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Cassner, Mary and Adams, Kate, "Providing Library Services to Distance Students and Faculty in the College of Human Resources and Family Sciences" (1999). *Faculty Publications, UNL Libraries*. 83.

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Providing Library Services to Distance Students and Faculty in the College of Human Resources and Family Sciences

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Library resources and services are an essential component of any educational experience. Guidelines written by the Association of College and Research Libraries serve as a framework for providing library support to distance students and faculty. This article provides a case study of services and resources offered to students and faculty involved in the University of Nebraska-Lincoln College of Human Resources and Family Sciences Interdepartmental Master’s Program. Included are results of research studies related to meeting the library and information needs of distance learners and faculty in the college.

Slade and Kascus (1998) predict four trends will shape the future of providing library services to distance learners. First, they believe there will be an increased global reliance on technology and distance education. For example, libraries are expected to rely increasingly on the Internet in linking distant learners with available resources and services. A second trend will involve further collaboration and cooperation to increase quality, equity, and access for remote learners. This collaboration will involve partnerships between librarians and other stakeholders, such as faculty, administrators, information systems experts, and other institutions. A third prediction is that off-campus and on-campus library boundaries will continue to blur. Finally, Slade and Kascus believe that the distance learning paradigm will continue to change as the knowledge base expands due to growth in literature related to library support for the distance learner.

In this age of the virtual university, it is expected that institutions will not only deliver courses but will provide the support services necessary to enable students to be successful (Miller, 1997). Library services are an important component of any educational experience and are essential for the lifelong learning process (York, 1993). As such, these services should be offered to all distant learners and the faculty who teach them (Holmberg, 1989). Although distance learning may

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Key Words: libraries, distance education, graduate students, faculty

Family Science Review, 12 (3), August 1999
be delivered via a variety of technologies, the common denominator is the physical separation of the learner from a traditional postsecondary institution and the library associated with that institution (Slade & Kascus, 1998).

It is generally accepted that distant students and faculty should expect the same level of service as that offered to on-campus users (Bazillion & Braun, 1992; Butler, 1997; Chepesiuk & Gorman, 1998; Riggs, 1997). The Association of College and Research Libraries (1998), a division within the American Library Association, has recently revised its official document, ACRL Guidelines for Distance Learning Library Services. These guidelines serve as a framework for providing library support to distance learners. Included in the document are statements regarding the philosophy of providing services, management and personnel concerns, and financial responsibility for services, facilities, and library resources and services. The intended audience for the guidelines includes administrators at all levels of post-secondary education, accrediting and licensing agencies, and librarians and staff who work with distance learning students and faculty.

In general, distant learners and faculty should have access to the following library services and resources:

- **Reference assistance.** Librarians should provide answers to reference questions in a timely manner. These questions may relate to any aspect of available library services and resources.

- **Bibliographic instruction and information services.** Instruction on electronic access to the library’s resources and services should be provided to distance students and faculty. Users also should be provided with basic library skills as well as information enabling them to independently search the library’s on-line catalog for books and citations for journal articles.

- **Access to library materials.** Distance education students and faculty should be entitled to library borrowing privileges through the institution offering classes. In some cases, reciprocal or contractual borrowing arrangements may be provided at a library in closer proximity to the students’ homes. Users should have the option of receiving materials in a timely manner through a document delivery service or interlibrary loan.

- **Means of contacting librarians and staff.** Several methods of contacting librarians and library staff should be provided. These often include options to phone, fax, or e-mail appropriate librarians or staff.

- **Documented policies and procedures.** There should be access to current, documented library policies and procedures, such as print handouts and/or webpages that specifically address library services for distant learners and faculty.

THE UNIQUE CHALLENGES OF FAMILY SCIENCE FOR LIBRARIES

*Family science* is a relatively new term. Librarians, and indeed academia in general, may not have a clear definition of what is meant by this body of knowledge. What is family science? What does it include or not include? How does family science differ from human ecology, family studies, or similar terms?

The literature of family science poses a challenge for family science librarians. Depending on their research interests, faculty and graduate students may seek information in such overlapping and diverse fields as sociology, social work, psychology, education, and medicine. Also, serial literature may be problematic for family science librarians. There is a core group of serial titles purchased by most subject specialist librarians. Many of these serials include the word *family* in the title. Additional serial titles purchased depend greatly on the curriculum being taught at a particular institution and the research interests of faculty.

