

Patterns of Conflict and Convergence When Proximal Libraries Serve Distance Students

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Abstract

The increase in the number of academic institutions jumping on the distance education bandwagon is impacting the libraries of unaffiliated academic institutions as well as public libraries. Libraries are being challenged to find ways to support these new users. The problem is that distance students often look to academic and public library facilities in their geographic area when doing research for class assignments. Surveys of academic and public librarians in 2004 found that the majority of both types of librarians stressed service to distance students in spite of the strain that serving distance students can place on the staff and resources of proximal academic libraries on one hand and the difficulties that public librarians have balancing their community's recreational reading and general reference needs with distance students' need for research resources to support their distance courses. Both types of librarians reported efforts to work with the home institutions' libraries and had a number of suggestions for improving services to distance students.

Introduction

The increase in distance education during the previous decade has been phenomenal. The percentage of institutions offering distance courses or programs increased from 33 percent in 1994–1995 to 70 percent in 2003 (NCES 2000; NCES 2003; Arabasz and Baker 2003). The enrollment of distance learners was expected to reach 2,600,000 by the end of 2004, up from 1,900,000 in 2003 (Alfred P. Sloan Foundation 2003). Truly, distance education is becoming “an influential force in higher education” (OCLC E-Learning Task Force 2003). As a result, public libraries and unaffiliated academic libraries and libraries are being challenged to find ways to serve these users.

The Guidelines for Distance Learning Library Services (ACRL 2004) and a “best practices” agreement by the regional accreditation bodies (North Central Association 2000) place the responsibility for library services upon the distance education providers. Postings to the OFFCAMP listserv and discussions or presentations at the Off-Campus Library Services Conferences

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attest to efforts by institutions to meet their students' library research needs. A survey of ARL members in 1996 showed strong support for distance learners (Snyder, Logue, and Preece 1996) and the accreditation process can serve as a catalyst for improvement of distance library resources (Stratford 2002; Tuñon and Pival 2001). Unfortunately, not all institutions abide by the Guidelines (Caspers, Fritts, and Grover 2001). In addition, some administrators have encouraged students to use the Internet and proximal libraries for their research (McManus 1998; Sutherland 2000).

Surveys have shown that, even when library support is strong and librarians go to great lengths to promote services, distance learners may turn to proximal libraries (Caspers 1999; Cassner and Adams 1998; Dew 2001; Goodson 1996; Kearley 2004; Macauley 1997; Orr 2004; Stephens, Unwin, and Bolton 1997; Tipton 2001). As taxpayers, they expect to receive the same library services and privileges as the students of public academic institutions (Verhoeven, Cooksey, and Hand 1996) and they fail to realize that private institutions' first allegiance is to the students whose tuition supports them (Cohn 1993). However, such expectations are not limited to distance learners and are not a recent phenomenon (Courtney 2001). The impact of distance learners and other unaffiliated users on proximal libraries includes:

- Excessive time spent with those unfamiliar with the library (Masters and Flatness 1985; Nicewarner and Simon 1996; Parnell 2002)
- Lack of financial support because distance learners are "invisible" to decision makers (Holley 1972; Piternick and McInnes 1979; Verhoeven, Cooksey, and Hand 1996)
- Unreturned books (Kelley 1985; E. S. Mitchell 1992; W. B. Mitchell 1982)
- Competition for books needed by affiliated users for courses (Bobp and Richey 1994; Jansen 1993; Josey 1969)
- Jostling for seating space (B. Johnson 1984; Verhoeven, Cooksey, and Hand 1996) and, by extension, for work stations
- Wear and tear on materials plus the need for extra security measures (B. Johnson 1984; P. Johnson 1998)

Some academic libraries have reacted by restricting access, charging for entrance or borrowing, or even closing their doors (Courtney 2003; Barsun 2003). Such decisions raise professional and philosophical

conflicts for librarians committed to free and unhindered access to information (Masters and Flatness 1985; Oberg 1998; Stoffle 1983). As noted by Rebecca Martin (1990), the paradox is that providing the same level of service to all may result in providing the highest level of service to no one, a concern shared by others (Flesch 1997; Ford and Likness 1989; Jansen 1993; Prince and Nelson 1985). Like their colleagues in academic libraries, public librarians experience distress when they are unable to meet the needs of those who come to them for assistance, especially when they are "blindsided by droves of under-prepared students" expecting to find materials to support their course work (*DLS Newsletter* 2004).

