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Reaching Out to Off-Campus Students via Blackboard™: A Consortial Library's Experience

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Abstract

Recent changes in information technology have opened new learning opportunities to educational institutions as they strive to serve the information and education needs of the millennial generation. More academic programs are now offered in non-traditional environments, which require a stronger focus on this generation's information-seeking behavior. This forces librarians to undertake fresh approaches toward library instruction. According to guidelines from the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL), library resources and services "must meet the needs of all their faculty, students, and academic support staff wherever these individuals are located, whether on a main campus, off campus, in distance education or extended campus programs, or in absence of a campus at all (1)." Thus, our focus must shift from providing solely classroom-based instruction to virtual, distance-based instruction where students learn regardless of place or delivery mode of instruction. This article will review an example of how virtual instruction can be used effectively in libraries as exemplified by the experience at the University of Maryland Shady Grove Library.

Introduction

The Universities at Shady Grove (USG) is the largest of Maryland's regional higher education centers offering more than forty undergraduate, graduate, and certificate programs at one central location in Montgomery County, Maryland. USG collaborates with eight participating state universities and community colleges in Maryland ([Appendix One](#)). USG is a multi-institutional consortium within the University System of Maryland (USM), where students complete the last two years of their bachelor's degree and can pursue graduate studies. As of fall 2006, USG serves a total of 1,534 undergraduate and 689 graduate students (2). USG students receive the same education as their peers at their home institutions, but at a remote location.

The Shady Grove Library (SGL) at USG operates as a consortial library supporting these diverse non-traditional students. There are two librarians serving this population. I am one of the two librarians serving this population for their information needs. Freshmen or sophomore level courses are not offered at USG, and library instruction sessions are generally not built into the curriculum of upper-level courses. As a result, most instructional sessions are one-time presentations at the beginning of each semester, rather than when project or presentations are due, which makes it difficult to reach out and offer assistance to these students. Results from a faculty study conducted in the fall of 2005 revealed that upper-level students are not confident when attempting to conduct effective library research (3). Survey results also indicated a traditional instructional approach does not appeal to Shady Grove students, and it is difficult for faculty to give up their teaching time for library instructional activities, especially when teaching upper-level classes. Furthermore, librarians at USG receive minimal on-site instructional technology support to develop online tutorials. Faced with such challenges, our librarians sought practical solutions to stay relevant to students while promoting library services.

Literature review

A brief literature review showed that the increasing depth and sophistication of instructional products offer a great opportunity for librarians to collaborate with faculty and demonstrate the benefits of these information tools. A librarian-faculty collaboration is ideal in academia because both work with students inside and outside of class environments, engage in sharing information and knowledge in an effective way, and want to develop students to become information literate and independent learners. Betsy Wilson further elaborates the idea: she finds that an academic librarian's success or failure in helping students become information literate depends largely on building and maintaining strong professional partnerships with teaching faculty (4).

As colleges and universities offer more distance learning programs and use campus portals as a means to deliver course materials, faculty-librarian partnerships can be further strengthened by utilizing campus portals as information delivery mode. Indeed, librarians are quick to use such campus portals to their advantage. They have begun working with campus instructional technology departments to promote library services via these portals. Since a campus portal is a single integrated point for useful and comprehensive access to information, it serves as David Eisler calls it, "as a community or learning hub for students, staff and faculty" (5). Christopher Cox has provided various tips to integrate library instruction into course management systems like Blackboard Academic Suite™ (6). Furthermore, instruction librarians at the University of South Florida Tampa Library have successfully used Blackboard™ courseware to deliver library information (7). Replicating such

instructional models in a non-traditional educational community like USG proved challenging, but the librarians at Shady Grove met the challenge. The following describes how the SG Library collaborated with one participating university at USG to deliver customized library instruction and services via Blackboard™.

Facing the Challenge

The University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC) is one of the participating institutions at USG. As the liaison librarian to UMBC's social work and psychology programs, I established a working relationship with a social work instructor. I was invited to introduce her students to library resources, which I did on several occasions—using “traditional” library instruction methods. In the fall of 2004, a new course—Social Work and Information Technology—was introduced at USG. The instructor wanted to teach the course via Blackboard™, but was concerned about her students' ability to adapt to the software. Taking this opportunity to collaborate with the instructor, I offered to assist her and proposed introducing a link to library instruction on her course page. She accepted, and we worked together during the summer to understand the learning objectives for the course and assignments that required a librarian's assistance. We began to develop a format for the library instruction module.