A fairly serious concern, in librarians’ opinion, involves the inadequate indexing of family science journals. This makes it difficult for faculty and students, both on campus and remote, to be aware of journal literature in their field. While *Family Index*, edited by John Touliatos, covers a majority of the family science articles published, it is available only in print format, making it inaccessible to students taking classes through extended education. Many electronic indexes, particularly general indexes whose scope includes a broad range of subjects, are erratic in their coverage of family science journals. *Family Studies Index*, produced by the National Information Services Corporation (NISC) Corporation, is one example of an electronic database that distance students and faculty can access from off campus. Another, *Sage Family Studies Abstracts*, was not available electronically until recently. This index is now included as part of the *Electronic Collections Online*, one of the FirstSearch databases produced by the *Online Computer Library Center, Inc.* (OCLC).

Reference materials are a pragmatic concern for serving distance students and faculty. Since reference materials such as handbooks, statistical abstracts, and specialized encyclopedias do not circulate in most institutions, it may be difficult for students taking classes remotely to have access to these documents. Users may find that some reference information, such as statistical data, is available through the Web. Another option is for distance students to use the services of their subject specialist librarian to find needed data. For example, the librarian can field reference questions and relay information to students.

CURRENT CONCERNS FOR SERVING DISTANCE LEARNERS

Library services and resources are often not used to their fullest extent by distance learners. A 1995 University of Minnesota-Twin Cities study of 1039 distance education students and 160 faculty members found that almost two-thirds of distant students expected limited access to library services and resources. More
than three-quarters of faculty expected their students to have less access to library services than if they were taking on-campus courses, and 20% of faculty chose not to give specific course assignments because of what they perceived as a lack of availability to library resources (Butler, 1997). Mary Beth Susman, president of Colorado Electronic Community College, also reports similar statements by faculty reluctant to assign library research (Chepesiuk & Gorman, 1998). Furthermore, results of a questionnaire sent to 53 graduates in agriculture in Iowa State University’s off-campus program found that students listed access to library facilities as a significant obstacle to off-campus study (Miller, 1995).

Rosenquist-Buhler (1996) provides examples of resources and services which libraries oftentimes cannot provide for distant learners. Smaller and older indexes may not be available electronically or purchase costs may be prohibitive. Distant learners also must wait to receive materials which they have requested from their library. In contrast, on-campus students often have almost immediate access to library materials available at their institutions. An additional issue, perhaps less pressing, is that distant learners cannot browse the stacks in search of related information on a topic of interest to them.

A CASE STUDY

The graduate faculty of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln College of Human Resources and Family Sciences instituted an Interdepartmental Master’s Program in fall 1994. The degree program consists of twelve 3-credit-hour classes from the three diverse departments within the college: Family and Consumer Sciences, Nutritional Sciences and Dietetics, and Textiles, Clothing, and Design. Students can complete the entire degree in three years without coming to campus. However, many students do not enroll in these classes seeking a degree but for enrichment, teacher re-certification, or other reasons (Laughlin, 1997). A related goal of the degree program is to serve not only the needs of students but the profession as well. Laughlin (1997) stated that the knowledge base of the profession is increased by these distant learners who, in their course work, examine relevant problems of individuals, families, and the broader community.

The University Libraries have played an important part in planning for and delivering instructional support to distant learners since 1990 (Adams, Bernthal, Bicknell, & Pearson, 1991). Guidelines set forth by the Association of College and Research Libraries (1990, 1998) have served as a framework for institutional support. The distance education coordinator for the libraries provides overall programmatic direction, while subject specialist librarians furnish instructional support.

