for a detailed description of the study, see Haythornthwaite *et al.*, 2000). This paper in particular focuses on what the students said about the library services that were already available, and what library services they thought could potentially be helpful to them. Since each student was interviewed four times over the course of a school year, these findings show what students think about library services as they use them over time and for a variety of tasks, instead of providing a snapshot of one particular library use incident. Because the data were collected and analyzed using grounded theory methods, the findings here are not simply a reaction from the students to what the library already does. Rather, the thoughts and suggestions about library services emerged when students spoke in general about what aspects of their distance learning experience they felt were most supportive to them. These suggestions, helpful on their own, also lead to further implications for libraries that support distance learning programs.

Integrating the library into distance education

To integrate the library, and its products and services, successfully into a students' distance education experience requires focusing on a variety of tasks and roles (Bremner, 2000; Arant and Mosley, 1999; Moody, 1999). While attention to "traditional" library services such as materials, reference, and training is still essential, the ways they are offered may need to be adjusted in light of distance students' overall needs. It is also necessary to step back and examine the role of

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the library for distance students, ways to integrate library technology with distance learning technology, and how to work with the larger university or library community to provide for the special administrative needs of distance learners. Accordingly, the following discussion briefly recognizes the issues of modifying existing library services, then focuses more intensely on these larger integrative issues.

Library materials

Many librarians whose clients include distance education students are already aware of the kinds of services available and the problems attached to them (ACRL, 1998; Vassie, 1999). Basically, distance education students cannot walk into the library and photocopy an article they need for class, or check out a two-hour reserve book. The students to whom we spoke, though they are using a library system with a variety of electronic document and database resources available, and notwithstanding the rise of other Internet resources such as mega-bookstores, expressed strong support for one service in particular: expedited document delivery. Simply being able to request a document and have it arrive via overnight or two-day mail was important to these students. One possible reason for this is that, in the library system LEEP students use, moving from a citation or abstract database to one which may or may not have the desired full-text article is not always easy; document delivery may get them the article a day later, but offloads the effort of finding it to the librarian.

People

Though the materials offered by the library are important, the librarians and other staff who help clients find and use those materials through reference and other services are also vital. The people in the library who provide reference and other interpersonal services are yet another kind of "traditional" library service whose provision may need to be changed to meet the needs of distance education students.

Libraries that serve distance education clients are already aware of some types of service provision changes that need to be made (Meola and Stormont, 1999; Logue and Preece, 1999). One factor in particular was echoed by the LEEP students: asynchronous service. Distance education students, many of whom have work and family responsibilities, often work during evenings and weekends. Their "working hours" are therefore somewhat different from those of traditional or on-campus students. For example, a student who asks a question via e-mail on Friday night about a paper they plan to write over the weekend would be very happy to get an answer before Monday morning. Therefore they need either good asynchronous help, such as e-mail or Web reference, or different reference hours (which are probably harder to provide).

In more general terms, we found that there are a number of factors that distance education students feel very strongly support them in their learning experience (Kazmer, 2000). A number of these can be related specifically to library services, and two specifically to interpersonal library activities: responsiveness, and single contact points.

Responsiveness

Many LEEP students place great importance on getting questions of all types (administrative, procedural, factual, research) answered quickly and correctly. These students tend to feel separate and isolated from the happenings in the program because they are not on campus, and many of them say that one of the best ways of alleviating these feelings is to receive timely answers to questions. Of course, part of being responsive echoes what was stated above: students also appreciate people who are available to answer questions, virtually, during evenings and weekends because this is when many of them must schedule time to do their schoolwork. Developing and refining electronic reference services should therefore include mechanisms for quick and off-hours turnaround.

Single contact points

As these distance students attempt to navigate their way through a university and a graduate school that have historically been structured around resident students, they find themselves often having to make phone calls or e-mail questions to various offices and entities around the University. Several of the students said that having one person in an office (such as the bookstore, the financial aid office, etc.) as a contact point to answer all questions from distance students was helpful because they did not have to explain their

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whole situation (as distance students) every time they had a question. Also, they felt more comfortable knowing a name for which to ask and a familiar person to whom to talk when they have questions; this makes them more likely to ask, and helps them resolve problems more smoothly. Providing a single point of contact in the library for all distance student queries should be a primary factor in designing services for these students.

So, having discussed briefly the ideas that distance students need their materials delivered in more technologically-intensive ways, and how interpersonal library services also need to be adjusted to match the specific needs of these learners, the next topic to examine is a specific intersection of technology and people: training and support.