The Problem

It is apparent from the above that serving unaffiliated distance learners can be troublesome to both public and academic librarians. As librarians serving distance students, the writers' concern about the effect their students were having on their colleagues in other libraries prompted them to conduct a survey of the attitudes of librarians in impacted academic institutions. They reported the results of an initial survey at the 2004 Off-Campus Library Services Conference in Scottsdale, Arizona (Tuñon, Barsun, and Ramirez, 2004). That survey found a strong service perspective among the 107 respondents as well as relatively positive attitudes toward unaffiliated distance students. However, some comments hinted at possible underlying issues and concerns. As a result, the writers undertook a second, more in-depth study in 2004 that examined both academic and public librarians' attitudes about distance students' use of libraries in their area.

Methodology

Design

The authors' instrument from their pilot survey was revised and expanded using Surveyor, an ObjectPlanet software package, to include one survey for academic librarians and another for public librarians. Although the wording varied slightly in the two surveys, the instruments were designed to be congruent on all major questions with the exception of two additional questions for academic librarians regarding distance education programs offered by their institutions. The final versions included 18 questions for academic

librarians while the public library survey contained 16 questions.

A variety of types of questions were used, including multiple choice, ratings, yes/no, and short answer, with the option to include comments with most questions. The surveys included demographic statistics about the types of libraries where the librarians worked. The questions were designed to address librarians' perceptions about why distance students chose to use unaffiliated libraries and to identify types of resources and services offered to distance students as well as their opinions about the adequacy of the collections to support student research. Librarians were asked whether they considered use of the library by this population to be a problem. Several questions addressed librarians' self-reported attitudes, including perceptions about the level of support by distance students' home libraries. Librarians were also asked to identify the basis for the opinions they had formed about services offered by the students' home libraries, whether they had ever tried to contact the home libraries of the distance students, and solutions they would suggest for better serving distance students. Links to the surveys were disseminated in the fall of 2004 to a variety of electronic discussion groups targeting both academic and public librarians.

Subjects

Although a total of 550 responses were collected, the number of surveys used was reduced to 463 (250 from academic librarians and 213 from public librarians) after surveys that were less than 33 percent completed were excluded. It is not known whether a software glitch caused so many respondents to drop out at question #6, where they were asked to identify the institution(s) with which their distance users were most commonly affiliated, or whether respondents had concerns about answering that particular question. An analysis of the demographics revealed that about two-thirds of the academic librarians worked at publicly supported schools including state academic institutions (49%), community colleges (13%), and joint-use facilities (6%) while about two-thirds of the public librarians worked at either a main library (35%) or a large library system (33%). However, the majority of both types of libraries had small to medium-sized collections. Not surprisingly, the majority of both public and academic libraries also came from either urban or suburban settings. The states of Florida (66),

New York (29), Texas (25), and Georgia (23) were heavily represented, and 17 respondents came from other countries, including eight from Canada and four from Australia.

Results

In both the academic and public surveys, 85 percent of librarians reported being aware of distance education students using their libraries. Overall, smaller libraries reported not having many distance students as users, but librarians also noted that students did not always self-identify themselves as distance learners.

- To what degree did academic and public librarians consider distance students a problem for their libraries?