Many services and resources are provided by the University Libraries in support of distant graduate students and faculty in the College of Human Resources and Family Sciences, as well as those in other colleges. Early on, the subject specialist librarian and the libraries’ distance education coordinator were consulted as part of the planning process for providing library resources and services to extended education students. The subject specialist librarian is often the initial contact for students and serves as a contact for a variety of reference information and bibliographic instruction functions. She uses a variety of methods to meet students’ research needs: telephone conversations, e-mail, and appointments for the occasional on-site library visit by the distant learner. Also, she conducts mediated searches to locate pertinent family science literature. Prior to the start of the semester, the liaison librarian contacts faculty instructors for upcoming distant courses to determine specific assignments which will require library research and to offer his/her assistance. Frequently, subject specialist librarians are included in e-mail class lists. This enables the librarian to monitor discussions related to assignments and to offer advice—at appropriate times—on accessing the on-line catalog and specific journal databases. This professional has a specialized background, and often an advanced degree, in disciplines related to course instruction. Also, assistance can be obtained by contacting the distance education coordinator, phoning reference/information, or through an electronic reference service.

The libraries’ distance education coordinator prepares customized handouts for distribution each semester and summer. Revised frequently to accommodate electronic technological changes and new databases, these handouts provide an overview of services offered to distant learners as well as information on specific journal databases. Library handouts are mailed to students each semester by college staff. The distance education coordinator developed a webpage, Services for Distance Education Students, that provides point-of-need information and is updated periodically. This homepage, accessible from the libraries’ on-line catalog, provides an overview of distance education services available to the distant learner and offers useful links to related Web sources.

Many of the Human Resources and Family Sciences distant learners live in rural areas far from an academic library. Therefore, students need to be instructed in various procedures to obtain library materials in support of their classes. Nearly all circulating materials in the university libraries’ collections can be acquired through document delivery. Interlibrary loan service is used to obtain materials not owned by the libraries. Monographs and journal articles are mailed directly to students.

STUDY OF DISTANCE STUDENTS

In fall 1997, a study was conducted of 184 students who had taken one or more classes in the College of Human Resources and Family Sciences Interdepartmental Master’s Program via distance education since the program’s inception in 1994 (Cassner & Adams, 1998). Data for the study were collected by a self-administered survey containing 24 questions. For the most part, survey questions were partially close-ended with respondents having the option of adding
or clarifying responses. A complete second mailing was sent to nonrespondents approximately two weeks after the initial package was sent.

One hundred ten students, approximately 61% of the total population, returned the completed questionnaire. The purpose of the study was to determine the degree to which the libraries had served the information needs of this clientele. Data was analyzed by figuring the percentage of survey respondents who indicated a particular answer for each question. Findings showed that 63% of students had used services or resources of the university libraries. Forty-one percent had used on-line journal indexes, and 37% had used the libraries’ on-line catalog to search for books. Over one-third of the students requested delivery of materials through the libraries’ Interlibrary Loan Office. Fewer students used reference services (23%) or consulted with the subject specialist librarian (12%) or distance education coordinator (14%).

One question sought reasons that the libraries’ resources or services were not used. Many students (41%) reported that they found materials elsewhere. A significant number (26%) stated that they did not know how to access the libraries’ on-line resources. Some (17%) said that their course-related research did not require the use of library resources or services. Noted less often were that students did not have access to a computer (14%) or did not know how to request delivery of materials (11%).

An overwhelming number of students (72%) who had contacted library staff rated their satisfaction with the service they received as “very satisfied” or “satisfied.” Another question asked whether certain factors affected their choice of a library in terms of extended education classes. Most students indicated that convenient hours, proximity to home, whether the library owned the materials the student desired, or staff expertise seldom, if at all, influenced their choice of library. The specific factors that did influence students’ choice of library could not be determined from the survey. However, the study found that students were most likely to use a college or university library for their classes with very few choosing to use a public library (Cassner & Adams, 1998). This finding is in contrast to a study by Gilson (1995), who found that distant students in rural Kansas most frequently used public libraries.

Twenty percent of students said they “very often” or “often” felt the need for additional training in searching for materials when preparing research papers. Similarly, 25% felt the need for additional training in using World Wide Web browsers. An open-ended question inviting comments for improving resources and services resulted in 37 comments related to the libraries. As noted earlier, several students stated they would benefit from additional library instruction in the use of electronic resources. Others asked that the libraries consider the purchase of additional databases containing full text journal articles. There were compliments as well. One student, for example, thanked the libraries for quickly responding to her e-mail questions.

Seventeen suggestions addressed curricular and program administration issues. For example, one student stated her desire for additional extended education classes. Another student was particularly interested in having a course on technology in the classroom or workplace added to the curriculum (Cassner & Adams, 1998).

