

Collaboration for Distance Learning
Information Literacy Instruction

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Collaboration for Distance Learning Information Literacy Instruction

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Association of College and Research Libraries

Distance Learning Section Instruction Committee

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

This publication was collaboratively authored by members of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Distance Learning Section Instruction Committee over a three-year period. In August of 2002, under the chairmanship of Michele Reid, Ramona Islam proposed the idea to distribute a survey tracking collaborative practices in distance library instruction. The committee elected to pursue the project. Communicating via technologies similar to those used for distance learning, members in locations scattered across the United States collectively annotated selected articles and suggested questions for the survey instrument.

In June of 2003, Ramona Islam assumed chairmanship of the committee; shortly thereafter, the first draft of the questionnaire was completed and tested. Darby Syrkin suggested working with the ARL/OLMS SPEC survey program to publish the results. This idea won approval from the committee and Ramona contacted Mary Ellen K. Davis, Executive Director of ACRL, and Lee Anne George, Publications Program Officer at ARL, to negotiate a joint publication contract between ACRL and ARL.

When the committee began working with ARL, members revised the survey instrument in accordance with newer research. ARL distributed the survey in January of 2005. The following spring and summer, committee members compiled the SPEC Kit. Elizabeth Lindsay, Rita Barsun, Mark Horan, and Robert Morrison pored over and selected numerous representative documents submitted by respondents; Patrick Mahoney, Dan H. Lawrence, and Ramona Islam combed through the results in search of correlations; Jonathan Potter, Michele Behr, and Stephanie Buck wrote the executive summary; and Darby Syrkin, Mou Chakraborty, and David Hovde prepared the bibliography. Final editing touches were added by Ramona Islam, Lee Anne George, Kaylyn Higgs of ARL, and the Instruction Committee as a whole.

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SURVEY RESULTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Distance education has become increasingly pervasive in higher education. According to the 2003 EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research survey on campus support for e-learning courses, 70% of higher education institutions offer distance learning courses online.¹ The 2004 Sloan Center for Online Education report estimates over 2.6 million students enrolled in online courses during the fall of 2004; this represents an increase of 25% since 2002.² While a fair number of libraries have offered generous document delivery and reference services to distance learners, fewer have provided ample information literacy instruction. However, progress is being made. Instruction librarians are increasingly reaching out to distance learners and integrating information literacy into their institutions' curricula.

Because the term "distance learning" is popularly used to describe a range of educational endeavors—from on-campus Web-enhanced courses to classes where students and their professors never meet—for the purposes of this survey the authors provided their own definition: a program of study wherein students (distance learners) complete formal coursework off-campus and require library services distinct from those offered to students with ready access to the library building. The term "distance teaching faculty" was defined as instructors, other than librarians, who are teaching a distance learning course, regardless

of whether they also are teaching traditional courses on-site. "Information literacy" was defined as a set of skills necessary to locate, critically evaluate, and effectively use information—specifically those skills enumerated in the *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*.³ Finally, "distance information literacy instruction" was defined as any instruction, whether an entire course, a one-shot session, a tutorial, or other effort (except for spontaneous reference interactions or individual reference appointments) that strives to teach one or more information literacy skills to distance learners.

Background

The survey was sent to the 123 ARL member libraries in January 2005. Sixty-nine libraries (56%) responded. The survey asked first if the respondent's institution offered information literacy instruction to off-site students unable to visit the institution's libraries. Forty-three respondents (62%) indicated at least some level of information literacy instruction to off-site students; twenty-six (38%) responded that they didn't offer such services. This is consistent with findings of another survey of ARL libraries that found that 38 of the survey respondents (36.9%) did not provide any library services at all to students at a distance.⁴

Delivery Method

The respondents who do offer information literacy

instruction to off-site students were asked what kinds of delivery methods are being used at their institutions to provide this instruction. The most popular method is asynchronous Internet use, such as tutorials, research guides, e-mail, and discussion lists (40 respondents, or 93%). Next most common is face-to-face library instruction (29, or 67%), though two libraries indicated they had previously done face-to-face instruction but had since dropped it. Twenty-six (60%) of the responding libraries offer synchronous Internet methods including chat, white boards, virtual meeting rooms, and instant messaging. Several libraries also offer instruction through course management systems, such as Blackboard or WebCT. Broadcast media (such as campus television, cable network, and radio announcements) is the least used delivery method; eight libraries currently use it and six others are considering it, but seven have discontinued using it.

