Can You Hear Me Now? Communicating Library Services to Distance Education Students and Faculty

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Abstract

Academic libraries have responded to the challenge of providing resources and services to off-campus users in a variety of innovative ways. However, recent survey results indicate that users are often not fully aware of what is available to them. This study of library web sites at 100 distance learning institutions seeks to establish a checklist of best practice in terms of library resources and services provided and to establish a template for the effective distance education gateway. The results of this research will provide a comprehensive guideline for librarians seeking to institute, improve, or better communicate distance education resources and services to students and faculty.

Introduction

Distance education has found a marketable niche and has experienced a steady growth rate. The National Center for Education Statistics indicated that 89% of public 4-year institutions and 40% of private 4-year institutions offered distance education courses in 2000-2001. According to the Sloan Consortium's Entering the mainstream: The quality and extent of online education in 2003 and 2004, schools are predicting a near 24% growth in students taking at least one online course in 2004 and no plateau in online enrollment is anticipated (Allen, 2004).

Librarians, who have often been at the center of development for new information technologies, products, and services, have also taken a leadership role in providing access to resources for distance education students and faculty. Students and faculty increasingly access library resources at a distance and library instruction programs must meet the needs of distance learners and instructors (ACRL, 1998). As identified by Jones and Moore (1997), the "periodic distance learner" is "the student in a residence hall or at home ten miles away from campus." Although this student has the option of visiting the physical library, this student's library needs are not dissimilar to those of a more geographically distant student. This broader definition of the remote user or distance student lends an even greater importance to addressing the challenges of providing and communicating remote services and resources.

Libraries have responded to the challenge of supporting off-campus learners in a number of now-familiar ways: remote access to online databases, virtual reference services, online tutorials, e-reserves, document delivery, and the development of web-based portals and gateways. Recent developments include streaming video instruction and the integration of library resources with course management software. Providing online library resources, services, and programs alone, however, without an effective means of communicating the same to prospective users, is inefficient, confusing, and misleading for users. Adams and Cassner (2002) point out that "in order for distance learners to become aware of available library services and resources, it is essential that the distance education home page be easily accessible, or findable."

In 2004, Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania's Bailey Library, under the leadership of Director Philip Tramdack, conducted a LibQual survey to assess the services of the library. After a comprehensive analysis of survey results, librarians were surprised to discover that students perceived a lack of remote services. Bailey Library provides a wide array of services to distance learners: remote access to electronic full text databases; e-books; e-reference; e-reserves; a distance education librarian contact; and online tutorials. The problem, as identified by the LibQual survey, was not a lack of services but a lack of patron awareness of the services. Although a distance education gateway had been created, it was not obvious to students and did not provide an easy, seamless, one-stop shopping portal for distance education students.

To many students, the library's web page is the library itself (Jurkowski, 2003). A satisfactory distance-learning gateway serves as a pathfinder for students and faculty, publicizing services and providing resource guidance and instruction. The purpose of this study is to observe and evaluate existing distance education library gateways in order to identify common and/or essential elements and recognize outstanding or unique features for the purpose of creating a template of best practice.

Terms

Distance education, distance learning, and distributed education/learning will be used interchangeably to indicate off-campus programs and remote users. The term "gateway" will be used throughout this study to indicate an audience-focused web site and to avoid confusion with the more sophisticated portal concept. The user-customizable library portal, such as Duke University's myLibrary, consists of a more complex and interactive technological structure than the gateway or audience-oriented web pages commonly linked to library sites and will not be considered here.