The instructor arranged Blackboard™ access for me through the Blackboard™ coordinator at UMBC. The access level allowed me to contribute to course building. We worked together to acquire a basic understanding of the software and to organize library resources on it. I came to find that Blackboard™ is relatively easy to learn and navigate. The process of uploading the module was simple as well. Initially, I provided a short “*Library 101*” module via the External Links tab on Blackboard™ ([Appendix Two](#)). This module covered a general overview of the library catalog and databases as well as basic research instructions. I accompanied the instructor to the first class to demonstrate to students how the library links worked on the Blackboard™ course page.

The following semester, I decided to extend this effort to two psychology courses at USG. I obtained the Teaching Assistant access level in Blackboard™, which enabled me to look at the course syllabus, homework assignments, student forums and discussion groups. With this increased virtual access, I acquired a better overall understanding of the course. I could proactively locate articles for additional class readings. I created a “*Beyond the Basics*” module with more tips for an advanced database and e-journals search on the Blackboard™ course ([Appendix Three](#)). In addition, I attended their lab sessions to introduce them to the library module.

Comments in library instruction evaluation indicated that students welcomed the convenience of this “one-stop shopping” approach to library research. They could look at their assignments, additional readings, and tips on how to search databases all at the same time through their Blackboard™ course. They realized that I was more than a “guest librarian”, and that I could interact with them on an individual basis at a mutually convenient time. This worked to a dual advantage: it reassured students to the point where they felt comfortable discussing their research concerns with me; and I was able to maximize the library’s accessibility and usability. While the UM Libraries have online reference and chat available to them, this accessibility via Blackboard™ was more convenient to students enrolled at USG.

A Need for Collaboration

UMBC students enrolled at USG are considered off-campus, remote students; they must log in to their home library to access certain e-resources offered only to UMBC students. They can, however, access SGL resources when they are on the USG campus. They did not understand the relationship between the two institutions or the different levels of library access. We tried to explain this in our short orientation sessions, but we were not always successful and frequently found a major disconnect. Comments in the session evaluation forms indicated that students left the library more confused than before and did not want to come back. Those who did return came only to express frustration at not being able to access some databases remotely. They felt they did not get library assistance at all.

Integration of a library module through Blackboard™ was an attempt to minimize this frustration. UMBC students already had access to Blackboard™. It was only a matter of making library resources available via Blackboard™. Faculty support made it possible to extend one-time library sessions to a semester-long presence on their course pages.

UMBC students at USG were coached by the Shady Grove librarians to log in to access library databases through their Blackboard™ course pages. They also accessed their Interlibrary Loan form in a similar fashion. This practice was reinforced during the in-class library instruction sessions and also during the one-on-one library consultations. Faculty members were likewise trained. Once aware of the access restrictions, students seemed to understand the advantages of searching library resources via Blackboard™. This let them save their search results, e-mail links to full text articles to their group or to themselves, build their own reading lists, etc. A library presence in their course work provided confidence to students as they knew they could contact the librarian directly if needed. This collaboration strengthened library-faculty relations as well. Librarians are now invited to faculty orientations to talk

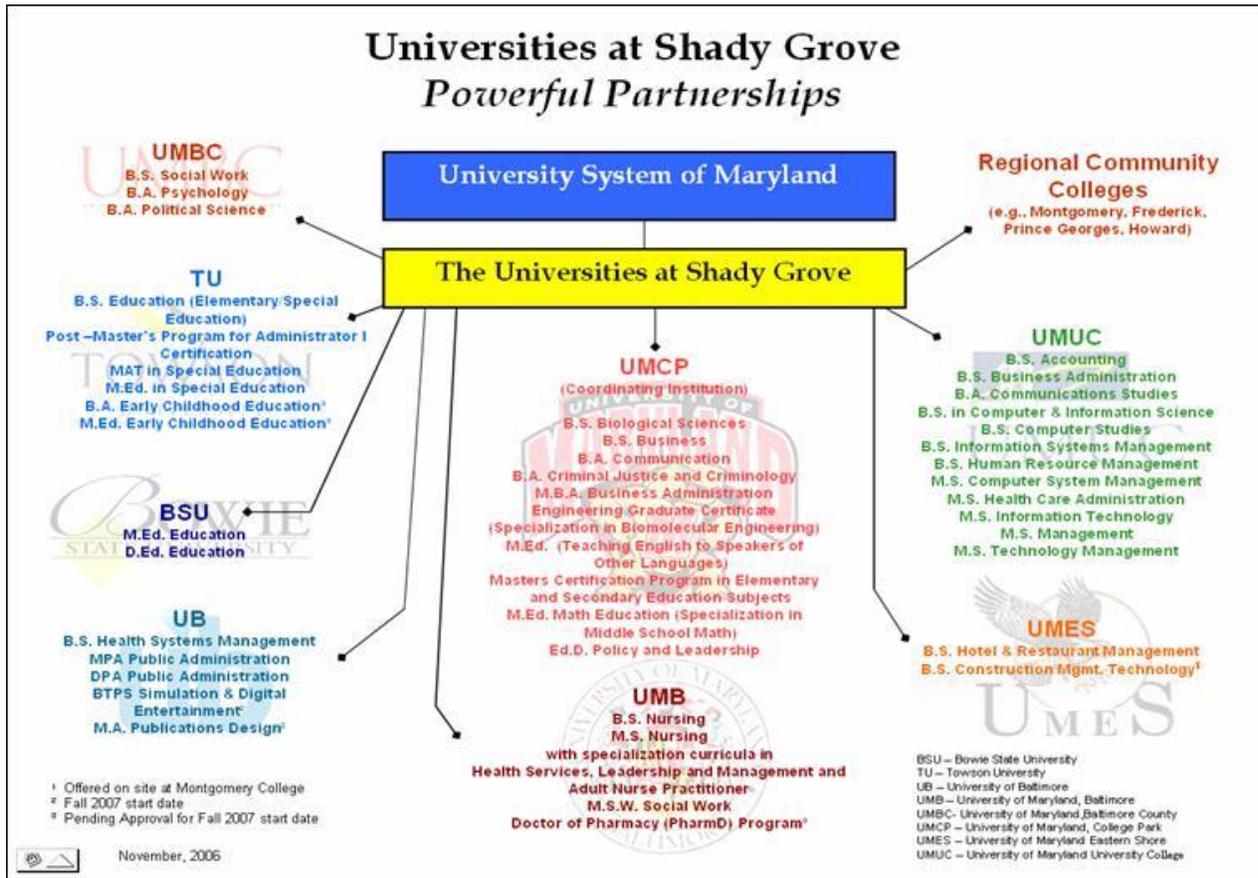
about their services. And as programs offer more courses through Blackboard™, faculty members increasingly desire a library presence on their course pages.