Most libraries use a variety of delivery methods. Twenty-three respondents (55%) use three to four different methods; nine (21%) use five to six methods. Asynchronous Internet, face-to-face, and synchronous Internet are the most popular, followed by postal/courier services and teleconferencing. Four institutions rely on a single delivery method: three on asynchronous Internet and one on synchronous Internet.

Collaborative Environment

Collaboration takes place on many levels and with many different departments. When asked if the provision of distance information literacy instruction was a collaborative activity between librarians and other professionals within the institution, 36 (84%) responded “yes.” Of these, 35 (97%) have a presence on the institution’s main home page. Twenty-six (72%) reported the existence of a strong relationship between the library and a center or unit of the university devoted to improving teaching. Twenty-five (69%) have a presence in the institution’s courseware product or portal. Achieving this kind of integral presence in institutional

courseware was later mentioned in comments as one of the strategies proven to facilitate collaboration. Fifteen respondents (44%) indicated that institutional general education requirements were a driving factor in collaborative instructional efforts. Only five (14%) indicated that regional accreditation standards were a driving factor.

Respondents indicated that there are many training opportunities available to librarians, teaching faculty, and other professionals in relevant areas. When asked to list these opportunities, 36 (100%) responded that technology skills training was available to librarians; 34 (94%) said that similar technology training was available to teaching faculty; 32 (89%) that it was available for other professionals. Over 75% of the respondents also reported the availability of training in pedagogy, information literacy skills, and ADA accessibility for librarians. Slightly smaller numbers of respondents reported that these programs were available for teaching faculty and other professionals, as well.

Librarians’ service on institutional committees was also mentioned as a factor that facilitates communication and collaboration. All but two respondents (94%) reported that librarians serve on at least one of a number of different types of university committees related to distance learning. Librarian participation is most common on committees concerned with information technology, distance education support, course management software, intellectual property or copyright, and improving teaching.

Collaborative Partners

Twenty-four of the responding libraries (69%) have at least one person responsible for coordinating information literacy instruction for distance learners. While there is no standardization of job titles for the individuals who hold this position, the titles can be divided into those that include “distance learning” and those that don’t. Of the total, 15 (63%) have titles that include distance learning. Eight of these are within a department devoted to distance learning. One is within an instructional

services department. Four are within a reference department. One is in access services and another is in a branch library.

Nine of the job titles (37%) do not include distance learning, implying that services to distance learners are subsumed in the department or are only a part of the specific librarian's job duties. Four of these are located within or related to instructional services; three are located within a reference department; one is within access services; another is in a branch library.

The reporting structure also does not follow any consistent pattern; 57% report to a director of a department or a department head and 37% report directly to a dean, associate dean, or the university librarian/library director. There is no obvious difference in the reporting structure based on the title held by the individual.

Nineteen of the respondents (53%) indicated that the librarians at their institution have faculty status; eleven (31%) are academic or administrative professionals. Four (11%) indicated an "other" status, which includes academic staff, library faculty, non-regular faculty, and administrative only. Of the librarians responsible for coordinating information literacy for distance learners, 66% have faculty status and 36% do not.

The respondents were asked to estimate the number of individuals with whom they had collaborated to deliver information literacy instruction to distance learners. The responses varied from 2 to 50. The majority of respondents (71%) collaborate with anywhere from 2 to 15 people. The majority of these collaborative efforts involve librarians and teaching (97%), instructional support (57%), academic computing (50%), and instructional design staff (47%). A few respondents collaborate with staff in other units, such as teaching improvement, writing, media, and career centers. All but a handful of the 29 libraries that collaborate with teaching staff report that these staff have a title of faculty or professor; 72% of these have full-time status.

Collaboration takes place primarily with the education (24%), social work (14%), nursing (16%),

library and information sciences (8%), and management/business departments (8%). Of the departments named, 12 are in the social sciences, 6 are in the sciences, and 2 are in the humanities. A similar distribution is evident among the faculty who are also distance teaching staff, with 38% in education, 33% in social work, 27% in information science, and 16% each in nursing and engineering.

Collaborative Communication

By far the most popular method used to promote information literacy for distance learners to the teaching faculty is personal contact; this method is followed by Web-based information, local presentations, e-mail, and printed materials. Many libraries apply more than one technique for getting the word out. Four libraries (12%) use between eight and nine communication methods, fourteen (42%) use between five and six, ten use three to four, and the rest use two or fewer. Only one library uses broadcast media (such as campus television, cable network, and radio announcements) and it is among the libraries that use the most communications methods. Only six of the responding libraries (18%) do not actively promote instruction for distance learners.