High percentages of librarians reported not being concerned by the level of use of their libraries by college/university students in distance programs. Interestingly, only 3 percent of academic librarians and 8 percent of the public librarians reported that serving distance students was a problem. Surprisingly, 41 percent of public librarians did make a distinction between students in distance programs and students in on-campus programs although another 32 percent did not. Based on comments by some public librarians, their reactions may be due in part to the difficulties some students experience with distance class assignments. Several public librarians commented on distance students' problems understanding assignments and a perceived lack of support by distance instructors, unlike the collaborative relationship they were often able to establish with local academic institutions.

- What reasons did academic and public librarians ascribe to the use of their libraries by distance students, and are there differences between the perceptions of academic and public librarians?

Peter Macauley noted that the "serendipity of browsing" draws students to proximal libraries (1997, 195). Karen Antell interviewed students who used her public library despite the presence in the same town of their academic library. She found that the convenient location, familiarity with the proximal library, and friendly staff were some of the reasons students use public libraries (2003). Respondents to the survey noted similar reasons as well as those listed in Table 1. Comments by both public and academic librarians most frequently attributed this behavior to a lack of knowledge of services offered at their academic home libraries.

- Did librarians consider their library collections adequate for the research needs of distance students, and were there differences between the perceptions of academic and public librarians?

Not surprisingly, 68 percent of academic librarians considered their academic collections adequate to support the research needs of distance students while only 24 percent of the public librarians did. Comments by some academic librarians were congruent to similar concerns expressed in the literature that the demands and expectations of distance learners and other unaffiliated users in academic libraries can put librarians in a position where they are torn between their commitment to service for all and the desire to ensure that their primary users are not given short shrift (Bobp and Richey 1994; Jansen 1993; W. B. Mitchell 1982; Prince and Nelson 1985; Waggoner 1964).

Although public libraries have been referred to as “the people’s university,” (Sisco and Whitson 1990) they are educational institutions in the broadest possible sense, *not* academic institutions. Thus it is understandable that public librarians expressed concerns about being expected to stretch materials budgets to

purchase both entertainment-oriented and academic materials.

Several public librarians reported encouraging students to use the academic libraries in the area or resources at their home institution’s library (if available). Others’ promoted interlibrary loan as a method for supplementing their own collections. However, as one librarian noted, “ILL is not FedEx!”

- Were there significant differences between the level of services and resources offered by academic and public libraries to distance students, and were there differences between the perceptions of academic and public librarians of this user group?

Predictably, public libraries provided more services to unaffiliated distance students than academic libraries, and state-supported academic libraries provided more than private academic libraries. Nevertheless, even private academic institutions offered a number of services to walk-in users. (See Table 2.) The overall theme in the responses demonstrated a strong service attitude by academic and public librarians alike. Librarians’ comments also emphasized the need to treat all patrons with respect and courtesy as well as good customer service techniques. The public librarians were

Table 1. Reasons Distance Students Use the Services at Other Libraries

	Academic library count	Ratio	Public library count	Ratio
(Respondents selected as many choices as applied.)				
Their academic library is not located in the local area	207	82.8%	170	79.8%
The public library is more conveniently located			186	87.32%
Their academic library is local but not conveniently located	59	23.6%		
Students are unaware of the services provided by their academic libraries	125	50%	82	38.5%
Helpful/friendly staff	130	52%	140	65.73%
Place to study	108	43.2%	110	51.64%
Students can bring their children along	41	16.4%	108	50.7%
More/better resources	146	58.4%	29	13.62%
Ease of use	75	30%	107	50.23%
Familiarity/comfort level	89	35.6%	150	70.42%
Parking available	50	20%	82	38.5%
One-stop shopping for both popular and research materials			85	39.93%
Other	29	11.6%	17	7.98%
Total Responses	250		213	