ON-CAMPUS VERSUS OFF-CAMPUS STUDENT LIBRARY USE

A library usage survey of on-campus graduate students in the College of Human Resources and Family Sciences was conducted in fall 1998. This survey was mailed to 200 randomly selected students, from a population of 287 students. These students were enrolled in Human Resources and Family Science classes between fall 1994 and fall 1997, the same time period as students who had enrolled in classes in the college through distance education. To ensure a more accurate comparison between the on-campus and off-campus students, the two surveys contained almost identical questions. However, a few questions which would not apply to the on-campus students were deleted and a few additional questions were added. Identical procedures (i.e., similar cover letters, second complete mailing to nonrespondents, etc.) were followed with both groups to ensure reliability.

Data is currently being analyzed to compare library usage of on-campus and off-campus students. Eighteen surveys were returned as nondeliverable as addressed. Of the remaining 182 surveys, 117 (64%) were completed and returned to the investigators. Preliminary results indicate that on-campus graduate students in the College of Human Resources and Family Sciences were more likely to use the resources and services of the university libraries. Off-campus students were more likely to indicate that they did not use the university libraries or their services because their courses did not require the use of the library. Further data analysis will be conducted shortly to compare the results of the two studies.

FACULTY STUDY

Each of the 13 faculty who had taught one or more courses in the College of Human Resources and Family Sciences Interdepartmental Master’s Program via distance education also received a short questionnaire. Seven faculty members (54%) returned completed forms, making it difficult to generalize findings from such a small sample size. However, four instructors indicated they required approximately the same use of library resources for their distance education classes; two required less use of library resources; and one instructor required more extensive use of library resources. Teaching faculty reported limited contact with the libraries’ distance education coordinator, subject specialist librarian, reference staff, and interlibrary loan staff (Cassner & Adams, 1998). This weak
library-faculty interaction corresponds with similar findings of Butler (1997) who studied distant learners at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

A greater number of adults will take advantage of distance learning opportunities in hopes of job advancement, retraining, professional development, or a more secure future. This was demonstrated by a 1997 random study of Nebraska adults which showed that 80% asserted that getting additional training or education was “definitely” or “probably” important for them to be successful in their work. This figure was identical to the 1995 national average (Furgason & Rockwell, 1999).

At the same time, an increasing number of academic institutions will enter the distance education field or expand current curriculum offerings due to political and financial pressures. Hanna (1998) has identified seven emerging models for higher education in a competitive environment. For institutions to respond effectively and quickly to emerging educational needs, stakeholders must collaborate to provide a quality educational experience for distance learners. Stakeholders include faculty members, university administrators, academic librarians, and accrediting and licensing bodies. Many academic libraries are already well-positioned technologically to serve remote users and are eager to partner with teaching faculty to provide the customization and interactivity that distance learners increasingly expect (Library and Information Technology Association, 1999).

Librarians at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln continue their collaborative efforts in serving distance students and faculty in the College of Human Resources and Family Sciences. Recently, the libraries invited faculty in the Department of Family and Consumer Sciences to test an electronic family studies index. After receiving positive feedback by faculty, the libraries purchased and offered remote access to this specialized index. In 1995 and 1999, library instructional videos were produced to support distance students in the College of Human Resources and Family Sciences. The distance education coordinator, in designing the Services for Distance Education Students website, provided a key service for distant students and faculty. In addition to furnishing an overview of distance education services, the website offers links to the College of Human Resources and Family Sciences and campus administrative units involved with distance education.

The distance education coordinator and subject specialist librarian are active participants in extended education, both on campus and at the national level. They are involved in campus discussion groups on distance education and programmatic reviews of distance education. They help conduct faculty development workshops to prepare instructors to teach in the distance mode. Additionally, they have presented papers on library services to distance students and faculty at state and national conferences. Some of the papers have been published in print or electronic formats, thus contributing to the growing journal literature in the field.

A major role of the academic librarian is to put a human face on the virtual library (Library and Information Technology Association, 1999). This is vital when communicating with distance learners and faculty in family science as well as other disciplines. As technology continues to evolve, librarians and faculty can partner to address issues such as copyright and publishers’ control of academic publications, on-line archiving, and full-text access to information resources (Eustis & McMillan, 1998). The distance learner will be the beneficiary of this collaboration.

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