There does not appear to be a significant difference in the way information literacy instruction is promoted to full-time versus part-time distance teaching faculty. Part-time faculty members are targeted with slightly fewer e-mails—75% vs. 83% for full-time faculty—but slightly more printed promotional materials—87% vs. 77%. Personal contact remains the primary method for promoting information literacy instruction to both full-time and part-time faculty.

Many libraries offer support services to distance learning faculty and staff. The most common include remote or office-based consultations, collection development, copyright compliance, and information alerts about relevant library resources. Other services include attendance at formal presentations of teaching faculty members, needs assessments, and professional development workshops.

Most of these services involve some level of personal contact with faculty. Such types of personal contact are listed in respondents' comments as strategies that have helped facilitate collaboration between librarians and faculty.

Collaborative Teaching

Not surprisingly, the collaborative teaching role for the majority of librarians is either teaching one-shot sessions (88%) or serving as an ad-hoc resource person (65%). Only about 21% of the responding librarians are or have been the primary instructor or the co-instructor for a course. In a few instances, librarians have developed tutorials or acted as consultants. Only two respondents (6%) indicated that their libraries are using synchronous communication, such as chat or monitoring a discussion board, to participate in distance learning courses. Only one library reports librarians participating in all five types of collaborative teaching roles specified on the questionnaire.

Eighty-eight percent of the respondents indicated that a librarian contributes to the content of distance education courses in some form, primarily by providing course-specific research skills content; information literacy skills content; or bibliographies, pathfinders, and other research guides. Librarians also contribute to assignment and syllabus design. A few are responsible for the creation of all course content. Twenty-five of the thirty-four responding libraries (71%) reported that librarians provide both one-shot sessions and course-specific library research skills content.

The teaching role of the respondents who either have the term distance learning in their job title or work within a department devoted to distance learning did not differ significantly from that reported for librarians who did not have the term distance learning in their titles or who did not work within a department devoted to distance learning.

Collaborative Assessment

Educators in all disciplines are increasingly recognizing the importance of assessment in developing

effective methods and programs. Therefore it is certainly a cause for concern that only 4 out of the 35 respondents (11%) who answered this section of the survey reported that they conduct any form of assessment to measure whether distance learning students have acquired particular information literacy skills as a result of instruction. Twenty-eight (80%) answered that they don't conduct such assessment; three (9%) answered that they didn't know whether their libraries conduct assessment. Only two of the four libraries that answered "yes" indicated that they conduct that assessment collaboratively with teaching faculty. It is difficult to draw meaningful conclusions from so few responses, so further inquiry into the question of assessment seems merited. What else are these very few libraries doing that exemplifies good practice in distance information literacy instruction? Conducting more in-depth profiles of these institutions might be one avenue of further study.

Although a degree of inconsistency is evident in the numbers of responses to the next three questions in this section of the survey, they further evidence a scarcity of assessment activity in distance information literacy instruction. Only two of seven respondents indicated that information literacy assessment counts toward course grades. In answer to the question on types of assessment methods, only two of six respondents identified assessment methods connected with student projects and only one identified performance-related assessment methods. Only one out of five responding libraries could say that student information literacy skills have improved based on longitudinal comparison of assessment results. It is noteworthy that this library also identified collaboration between librarians and teaching faculty as having contributed to the positive outcome.

Collaborative Challenges and Opportunities

As noted previously, of the many disciplines in which collaborative information literacy instruction occurs, education and social work are high on the list; library and information science, business

and management, nursing, and engineering make a strong showing, as well. Within this context, respondents' comments on what has facilitated versus what has hindered collaboration indicate that successful strategies cover a broad range of activities from informal meetings and communications to development of online resources and assignments to establishing subject liaison roles for librarians to conducting face-to-face workshops and orientation sessions. Hindrances include staffing issues, lack of centralization of distance programs, technological roadblocks, and difficulties in communicating with adjunct and off-campus faculty.

In light of these experiences, respondents were asked to identify areas of improvement they plan to implement. Responses included conducting needs assessments, publishing promotional brochures, increasing collaboration with instructional designers, and increasing participation in university-wide formal distance education support groups.

Time and workload issues are among the most common challenges encountered by librarians when attempting to work collaboratively to deliver information literacy instruction to distance learners. Technology and administrative issues also figure prominently. In addition, a number of respondents identified institutional politics, pedagogical issues, and intellectual property issues as challenges. Correlating the responses in this section against the initial section of the survey indicates, as one would expect, that increased collaborative activity results in increased challenges.