	Academic Library Count	Ratio	Public Library Count	Ratio
No services are available to individuals from other institutions	1	.42%	3	1.44%
Fee-based entry for non-affiliated students	12	5%		
Services to outside users restricted to patrons from institutions with formal/consortial agreements	48	20%	16	7.66%
Services restricted to state residents	23	9.58%		
Services restricted to county/city residents	24	10%		
In-house use of print materials	197	82.08%		
Fee-based card to check out books	71	29.58%	51	24.40%
Free circulation privileges	69	27.75%	68	32.54%
In-house access to proprietary databases	205	85.41%	185	88.52%
In-house access to Internet	212	88.3%	205	98.09%
Fee-based access to databases	2	.84%	2	.98%
Face-to-face reference	224	93.33%	202	96.65%
Virtual reference (phone, chat, and/or email)	144	60%	129	61.72%
Fee-based interlibrary loan	24	10%	9	4.31%
Free interlibrary loan (PL: to non-residents)	20	8.3%	68	32.54%
Test proctoring service	42	17.5%	139	66.51%
Other	16	6.67%	18	8.61%
Total Responses	240		209	

particularly positive. As one librarian put it, “It’s the public’s library. Come on in.”

Academic librarians’ comments focused on prioritizing whom to serve: “Our students pay a lot of money to come to school here. They must come first. Our faculty and staff also must come first. Distance students are free to use our collections, but come second to our students, faculty, and staff.” Another librarian put it even more forcefully: “It is absolutely ok to neglect the visitor in favor of the paying customer. It is not only ok but right.” In spite of the service mentality expressed, both types of librarians stated that distance students should also be making use of their own library facilities.

- What attitudes were expressed about distance students and the support services provided by these students’ home libraries, and were there differences between the perceptions of academic and public librarians?

Only 22 percent of both academic and public librarians thought academic institutions did a good job of supporting their distance students; significantly more reported feeling ambiguous. Here, as elsewhere in the survey, a number of librarians suggested that students should be using the library services their tuition was paying for at their own institutions. As one librarian explained, this suggestion did not arise from a feeling that students from other institutions did not “have the right to access OUR services” but rather because the home institution had (or should have) the materials that support the students’ studies. It is also important to note that the overall sentiment expressed was that serving unaffiliated distance students should not be considered a polarizing “either/or” issue.

Librarians reported being more irritated when the sponsoring institutions were perceived to provide little or no library support to their distance students. This was even more true when the institution was a for-profit

university that benefited by sending students to use other libraries. As one librarian put it, “Some colleges don’t even seem to bother with their distance ed students lib[rary] needs.” Another noted that some institutions “appear to be gaining revenue unfairly—putting the burden of services on other institutions, charging

tuition, and not supporting their students.” As Stephen Parnell stated, publicly funded libraries should not be expected to support the activities of distance education providers run for profit (2002).

Of the librarians who concluded that the home institution was doing a poor job of supporting the in-

Table 3. Attitudes among the Librarians toward Walk-in Distance Students

	Academic Libraries		Public Libraries	
	Disagree or Strongly Disagree	Agree or Strongly Agree	Disagree or Strongly Disagree	Agree or Strongly Agree
Distance students are tax payers/state residents who should be actively encouraged to make use of local library resources available to them.	7%	73%	4%	81%
Distance students are usually appreciative of services offered to them.	3%	38%	8%	78%
Staff should treat distance students like any other library user.	16%	75%	3%	89%
Students are unaware of the services provided by their home libraries	50%	50%	31%	69%
Librarians should help distance students from other institutions learn about the services offered to them through their home libraries.	10%	76%	8%	72%
Librarians from the home institution don’t seem to be providing any bibliographic instruction for their distance students.	18%	30%	16%	35%
Distance students from other institutions often demand services that they do not pay for and may even become argumentative about any limitations.	51%	26%		
College/university students in distance education programs often expect to find academic-quality research resources in a public library.			8%	78%
It is OK not to provide distance students from other institutions with the same level of help as students from your own institution, particularly if the library is busy.	47%	42%		
It is OK for public libraries not to provide specialized scholarly materials for the research needs of students in higher education.			7%	48%
The time spent with distance students is a drain on librarians’ ability to serve their own patrons.	57%	24%	67%	10%
Distance students seem “clueless” about proper research methods.	31%	31%	21%	43%
Distance students are a drain on the library’s budget.	61%	14%	65%	11%
Distance students should be using library services at their own institutions	17%	61%	11%	55%
Total Responses	232		204	