Methodology

Institutions studied included a random sample (N=100) from the College Blue Book of Distance Learning Programs (2004) in order to provide a cross-section of institution types in a variety of locations. These institutions included those granting associate degrees, bachelor's degrees, master's degrees, doctoral degrees, and online courses that may or may not lead to degrees or certifications (Figure 1. Institutions by Type). Geographically diverse universities, colleges, community colleges, religious seminaries, and training institutes with varying distance education enrollments were included. All of the selected institutions have demonstrated some commitment to and have invested in distance learning initiatives, as evidenced by their inclusion in the Blue Book. How those commitments and initiatives are communicated to users is the focus of this investigation.
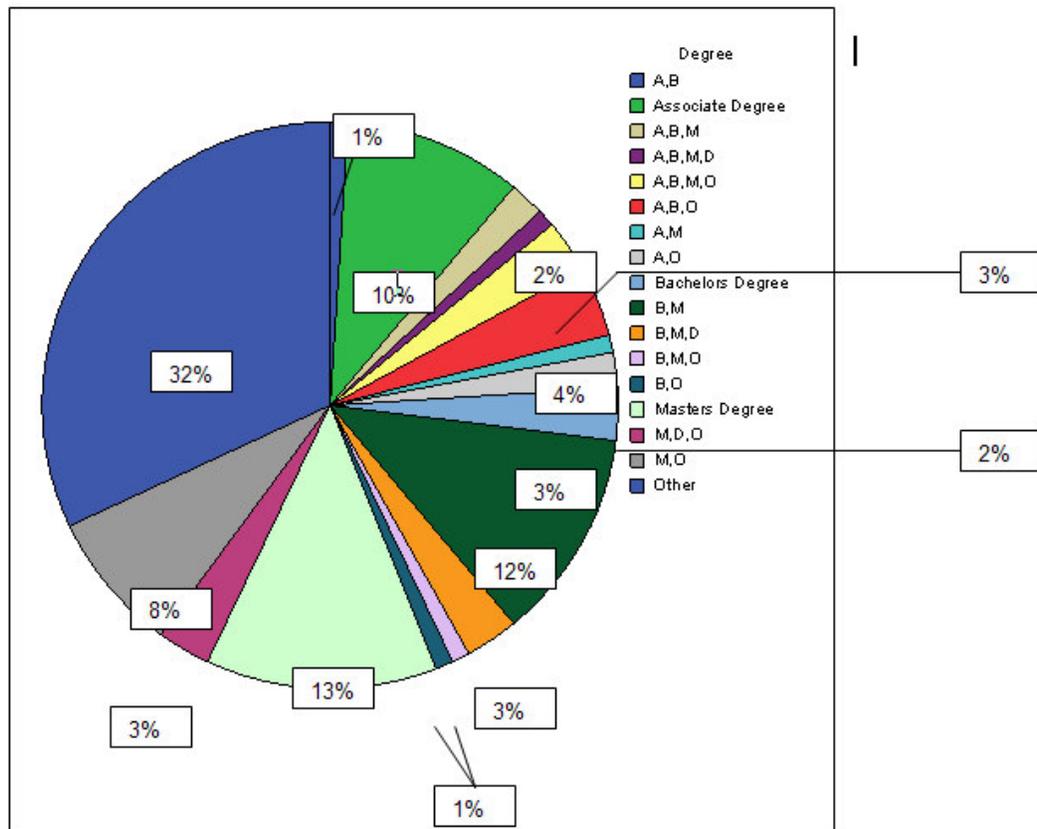
Figure 1. Institutions by Type

O = Other _____

After identifying the random sampling of institutions using the Research Randomizer (http://www.randomizer.org/), an evaluation sheet was prepared in order to record the
information sought for the study (Figure 2. Evaluation Sheet). Both authors reviewed all
selected sites with the intention of discussing differences of opinion, but no major
discrepancies were revealed. The observations and evaluations were meant to identify information in four
categories. First, attention was paid to the linking relationship among the institution's home page, the distance
education page, and the library home page. A checklist of services provided by the selected libraries to their distance education
community was compiled as evaluators noted the presence or absence of the following: library contact information;
a distance education librarian; remote access for databases; interlibrary loan services; online tutorials; e-books;
e-reserves; e-reference in any format; and a "for distance education faculty" section. A third evaluation consisted of
a four-question rubric that was posited to each library web page, signifying typical distance user tasks. Questions
were: "Who can I contact with a reference question?"; "How can I get a book from my home institution's physical
library?"; "Is there a pathfinder available for a specific online course?"; and "How can I learn to use the library's
databases?". A final factor was the identification of those pages deemed to have outstanding content, services, or
design that might serve as examples of best practice, a more subjective judgment.

