New Forms of Distance Education: Opportunities for Students, Threats to Institutions

Leigh S. Estabrook

Abstract

In 1996, the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois began offering its master's degree over the Internet, with only brief periods of on-campus learning, in a program called LEEP3. This paper outlines the way in which LEEP3 is designed to allow students from Alaska to the Virgin Islands to obtain high quality LIS education. Students can obtain the full Master of Science accredited degree in a site independent format of instruction. Faculty employ both synchronous and asynchronous learning in classes that increasingly blend on-campus and distance students. The program includes cooperative learning, outside lecturers, career counseling and extensive use of new information technologies to give students an experience as rich as that received by students on campus.

This paper describes the design of LEEP3 with a focus on instruction. It then turns to the broader implications for programs such as LEEP3 for colleges and universities. While distance education opens up new opportunities for students, it also promises to change significantly the ways in which colleges and universities operate. Most familiar to librarians is the demand for materials in electronic form. Other changes that may affect libraries even more dramatically include (1) new configurations of faculty both on and off-campus and (2) significant challenges to the ways in which the “Carnegie unit” of instruction (i.e., credit hours) is defined. Who are the faculty for which the library develops collections? Who are the students? What is a course? Can the library “collect” instructional materials developed for distance delivery? What is the domain of supporting materials for teaching for which the library should be responsible?

A concluding section suggests areas of greatest need in the near term for libraries responsible for providing support to distance education.

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In 1996, the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois began offering its master’s degree over the Internet, with only brief periods of on-campus learning, in a program called LEEP3. This paper outlines the way in which LEEP3 is designed to allow students who cannot commute to Champaign-Urbana to obtain high quality LIS education. It then turns to examine the real and potential impact of such design on higher education and its libraries. Students can obtain the full Master of Science accredited degree in a site independent format of instruction. Faculty employ both synchronous and asynchronous learning in classes that increasingly a blend on-campus and distance students. The program includes cooperative and group learning, outside lecturers, career counseling and extensive use of new information technologies to give students an experience as rich as that received by students on campus. We are cognizant of the need to support varieties of learning styles as we assure access to both human and instructional resources for learning. Above all, our faculty have been committed to avoiding a correspondence course model. We work hard to keep frustration over technology to a minimum.

When we designed LEEP3, the GSLIS faculty was committed to providing instruction and student experiences comparable to those received by students who enroll on-campus. This means that all regular GSLIS faculty are involved in teaching. Extensive and creative access to library resources is provided through online reserves and mail service for inter library loan. We have set up a “proxy” server that allow students from outside information service providers to be recognized as coming from the UIUC domain—a necessary component to their getting access to the University library’s electronic collections.

During the brief periods of time students are on campus, we schedule a variety of activities—both social and instructional—that increase the sense of community not only among the students but also between students and faculty. We have begun an electronic job fair that includes live recorded interviews with professionals in the field. We are careful in selecting adjuncts—and are fortunate to have a talented pool from which we can draw because we are not limited by geography. Faculty from Pennsylvania, North Carolina and Wisconsin have taught. They, too, come to campus only during the semester.

Faculty, while preparing and teaching a course, work closely with our technology support staff. The manager of instructional resources goes to a faculty member and asks “what is it you wish to accomplish pedagogically?” The answer to that question drives the types of technology used in a particular class. As we complete our third year of this program, all regular faculty have been involved and only a few students have found it necessary to stop taking courses in the program because of demands from work or family.

We enroll people from Thailand to the Virgin Islands: from Alaska to Columbia. Many of those who enroll are initially much less technologically literate than we had expected. But many are in jobs for which the master’s degree will be a significant advantage and the students are driven to learn and take advantage of an opportunity they did not have before. Among their comments to us are the following:

I’ve . . . learned that a large component of the ability to learn, to use technology, and to . . . do scholarly work benefits from the ability to work with peers. What we’re facing with LEEP3 is the need to generate peer support infrastructure without face-to-face communication.

at age 41 I’m finally learning how to swim . . .