stitution's distance students, 53 percent of the responding academic librarians and 55 percent of the public librarians reported reaching their conclusions based on student comments. Because librarians acknowledged that students did not always pay attention to the help materials and training sessions that were offered, the fact that only 27 percent of the academic librarians and 15 percent of the public librarians actually contacted librarians at the students' home institutions with inquiries about the services available was significant.

Respondents' comments also provided some unanticipated general insights into distance students as a group: Several librarians described distance students as older, nontraditional students who were coping with the demands on their time of families and jobs and that they may have "average (or below) computer skills." Others commented on the fact that they were more likely to become easily frustrated, particularly if they also had unrealistic expectations about library. Although the majority of distance students were described as courteous and appreciative, librarians also acknowledged that others could be demanding, pushy, "extra needy," and even unpleasant on occasion.

- To what degree do the overall attitudes of academic librarians toward distance students differ from public librarians?

Librarians self-reported relatively positive attitudes toward distance students for the most part. For example, the majority of librarians reported feeling that distance students were not a drain on their time or a drain on their budget. However, there was a distinct difference in responses about the perceived appreciation of distance students for the services accessed as walk-in users.

The choice that elicited the most comments had to do with whether distance students were "clueless" when it came to proper research methods and use of library services. Although respondents acknowledged that distance students might be "clueless" about library research skills, a number also noted in their comments that this was also the case with students attending local institutions. The difference between distance and local students is that the distance students do not have the same kinds of opportunities for "one-on-one, face-to-face help from their instructors."

- To what degree do the attitudes of librarians working at publicly subsidized and private institutions differ?

There was not as big a difference as expected between the attitudes expressed by librarians at public and private libraries about distance students using their libraries. The fact that 80 percent of librarians at publicly subsidized institutions did not have problems with distance students using their libraries was not unexpected, but the fact that 74 percent of librarians at private institutions expressed similarly positive opinions was surprising. In fact, the responses of these two groups were actually quite congruent, as shown in Table 3.

- To what degree do the attitudes of academic librarians who work at institutions that offer distance education programs differ from those that do not?

Academic librarians reported that 88 percent of their institutions did offer distance programs of their own. However, 65 percent of these reported having fewer than 25 percent of their student bodies consisting of distance students. Only 8 percent said that 50 percent or more of their students were distance learners.

The writers were interested to learn if there were any differences in academic librarians' attitudes toward students attending distance programs at their own institutions and students attending classes at other institutions. The writers first looked at responses of librarians at institutions that offer distance programs to see if this impacted attitudes about unaffiliated distance students. They found that librarians working at institutions with no distance programs were less likely to have positive feelings about unaffiliated distance students (63%) than those at institutions that did. Moreover, librarians at institutions with smaller distance programs were more likely to express positive feelings about unaffiliated distance students (82%) than those at academic institutions with larger programs (72%).

- What solutions do public and academic librarians propose that their libraries and/or the home libraries implement to better serve distance students, and are there significant differences in the solutions proposed by academic and public libraries?

Librarians had a number of suggestions for what the home library should be doing. Many were in agreement that the home libraries need to provide training for their students. As one librarian noted, "Most [distance students] have no idea what services are actually available to them through their program". Training suggestions ranged from mandatory online tutorials and mandatory tours of the library to a credit-bearing

course in library research. Other suggestions for the home institution or library:

- Send out information packets that include the student's library card and password(s) and provide Ask-a-Librarian style email services to distance students;
- Consider donating materials that support the institution's curriculum to public libraries as well as providing monies to pay for processing costs to add these materials to the collection;
- Arrange for library privileges at local academic libraries and/or offer stipends to public libraries to cover the expenses of providing ILL or provide desktop delivery of resources as an alternative;
- Offer students with information about how to set up an account in the electronic classroom software program used by the academic institution and other related technology issues;
- Provide their distance students with an ombudsman who could mediate for students, for example, who have technical problems with authentication, passwords, proxy servers, etc.