Figure 2. Evaluation Sheet

#____
Institution_____

Location_____Size_____Type____

URL_____

☐ Link to DE from Home
☐ Link to Library from DE
☐ Link to Library from Home
☐ DE Gateway from Library

SERVICES OFFERED:

☐ Contact	☐ For DE Faculty
☐ Librarian	☐ E-Books
☐ Remote DB	☐ E-Reserves
☐ ILL	☐ E-Reference
☐ Tutorials	☐ Other _____

QUESTIONS:

1) Reference contact? _____Yes _____No _____Other

2) Get a book? _____Yes _____No _____Other

3) Pathfinder for course? _____Yes _____No _____Other

4) Database tutorial? _____Yes _____No _____Other

COMMENTS:

Reviewer_____ Date _____

Results

In addition to distance education gateways on library pages, the presence of distance education gateways on institutional home pages was noted. Surprisingly, only 53% of the institutions examined provided a clear and obvious link for distance education users or those seeking information about distance education programs. This most obvious means of encouraging enrollment, when present, employed identifying terms that varied from "distance education" to "off-campus", "continuing education" to "extended studies," and "extension education," "cybrary," "access students," and "elearning." The distance education gateway from the institution's home page was often found under "Academics", as were library links. Libraries fared better than distance education programs, with 79% of institutions offering a direct link to their associated library or libraries, although a number of these links were discovered under "Academic Support" or "Learning Resources" headings.

In this study of a broad spectrum of institutions, only 31% of distance education program pages provided a link to the library for users and more often served the purpose of providing a broad overview or description of distance education programs or an entryway to course management software. Although many distance education pages provided information on computer requirements and student readiness, none provided a similar self-assessment for information literacy or research skills. In a similar study of ARL libraries, Adams and Cassner (2002) found that 96% of distance education pages linked to the library. An explanation of this discrepancy may be found in the types of institutions included in each study. In turn, libraries provided a link to distance education pages in only 45% of the instances examined by this study, even when the library's page was specifically designed for distance education users. In the Adams and Cassner study, 17% of ARL libraries linked to a distance education page. (Table 1. Linking To and From...).

Table 1. Linking To and From..

Distance Education Link from University Home Page		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	53	53.0	53.0	53.0
No	47	47.0	47.0	100.0	
Total	100	100.0	100.0		

Library Link from University Home Page		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	79	79.0	79.0	79.0
No	21	21.0	21.0	100.0	
Total	100	100.0	100.0		

Library Link from Distance Education Home Page		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	31	31.0	31.0	31.0
No	69	69.0	69.0	100.0	
Total	100	100.0	100.0		

Distance Education Link from Library Home Page		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	45	45.0	45.0	45.0
No	55	55.0	55.0	100.0	
Total	100	100.0	100.0		

The services and resources identified as common elements in the selected institutions can inform a comprehensive guideline for librarians seeking to initiate or improve distance education services to students and faculty. For those subscribing to the philosophy of "all users are distant" (Feeney, 2004), many of the following elements would be necessary to serve traditional, on-campus students as well. Commonly featured resources included: online library catalogs (90%); remote database access (86%); e-books (55%); and e-reserves (32%). Services provided included:

interlibrary loan and document delivery (77%); e-reference services via email, chat, instant messenger, or telephone (53%); online tutorials (42%); a link for faculty involved with distance education (21%); and a designated distance education librarian contact (10%). In the latter case, only librarians with "distance education" in their titles were included. General contact information was provided by 73% of all libraries studied. (Table 2. Checklist of Distance Education Services and Resources).