After LEEP3, I’m much braver about a lot of things.

LEEP students not only do the full workload of a class delivered in “regular” format, but must also spend extra time with technology. Communication takes time, learning how to use the technology takes time, and troubleshooting technological problems takes time. I am very grateful for the opportunity to get my degree in this manner, (one student said) but it’s taking me longer than I thought it might because it’s so timeconsuming for one who works a fortyhour week. Every time someone who asks about my course work says, “So it’s like a correspondence course?” I want to smack ’em! The thing that’s different about LEEP3 is the constant, immediate communication and the synchronous instruction/discussions we are able to conduct. Not all of us are given release time and/or pay by our employers, making it even more difficult to juggle work and LEEP3. And I hope it will be clear to future employers that a degree earned in this manner is every bit as good as one.
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earned in a traditional setting, and in some ways, more valuable.

Another commented as she was about to graduate:

Sitting here preparing to work on my final paper, I can’t help remembering that it was two years ago today that approximately thirty students gathered in Champaign to begin this bold new adventure. I remember my apprehension as I drove to Champaign, sure that I would be the only student over thirty in LEEP3, wondering what I had gotten myself into. Did I still remember how to write papers? Could I do graduate work and still hold down my jobs? What about my family? How would this affect them? Did I know enough about computers and the Internet? But the excitement and enthusiasm for this opportunity to do graduate work in library science was greater than the apprehension.

LEEP3 has truly been a marvelous, exhilarating experience. I have met and learned from a wonderful group of students and teachers. At times overwhelming, but always challenging, the GSLIS classes have taught me far more than I could have imagined. I have gained insights and confidence, knowledge and skills, and friends for a lifetime. The virtual community of LEEP3 continues to develop and thrive.

For us, at the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois, the advantages of LEEP3 center on the opportunity to extend LIS education to those for which it has been unavailable (we have had someone from Alaska in each of the three years of LEEP3). Faculty have been able to explore new forms of pedagogy and to work collaboratively in new ways. We have been able to hire adjuncts of particular talent.

Most colleges and universities are considering new forms of distance education, although it is important to note that models of instruction vary. (None currently mimics the “old form” practiced by such people as Alice Lohrer in who in the 1950s took a plane from Champaign to various places in Illinois to deliver instruction.) Some institutions involved in distance education focus on the “learning unit”, others focus on “skills” and still others focus on teaching courses as a whole. Some see distance education as source of new students and new revenue. There is a range of distance education models from videotapes sent to remote locations with workbooks, to whole, highly interactive degree programs like LEEP3. Many university administrators and state legislators assume distance education will save money. (It probably won’t if it is done well.) Some see it as a way to use certain technologies in which a state may have invested.

As distance education moves from the control of a division of “continuing education” and becomes more firmly embedded in university structures, colleges and universities will face a number of complex questions driven by new configurations of faculty both on and off-campus and significant challenges to the ways in which the “Carnegie unit” of instruction (i.e., credit hours) is defined.

I mentioned earlier that we hire a number of instructors for LEEP3 who do not live in Champaign-Urbana. I was even called by our department of Human Resources to verify that certain individuals really were U of I employees. What responsibility does the library have for providing collection development support for these faculty? How does the library work with the adjunct faculty member’s “home” library? How does the library handle the murky questions of intellectual property rights for digitized materials made part of a distance education course?

Similar questions arise when providing service to off-campus students. Many do not pay regular campus fees. Are they to be given the same library privileges as on-campus students? Does a library provide electronic reserves or mail ILL requests to individuals unable to come to the library to read or borrow materials? Does the library provide a “proxy” server so remote students can have access to electronic materials that usually can be used only from the college or university domain name? In a program such as ours, who is in residence? Many of our LEEP3 format classes are taken by on-campus students and many of our on campus students are actually at the School for limited time.