Training and support

As students start to use new technologies that solve some of the problems of remote access to materials and people, they need help in learning how to use them and dealing with problems when they come up. Libraries have commonly provided training and support through mechanisms like bibliographic instruction, workshops, and as-needed reference, most of which happened on-site. Now, with distance students, this is another area where the structure and delivery will have to change. Asynchronicity and responsiveness are still key here – in some ways providing this kind of help is similar to reference, though the kinds of information provided in response to queries may be a bit different.

Training

Students need to be trained to use the new hardware and software they need for the distance learning program, which likely includes library technologies. In the LEEP program, students are only on campus for a limited time when they start, but that is when they need and appreciate the most intensive training in technology. Students also say that, since they have widely varying levels of experience when they begin the program, training at a variety of levels from novice to expert would make them feel as though the training was worthwhile for themselves and for others. Finally, though they find face-to-face training best, asynchronous training through computer-based tutorials can help students who need to go through the material at their own pace.

Technology support

When students have difficulties using their computers, software, or communications systems, they find the problems more readily solved if there are familiar individuals who can provide timely and reliable technology support. Students describe these people as "consistent, available, and extremely patient." Students also say that these characteristics make them more comfortable in using the technology and testing its limits, in turn making them more skilled in its use. That is, successful technology training "up front" enables students to help themselves throughout their time in the program. Notice that, not surprisingly, these factors are similar to what was reported above (see "People") – the LEEP students are consistent in their statements about what is important in supporting their remote help-seeking, no matter what kind of help or information they need.

Of course training and support for distance learning technologies overall do not necessarily fall directly under the library mission; however, thinking about the relationship between those and the technologies that specifically support remote library use for distance students may reveal other ways that the library can help make distance students' experiences more satisfactory and rewarding.

Technology itself

The previous section discussed training and support for technology and how providing that role falls naturally to the library at least in part, because it is similar to other kinds of information provision. The next step is to focus on technology in general, and how library technologies (library computing resources or computer-based services) may relate to distance learning technologies overall. In order to think about this relationship, it should be fruitful to examine what the LEEP students said about using technology in the program as a whole. Understanding what distance students consider to be the important factors in their use of technology will in turn help us to understand what factors are likely to be important in library technology implementation specifically.

LEEP, as an Internet-based learning environment, utilizes a number of technologies both at the school and at the

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students' homes or workplaces, and all of this technology has to work together. Hardware, software, and technical know-how must combine to form a seamless infrastructure so that students may focus on the school work rather than the computer itself. The students identified two major factors that affect their ability to do so:

(1) whether the technology is implemented in ways that they feel are appropriate; and
(2) how working in a computer-based setting affects actually doing the school-work.

Appropriate technology use in distance "classrooms"

Students express a variety of preferences about how the various available technologies are used inside and outside of class. For instance, they would like their instructors to be sure that the technologies they are using are suitable for the class being taught; also, they want instructors to be aware of the wide variety of technologies available to them and utilize them when appropriate. Students, on the other hand, have a number of communication technologies available to them, some that can be directed to a wider audience and some that are more focused on individual communication. Students stress that they and their classmates should be aware of the scope of their audience when using these communication technologies. For example, personal messages should be sent using e-mail rather than a class-wide Web discussion. This sense of "appropriateness" varies from student to student, and is highly dependent on exactly why they are using the technology.

Effect of technology on school-work at a distance

When students are using technology both to complete and to hand in their school-work, more problems tend to arise than with traditional paper school-work; any one of the tools being used can break down. Therefore, students indicate that they need to plan additional time when they are using the computer to do or hand in work. Also, doing work on the computer can be more time-consuming than doing a similar task in another medium; for example, students who need to transfer their work from one computer to another experience occasional severe slow-downs because of the transfer process.

Leveraging technology for library service

Examining how students think about technology use in general gives us some themes to keep in mind when applying a particular kind of technology anywhere in distance education (including in the library), and simultaneously points to ways the library can be integrated into the distance learning environment. We have seen that students appreciate it when available technologies are considered and used. Using library technology training as an example, if interactive class mechanisms are already set up, why not also use them for library training and support? Or can the library adapt its service provision (as in above, "Responsiveness") to reflect and support the distance student's need for planning ahead? In general, then, the library would use its own services to help students when the distance learning technology gives them problems, but also leverage that technology to help the library provide information and help.

This section has suggested some ways that the library can be integrated into the distance education system in addition to supporting it. The students in this study indicated that, as this integration happens, it might be worthwhile to examine the multiple roles the library can play for distance education students.