Table 2. Checklist of Distance Education Services and Resources

Contact Information		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	73	73.0	73.0	73.0
	No	27	27.0	27.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Distance Education Librarian		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	10	10.0	10.0	10.0
	No	90	90.0	90.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Remote Database Access		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	86	86.0	86.0	86.0
	No	14	14.0	14.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Interlibrary Loan		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	77	77.0	77.8	77.8
	No	22	22.0	22.2	100.0
	Total	99	99.0	100.0	
Missing	System	1	1.0		
Total		100	100.0		

Tutorials		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	42	42.0	42.0	42.0
	No	58	58.0	58.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

For Distance Education Faculty		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	21	21.0	21.0	21.0
	No	79	79.0	79.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

E-books		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	55	55.0	55.6	55.6
No		44	44.0	44.4	100.0
Total		99	99.0	100.0	
Missing	System	1	1.0		
Total		100	100.0		

E-reference		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	53	53.0	53.0	53.0
	No	47	47.0	47.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Other		Frequency	Percent	Valid	Cumulative Percent

			Percent	
Valid	Yes	7	7.0	7.0	7.0
	No	93	93.0	93.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Seeking to discover a correlation between the level of resources and services and enrollment reveals that institutions with a distance education enrollment of 5,001- 10,000+ did not necessarily offer the most library resources and services to students. Institutions with a large distance education enrollment did offer a high percentage of personnel-intensive services. For example, institutions with a distance education enrollment of 5,001-10,000+ led in offering database tutorials (29%) and course specific pathfinders (42%), as well as designating a distance education librarian (14%). As might be expected from smaller institutions, a designated distance education librarian was rarely found in those institutions with an enrollment of 0-1,000 and resources were somewhat limited. Institutions with a distance education enrollment of 1,001-5,000 surprisingly led in all other categories, demonstrating a wide margin of leadership in providing remote access databases (100%), interlibrary loan (100%), e-books (80%), and e-reference (93%) services. In our sample, these institutions usually represented traditional brick-and-mortar colleges and universities, offering hybrid programs sometimes referred to as "brick and click." (Table 3. Checklist of Distance Education Services and Resources Correlated by Distance Education Enrollment).

Table 3. Checklist of Distance Education Services and Resources Correlated by Distance Education Enrollment

Distance Education Enrollment	Size 0-1000	Size 1001-5000	Size 5001-10000+
Distance Education Link from University Home Page	52%	73%	42%
Library Link from Distance Education Page	31%	33%	29%
Library Link from University Home Page	81%	80%	57%
Distance Education Gateway from Library Page	43%	53%	43%
Contact	71%	87%	57%
Distance Education Librarian	9%	13%	14%
Remote Database Access	84%	100%	71%
Interlibrary Loan	73%	100%	71%
Online Tutorials	40%	40%	43%
For Distance Education Faculty	17%	40%	29%
E-books	49%	80%	43%
E-reserves	25%	47%	43%
E-reference	43%	93%	71%
Other	5%	7%	0%

To more accurately reflect a typical user's experience, a rubric consisting of four questions was designed. The following four questions were posited to each gateway under consideration:

- *"Who can I contact with a reference/access question?"* This question was designed to reveal the presence of a designated distance education librarian or specific email contact. Only 10% of institutions identified a distance education librarian or contact, although 53% offered remote reference services (email, chat, instant messenger, telephone). 73% of total institutions provided some form of contact information.
- *"How can I get a book from my home institution's physical library?"* Interlibrary loan and the physical transfer of materials are sometimes difficult issues for libraries dealing with distance learners. This question was intended to assess how and if the issue was addressed. Only 26% of libraries studied gave instructions on obtaining a physical book from the student's home library.
- *"Is there a pathfinder available for a specific online course?"* The presence of course specific pathfinders might indicate an element of faculty collaboration and a more focused approach to instruction. 14% provided a research guide or pathfinder for a specific course, although general subject pathfinders were common.