And what, we may ask, is a course? What is the meaning of the classic “Carnegie unit” that standardized measure of credit hours, when teaching is modularized. The faculty at GSLIS are undertaking a full review of the master’s curriculum that has led us to confront the questions of what areas of instruction to combine and how much depth to provide. This is an issue well beyond distance education, but I believe that the modular approach to various distance education offer-
ings in other universities, particularly in the areas of math and the sciences, has led us to question in new ways some of our basic assumptions about what topics go together. And once these questions are opened we have added problems in defining faculty load.

We see also an increased potential for outsourcing college and university services. So far, at Illinois, the campus has outsourced only the food services—not a problem for LEEP3 students. But Phoenix University, I understand, is outsourcing student support services. Not an unreasonable approach, particularly if a university can find staff who are trained to work with the issues that confront students working at a distance from campus. Certainly library services are an obvious target for outsourcing in some kinds of institutions. But then we may begin to ask, “where is the university”?

What happens to our universities depends a great deal on the economic patterns that evolve. I see a number of alternatives. First a Darwinian model in which different programs in effect adapt to their environments, driving out those unable to adapt the technologies or recruit students or convert faculty to new ways of instruction. Similar to this might be the “distance education class struggle” in which those with power, prestige, resources for technology and business connections are able to dominate the distance education markets. A third possible model could be called the “loaves and fishes” approach. For the foreseeable future there are many more students to be educated than opportunities for education. There are also many more areas that might be taught and a global demand for new educational ventures. One might argue then that there is ample “food” for hungry distance education providers.

Two other models we might posit include the “McDonalds” model, in which distance education becomes franchised. In some ways this is the pattern followed by some universities that send video tapes or live video instruction to remote sites where local staff are employed to facilitate discussion of learners. And finally, I would offer the model of “Colonialism” where we find not only economic control, but also cultural domination of the forms and shape of distance education offerings.

I offer these examples as much to trigger discussion as anything else. They certainly are not exhaustive categories, nor even mutually exclusive. But I think they give us a way to begin thinking more broadly about the impact of distance education on library services in colleges and universities. Many of us, and I include myself, have focused on issues of how to get materials to our students who live in remote locations. Some of us are beginning to address issues related to providing electronic reserve. Few of us, and again I include myself, are working out the possibilities that higher education itself may be radically transformed by distance education.

Let me suggest just three of those transformations—ones with which we struggle daily at the University of Illinois. First is the idea of learning communities and how best to create them in a distance mode. It is not only a question of how to build community for LEEP3 students, but also what models of teaching and learning are most effective when students have only short periods of time working face-to-face. When do they need the physical documents in their learning about library and information science? When will document surrogates work? Are there some things that simply cannot be taught in anything other than a face-to-face mode? For example, uses of certain kinds of higher end technology.

Second is the challenge of how to manage new interdependencies in instruction. Much of our face-to-face instruction occurs with a single instructor behind a closed door. Someone may deliver AV equipment or help order textbooks, but others are rarely involved in a significant way. In distance education, faculty do not work alone. They are dependent on several of our technology staff who not only help initially in the pedagogical design of a course and in getting materials mounted on the web; but work throughout in setting up and monitoring synchronous sessions, trouble shooting when students or faculty have technical difficulties and providing numerous other support services intrinsic to teaching.

Third is the greater “publicness” of teaching and learning. We do password protect much of the work of our students and faculty so that it cannot be seen by people outside the GSLIS community. But within that community, all of us know much more about each others work. Students’ postings on webboards are read and commented upon not only by others in the class, but sometimes by students in other classes. The archived synchronous sessions, particularly when they involve outside guest speakers may be listened to by others long after a course has been completed.

For college and university librarians, who are important parts of these increasingly interdependent learning communities, the issues then go well beyond what
to scan, what to mail and how to password protect. We look to you to help us understand when and why document surrogates won’t work. We ask you to become part of our interdependent team trying to make the pedagogy of distance education work. We also ask you to consider whether to preserve and make accessible new forms of information that are being created as part of the teaching and learning of distance education.