Editorial

Distance Education: Rethinking Practices, Implementing New Approaches

> The thing to do with the future is not to forecast it, but to create it.[1]—*Russell Ackoff*

Some institutions of higher education, particularly universities, are well known for their resistance to change. They have been described in the literature as medieval institutions, notwithstanding the opportunities to undergo significant transformation using the enabling technology. Someone remarked that it is easier to move the family graveyard than to make a major change in the tradition-driven university. Nevertheless, distance education programs are in vogue at nearly all types of institutions making up the higher education arena. Distance education also is known as distance learning or extended campus. Generally speaking, the phenomenon refers to the various aspects of providing postsecondary instruction away from the traditional college or university campus.

One can find universities offering distance education programs at various locations throughout the world. Technology has permitted instruction to be delivered anywhere on the planet if the necessary telecommunication infrastructure is in place. The quality of programs falling under the distance education rubric has been—and continues to be—a major concern. And the provision of sufficient library resources is a part of the "concern equation." The transmittal of intellectual resources via technology is easing the concern factor somewhat.

Early Leadership

Nova Southeastern University (NSU) is a pioneer in distance education; it began offering distance education programs in 1972. It was the first university in North America to offer graduate programs in an online format, and it was the first to use the UNIX system to host online courses. Presently, about one-third of all students enrolled at NSU are taking classes via distance education delivery systems beyond the South Florida area. Library services provided by NSU for its distance education programs are among the more sophisticated in the world. Years of monitoring, evaluating, and continual improvement have resulted in library services that are highly appreciated and valued by distance education students and faculty. Based on a recent NSU libraries' "How Are We Doing?" survey issued to their distance education students, 97 percent of the respondents were satisfied with library materials received to support classwork and research, and 91 percent were satisfied with the timeliness of the receipt of materials.

Monitoring and Evaluating

Unlike some of the traditional services offered on campus, distance education library services require much more anticipation, planning, and even a bit of intuition. The library has to be involved from the very beginning of any new distance education program. Faculty may be quite eager to begin a new class in a remote part of the world, but there has to be campuswide understanding that the library and information technology capabilities and requirements are not to be an afterthought.

While a distance learning class is in session, students should be consulted

about the strengths and weaknesses of the library services offered to support the class. An evaluation focusing on the qualitative and quantitative aspects of the library services offered to support the class should be conducted. The results gleaned from the monitoring and assessments will be key factors in the development of a strategic plan for distance library services. Thoughtful strategies can be formulated to address the short- and long-term library needs of students and faculty.

Have MLS, Will Travel

Asking participants in distance education programs to respond to library surveys is one method for getting useful information that can be factored into the improvement equation. However, a better way to learn firsthand what the library concerns are is to visit the site where a particular class is being held. A face-to-face interaction with students will yield valuable information not necessarily divulged via a questionnaire. Also, site visits will permit the librarian to provide training that cannot be presented via technology. The information gained from the site visits will usually be helpful in preparing for another distance education program. And students do appreciate seeing a "live librarian" who shows genuine interest in improving library services.

Same Values, Different Locations

Students taking classes at a remote location should expect the same level of library service as that provided to their peers on campus. This is a tall order—especially because on-campus students have immediate access to the library's paper collections.

The distance learner has to be perceived in the same value structure as the on-campus learner. If this is not the case, then distance education could be viewed as a stepchild. Distance education requires a strategy for change—essentially, to conjure with values different from those that have implicitly conditioned the library's organizational past. Distance library services must not be subjected to a disparate value system and should not be thrust into a juxtaposition with traditional, on-campus library services.

Will Emerging Technology Level the Playing Field?

Recent technological advancement is one of the primary reasons that institutions of higher education are investing more resources in distance education. Lifelong learning also fits neatly in this package; learning from cradle to grave is certainly enhanced by the new technology.

Compressed video, audio teleconferencing, and interactive multimedia are adding "real value" to the learning, teaching, and research components of distance education. Digital technology is changing the nature of creating and disseminating knowledge. The globalization of knowledge and the World Wide Web/Internet are having an unprecedented impact on higher education (regardless of location), the global economy, and the human condition. The current and emerging technology offers an extremely positive environment for improving library services in distance education endeavors. Exciting and rewarding times are ahead for librarians who engage themselves vigorously in distance education.

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Notes

1. Russell Ackoff, *Creating the Corporate Future: Plan or Be Planned For* (New York: Wiley, 1981), 44.