- *"How can I learn to use the library's databases?"* With this question, the authors hoped to discover the presence of online tutorials and orientations. Only 26% of libraries studied provided some form of guidance for database usage, which varied in format from tutorials to frequently asked questions to general guidelines. 42% provided users some online instruction in general research and information literacy skills that could include database directions. (Table 4. Analyzing Common User Tasks).

Table 4. Analyzing Common User Tasks

Distance Education Enrolllment	Size 0-1000	Size 1001-5000	Size 5001-10000+
Reference contact?	48%	80%	57%
Get a book?	21%	33%	28%
Pathfinder for a course?	7%	40%	43%
Database tutorial?	23%	27%	29%

The general inability to answer these common distance user questions on the selected library web sites indicates the need to design gateways with the user's needs in mind. Many libraries provide interlibrary loan services (77%) but do not always address how a distance user can borrow materials, specifically a book, from their own library (26%). Almost all selected libraries offered online databases with remote access (86%); only 26% provided specific instructions or guidance for database use. Many distance education students are non-traditional students to whom the modern research environment may be unfamiliar. Instruction and/or a contact person are essential to their understanding and comfort level. Distance education faculty is commonly overlooked in the design of gateways (21%), even though they may need additional guidance in providing resources to distance students.

Six institutions in the study provided no discernible library services; in one example, only generic Internet resources were listed under "Academic Resources." In more than one instance, there appeared to be no online catalog. One university site provided easy access to their college store, but none to their library.

The very best examples provided a clearly identifiable link for distance or off-campus users and supplied a menu of services and resources that would indeed be "equivalent to those provided for students and faculty in traditional campus settings" (ACRL, 2000). Those distance education gateways that were most helpful reflected a greater understanding of the remote users' needs and recognized that these users would not be coming to the physical library. Specific directions for procedures such as interlibrary loan, obtaining a library card, retrieving a book from the home library, or using discipline-specific resources distinguished outstanding distance education gateways. Shelton State Community College in Alabama (http://www.sheltonstate.edu/library/distancelearning.html) provides clear directions for distance students, as well as an ongoing opinion survey for feedback. DePaul University in Illinois (http://www.lib.depaul.edu) provides an appealing "Just for Distance/International Students" gateway and a number of course-related workshops and independent activities. Lesley University in Massachusetts (http://www.lesley.edu/library/guides/offcampus.html) provides an "Off-Campus Library Handbook" that includes information for students with disabilities. An interesting feature of the Medical College of Wisconsin (http://mcw.edu) is a link to "PDA Information" and related resources.

Conclusion

The ACRL Guidelines for Distance Learning Library Services (2000) assert "access to adequate library services and resources is essential for the attainment of superior academic skills in post-secondary education, regardless of where students, faculty, and programs are located." A basic menu of library resources and services for distance users includes remote access to databases, e-books, e-reserves, e-reference, and interlibrary loan tailored for remote users. A user-focused approach, providing instruction and guidance in resource use, distinguishes some institutions for remote students. The needs of distance education faculty are rarely addressed.

The results of this research reinforce the fact that although library services and resources are essential to an effective distance education program, simply providing access is insufficient. Communicating access through web design and the marketing of available services and resources is suggested for successful use. Although the size and type of institution may have an impact on the number of resources and services offered to remote users, these parameters would seem to have little bearing on the effective communication of available library services. A distance education or off-campus gateway should be prominently featured on the library's home page and should be designed to respond to the needs of users, even if information seems repetitive or obvious to library staff. A good test of gateway effectiveness is the attempt to identify and answer common user questions, which may reveal gaps in understanding. The following elements could be considered essential for the library distance education gateway:

library contact information, personalized where possible; listings of remote access databases and e-books with some guidance for their use and information on authorization as appropriate; some electronic means of posing reference questions; and specific instructions for off-campus interlibrary loan procedures. Desirable information would include subject or course-specific resource pages and information for distance education faculty.

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