The survey concluded by asking for general comments regarding collaboration between librarians and teaching faculty or other individuals to deliver distance information literacy instruction. The following selected comments demonstrate the diverse distance learning environment today.

"Distance programming at our university is not coordinated in any central way, it is very much department-based; there are no campus-wide committees or such to coordinate it. Hence, distance library service generally, and information

literacy for distance students in particular, are not a separate function at our library, but are integrated with other services."

"Our institution is not actively involved in distance learning at this time. Only a few courses are offered in the professional schools (social work, nursing, law)."

"We have growing distance learning programs and the libraries are striving to serve them. So far, we've made little progress in the area of information literacy."

"We currently have a position open for a Distance Education librarian. We are expecting this person to take the lead in working collaboratively with academic officials and faculty involved with distance education. This is a new enterprise for us."

"We are really just getting started with trying to forge a connection between librarians and faculty with regard to information literacy, and also getting started with faculty collaboration in distance learning."

Conclusion

The results of this survey underscore the fact that distance learning trends in higher education are in a state of rapid evolution, growth, and uncertainty in relation to traditional on-campus programs. This context of rapid change and uncertain status makes for unique challenges to (and opportunities for) collaborative efforts among librarians, teaching faculty, and others involved in the distance learning process. The large number of survey respondents claiming not to be providing any information literacy instruction at all to distance learners (26 libraries, or 38%) may be disheartening to proponents of distance library services, but it is perhaps not surprising given the uncertain status of distance learning programs that is reflected in respondents' comments about the tendency of these programs to

be decentralized, ancillary, and lacking in cohesion with on-campus programs.

On the positive side, many of those libraries that are engaged in distance information literacy instruction appear to be approaching the unique challenges of the distance learning environment dynamically and creatively. Key to the success of these effort has been their collaborations with faculty and other instructional support personnel. As one respondent commented, "Collaboration is clearly important, even critical, to success." And personal contact seems to be the most effective way to facilitate collaboration.

The ability to utilize a variety of tools and technologies, from face-to-face instruction to synchronous and asynchronous online assistance, appears to be a trend for libraries that are taking the lead in distance information literacy instruction. However, the survey reveals that only a very few of these libraries are exploiting to the greatest possible extent recent advances in educational technology, such as e-portfolios, to further librarian involvement in course content creation, teaching, and assessment.

The results of the survey suggest that there are a few truly outstanding distance information literacy programs among ARL libraries and that there are a great many others muddling along as best they can in a challenging and changing environment. This impression is echoed by the literature review and Web site case studies performed by the survey authors, which also point to outstanding programs that deserve further study and emulation as "best practices" models. Among these, North Carolina State, Texas A&M, University of Kansas, and University of Manitoba stand out in terms of promoting collaboration with teaching faculty and instructional designers.

The four libraries that are assessing distance learning students' information literacy skills (Michigan State University, University of Louisville, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, and University of Nebraska-Lincoln) might also be worth exam-

ining more closely, particularly Louisville, which attributed evidence of successful distance information literacy instruction to its collaborative efforts with teaching faculty.

In addition to conducting follow-up case studies aimed at highlighting best practices, further useful information could be obtained by repeating the present survey among different sample groups such as smaller non-ARL private and public institutions, community colleges, or even a more cohesive group such as the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities, where a shared multi-institutional online distance learning initiative has been developing in recent years. Investigating how the dynamics of collaboration in distance information literacy instruction play out in other higher education environments could shed further light on the conclusions drawn here.

Notes

1. Paul Arabasz and Mary Beth Baker, "ECAR Respondent Summary: Evolving Campus Support Models for E-Learning Courses" (Boulder: EDUCAUSE, 2003), 2, <http://www.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ERS0303/ekf0303.pdf>.
2. I. Elaine Allen and Jeff Seaman, "Entering the Mainstream: The Quality and Extent of Online Education in the United States, 2003 and 2004" (Needham, MA: The Sloan Consortium, 2004), 5, http://www.sloan-c.org/resources/entering_mainstream.pdf.
3. "Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education" (Chicago: American Library Association, 2000), <http://www.ala.org/acrl/ilcomstan.html>.
4. Zheng Ye (Lan) Yang, "Distance Education Librarians in the U.S.: ARL Libraries and Library Services Provided to Their Distance Users," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 31, no. 2 (2005): 92–97.