An expanded role for the library in distance learning

The last section focused particularly on technology and the factors that distance learners identified as being important to them in its implementation and use. The students have also identified other ways the library can support them and other roles the library can take on. Though the previous sections focused particularly on library materials and services and how they are provided through technology, "library use through technology" is not the only role the library can play in being integrated into distance education overall.

For instance, students commented on library-as-place. Though they cannot meet at the library regularly, they often meet there when they do come to campus in the middle of each semester. Then they feel that it plays a valuable role, a meeting space where they can move around, talk if need be, and focus on

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work in a "scholastic" environment. This points to making the library facility and staff available as much as possible during any on-campus time the distance learners might have. As one student, Doris, commented, it made her feel "much more at home" to have this place on campus in which to meet and work. Thinking then of the library as a specific and familiar entity also allows them to feel tied to the University once they are back at home, particularly since the library is one campus facility with which they have a lot of ongoing contact. This tie is especially reinforced if the "single contact point" model is followed, since it increases their sense of continuity.

Not only can the library provide workspace and a portal to the campus environment, but it can also support various kinds of work that are hard to do at a distance or that are unique to distance education. In many ways that have already been described, successful distance education hinges on solving information problems. For example, providing support for distributed group projects (considered by the LEEP students to be a particularly difficult endeavor) could include brokering among group members or virtual "storage" for shared information resources. As another example, the LEEP students place a very high premium on getting all kinds of information – not just "traditional" library information, but course syllabuses, announcements, etc. – as early as possible. Combining this desire with the advantages of the single contact point model leads to a vision of an integrated distance education information resource, where all kinds of resources and services are provided to distance learners through a system(s) that is particularly focused to their needs, and where distance learners could find the answers to procedural as well as research questions.

Of course, integrating the library and its services more thoroughly into a distance education program involves changes that affect not only students but everyone involved in running the program. For example, students value a quick response time when they have questions, even if these questions arise during evenings or weekends. For the librarians or instructors, providing this level of responsiveness means having access to communications technologies and course materials during times they might previously have set aside for other tasks. Also, a student may rely on a single information contact point, but that person in turn will certainly help more students than that. This means that the interaction with students may seem almost constant, certainly overflowing the bounds of a normal work day, a difficulty surely to be compounded if on-campus students need to be supported as well.

Integrating materials and services, and the technologies used to provide them; and integrating other library roles into the distance education experience, are good but not necessarily enough – notice that the students have identified that part of their problems arise from being "different" in the University as a whole – and only by working with other areas of the University can all of their needs truly be met.

Working with university as a whole

The previous section discussed ways the library might adapt its current roles and take on new ones in the support of distance education, especially by becoming more tightly integrated with the distance learning infrastructure. Different implementations of distance education, however, happen at different "levels" in their parent institutions: while some integration may involve relationships between departments, some requires more overarching change. The LEEP students in this study also recognized the necessity, albeit the potential difficulty, of change at the university level.

LEEP students rely quite heavily on various kinds of administrative help, including library materials and services, to make their progress through the program as smooth as possible. They must also rely on the university's adapting to their needs as distance students in a system that is almost entirely geared toward resident students. For a distance learning program that is not running under the umbrella of a campus-wide administration, these changes may be out of the scope of their ability to effect. For example, students mention that they would appreciate differences in the operations of activities such as financial aid and thesis depositing, and point out that, as distance education becomes more common, these offices will need to accommodate offsite students more seamlessly than they do now. The library in its role as a campus facility will need to become

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more responsive to large numbers of distance learners; and, as a change agent, to provide the information help that others within the University need to become equally responsive.

Integrating the library into distance education may require (or imply) changes to various library services, materials, delivery mechanism, and relationships within their parent institutions. In addition, LEEP students indicated that they used their home libraries, whether academic or public, to support their schoolwork; another fruitful avenue of change, then, could be combining services with those home libraries (see, for example, Caspers, 1999). Extended discussion of that kind of extended project is beyond the scope of this report, however, as it is not represented strongly in the research data.

Conclusion

In talking to a number of distance students over time, we learned what general kinds of factors help them in their learning experience. These are things that make the students' distance learning run more smoothly, in particular reducing frustration at unresolved problems and lack of materials. Some of these are specifically related to library services, while some are more general but can be applied to the library. They range from changes in the provision of library materials and interpersonal services to large-scale integration of the library with distance learning infrastructure and the governing institution as a whole.

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