Others suggested that the impacted libraries should have more in-service training of staff and should set policies about the specific services and resources available to distance students. Both academic and public librarians suggested more consortial collaborations.

Although a number of librarians thought better partnerships with home institutions were needed, there were few concrete recommendations about how to accomplish this. Unlike the case with local academic institutions, public librarians often do not know whom to contact when the academic institutions are across the state, the country, or even the world. Librarians made several suggestions about continuing and expanding efforts like the Florida Electronic Library, ILL cooperatives, partnerships between state universities and public libraries at the state level, and consortial efforts such as the COPPUL Distance Education Group, KCREACHE, and the TexShare reciprocal borrowing cards. Others liked the idea of regional or national government-funded resource sharing networks such as the national reciprocal borrowing program available in Australia. It was also noted, however, that if public libraries were to agree to such a mandate, they would need to be adequately funded in order to take on these additional responsibilities. One librarian suggested that, ideally, the distance education program should provide a per capita allotment of money to public

libraries since their library was spared the expense of supporting these particular students. Others recommended that the impacted libraries should become more entrepreneurial and offer fee-based services to unaffiliated distance students.

Suggestions for improving services for distance students specifically at public libraries included some academic library solutions such as offering live chat, electronic pathfinders, library-instruction oriented Web sites, interactive tutorials, electronic reference forms, email library instruction, virtual tours, and outreach programs that promoted information literacy skills. Other innovative suggestions included book displays showcasing distance education technologies and tools as well as efforts to partner with academic reference librarians to cosponsor information literacy instruction. One librarian concluded, "It should be incumbent upon public reference librarians to make more effective use of the various online options that are currently at hand for meeting the information needs of their patrons, whether they are distance ed students or not." However, to truly serve distance students, public libraries would need more staff, more funding, and more space.

Librarians who had experience working with distance students at their own institutions had suggestions about how things could be improved. One librarian felt that students should be advised about the services, fees, and regulations associated with using the library services at other institutions so that they would have any needed documentation to use the services and be prepared for any costs. Another librarian described how email messages that explained library services were mailed out to all students to alert them to the services available. The development and posting of policies in brochures and on Web sites that set a clear service protocol would also be helpful. One academic librarian suggested in-house training for librarians and staff on the library's policies that pertain to unaffiliated students whether they were taking classes locally or at a distance. Another librarian at a joint-use library stressed having an open attitude to outside users and keeping statistics.

Limitations

The writers did not include any questions about respondents' feelings regarding the quality of distance education, but a number of comments expressed

opinions on the topic. Although the writers had originally hypothesized that public librarians in particular might not really note any difference between local and distance students, this did not prove to be the case. In fact, 41 percent of the public librarians reported a difference between students in distance programs and students in on-campus programs. Several public librarians note in particular the difficulty distance students have understanding their assignments and the inability to collaborate with faculty at local academic institutions.

The surveys did not inquire about how many librarians had taken distance education classes themselves, but a number of respondents indicated that they had taken classes delivered via distance education, and this personal point of view seemed to help them understand both the challenges and the problems of distance education. They tended to hold programs offered online and at a distance in higher regard. Experience as distance students also seemed to promote a willingness to go the extra mile to help other distance students.

Conclusions

The findings of this study showed evidence that the trend toward convergence in society is impacting usage patterns of proximal academic libraries and public libraries by distance students. Even though the distinctions between different types of users is becoming increasingly blurred, the service attitude of all types of librarians puts helping users as their priority.

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