

# Job<sup>of a</sup> Lifetime

Danianne Mizzy

## When your campus is Alaska

If you have great communication skills and enjoy working with a diverse population, then serving as off-campus librarian for the University of Alaska-Fairbanks (UAF) might be your job of a lifetime. Suzan Hahn, who also serves as assistant professor of library science, has worked at UAF's Elmer E. Rasmuson Library since 1997. Rasmuson has the biggest collection in Alaska, but many of its patrons never get to use it in person. That's because they reside in remote areas spanning two-thirds of the largest state in the union.

### Off-campus library services

"Off-Campus Library Services was established in 1989," Hahn explained, "to serve UAF students and faculty who do not have access to appropriate information resources in their community. I support UAF students, staff, and faculty located at any of the six extended campuses and seven other units, comprising the College of Rural Alaska."

She outlined how this works. "Typically, students phone in using an 800 number, or e-mail our office. If we're doing the research, then we ask them to describe their topic or area of interest. Sometimes it takes several phone conversations back and forth to help them narrow down their topic. We can supply all the material a student needs to complete [his or her] paper or project, whether it is a specific item that they have located, or a request for research." She works closely with Interlibrary Loan Services to accomplish this.

When I asked how materials are delivered to students so far away, Hahn said, "U.S. mail, e-mail,

fax, or the Web. Mail is the slowest and most unreliable method of delivery, as it is frequently delayed by weather conditions. And bush planes don't fly in every day, sometimes only once a week or so. That means mail can be delayed two weeks or more, depending on where it is going and the time of year. Students really have to plan ahead if material is being mailed."

### What a difference the Web makes

We discussed how the advent of the Web has changed access to information for the better. "Five years ago, very few rural students had Internet access,

so everything was being photocopied and sent out via fax or in the mail, sometimes both. You might fax the paper to the local grocery store or local tribal offices. The quality of faxes was not good and, in many cases, it might cost them a dollar a page. Now, most folks have Internet access at home, school, or through work. So to send articles, we scan it and put it up on the Web in PDF or send it via e-mail."

One thing that has not changed is how willing people

are to help one another. "People in rural Alaska really work well together," Hahn remarked. "Faxes can still be sent to tribal offices, employers, the local schools, and the extended campuses. They all allow people to use their Internet access. It's a community effort. It's just amazing what they do with very few resources, sharing and cooperating."

Hahn shared another positive development. "With the institution of our proxy server, license agreements with information aggregators, and a new



Suzan Hahn, off-campus librarian and assistant professor of library science at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

Danianne Mizzy is public services librarian at the University of Pittsburgh's Hillman Library. Have an idea for a "Job of a Lifetime" story? E-mail: [danianne+pitt.edu](mailto:danianne+pitt.edu)

Web-based catalog, remote access is pretty good." She has noticed that the type of questions is changing to, "How do I access this?" "Where do I go?" or "How do I search?" Requests for research have dropped slightly, but the nature of the research is more complex. They are getting more sophisticated in their information needs."

### Communication is key

Hahn spoke about the challenge of working with a diverse population. "One of the most important aspects of this position is the ability to communicate with people from all walks of life. We assist everyone, people who are just beginning their college careers, as well as those who are teaching or doing research for the university. Some people in rural areas have not ever seen a library or been very far from their village. We have really distinct cultural groups in the state. And for some, English is a second language. You need to be flexible. Don't be afraid to try different ways of explaining the same topic. If one doesn't work, try another."

Hahn mentioned that library instruction has become even more important now that the students "are able to do a lot more of their own searching. We try to encourage that because it's part of the research process." She has been able to deliver instruction using both new and old methods. "Using Blackboard, I developed the Web-based version for a required Library Skills 101 core course that's taught here on campus." However, she has found that for many of her patrons, the Library Skills 100 class, taught with a printed workbook through correspondence, "is probably still the best for rural areas. Some of them have DSL, but others are subject to frequent disconnects because the quality of the phone line is bad."

She also delivers course-integrated instruction for classes conducted via audio conferencing. "We can talk back and forth. Quality is improving, but sometimes it is hard to communicate that way. There are time lags; if a mike is left open you may hear someone coming in and out of the house, or a baby crying in the background. Then you have privacy issues. Someone may not want to ask a personal question that way. So we always encourage them to contact us or I'll call them."

### Putting a face to a voice

This past spring was the first time Hahn had the opportunity to visit any of the extended campuses. She and library director Paul McCarthy had to fly to Anchorage first, then catch another plane. "When we went to Nome and Kotzebue, some folks [on the flight] were already on their third attempt to get home, but weather conditions kept delaying them. Harsh weather conditions are common. After over-nighting in Anchorage, hours of waiting in the airport, and a long flight, the crew received a resounding round of applause when we finally landed." She went on to observe, "Nome is more like a small town than you might expect,

except the houses are on pilings because of the permafrost and there are only a handful of trees. Kotzebue is smaller and farther north, with only 27 miles of road. All the people are really friendly and it's always exciting to put a face to a voice." While there, she got to meet the resident UAF librarian, the faculty,

and some students. This spring they plan to visit the campuses in Bethel and Dillingham.

## Off-campus librarian

### Where:

Elmer E. Rasmuson Library  
University of Alaska-Fairbanks

For more information, visit: <http://www.uaf.edu/library/>

### It's all about connecting the people with the resources

When I asked what she finds rewarding about her job, Hahn replied, "I enjoy the variety I encounter daily. I get the opportunity to talk with people from many different cultures all over the state and a few living outside the country. I also get to research a broad range of topics based on the interests of our students and faculty. So I get to broaden my knowledge right along with them."

Hahn seems to embody the dedication and community spirit she admires in her rural Alaska patrons. "This job has taught me that people in Alaska really work hard toward their educational goals, improving their lives, and improving their communities. This is a great opportunity to help! Alaska is a huge state with a small population. Most rural Alaska students are Native Americans who live in communities with limited or no local library services. And they are always so happy to know that help is just around the corner, or at the end of telephone line or an e-mail message." They are indeed lucky to have Suzan Hahn there. ■