Conclusion

Course management systems like Blackboard™ have become a fixture in the higher education environment. It is vital that as librarians we stay current with rapidly changing instructional technology. Integration of information literacy into course management systems such as Blackboard™ is largely dependent on a successful collaboration between librarian and faculty. Since my initial involvement with Blackboard™, I have continued to add research tips to courses that I access. Becoming a collaborator on Blackboard™ has provided the librarians at the Shady Grove Library with an opportunity to work closely with faculty and also to reach out to the diverse population at the Universities at Shady Grove.

This exercise also demonstrates that it is possible to work in an environment where on-site instructional technology support is not always readily available. It does require a semester-long commitment, but it offers endless possibilities for collaboration and establishment of close relationship with students and faculty. What is more, it opens a virtual window of opportunity to be with students at all times. It is my hope that librarians working in an off-campus library or consortial library environment will be encouraged to collaborate with faculty to incorporate library instruction into online learning.

Appendix One



Appendix Two

Welcome to Library 101!

Before you Begin:

- Do not wait until the last hour. Research always takes longer than you think.
- Learn basic library skills that can be useful in any library setting.
- Not sure which resources to use? Check with a librarian.

Step One:

- Describe your topic.
- Read course materials, class notes to gain a better understanding of your topic.
- List what kind of sources you are looking for (books, journals articles, government reports, statistics, newspaper articles...)
- Identify keywords/concepts from your research topic.
- Make a list of related concepts for each keyword.

Step Two:

- Use library resources to find what you need.
If you are looking for encyclopedia, handbook, or other reference books, you may want to start your search in [library catalog](#).
- If you are looking for journal articles start with [Research Port](#)
Note: For off-campus access, you need to enter your 14-digit barcode number found on your university ID card. Enter your last name and choose your campus. Click on **Login**.

Step Three:

- Understand how searching works and develop a basic search strategy
 - Choose the appropriate database for your research topic. Seek a librarian’s help if unsure what to use.
 - Use your search terms in the title or subject fields to increase your chances of getting relevant results
 - Searching for “Juvenile violence” in the title or subject fields will bring back some results that are on target.
 - On the other hand, searching for juvenile violence in “All fields” you will get results that have little to do with your topic.

Additional Information:

How to Use Catalog
How to Use Research Port
How to Use Find it!

[Appendix Three](#)

Beyond the Basics

What are Boolean operators?

- The Boolean operators are used to combine keywords when searching electronic databases. Using Boolean operators can make your search more focused. Boolean searching can increase or decrease the number of hits you will get.

AND (narrows): juvenile AND gang
OR (broadens): crime OR violence
NOT (excludes): crime NOT domestic

- Use of Parentheses to group similar search terms
 - A concept can have many synonyms and sometimes it is impossible to search for each of the synonym separately. At the same time, you run a risk of not getting the very best results if you omit to do so. In such cases, you can use parentheses to group similar terms together and retrieve better results.

(drug abuse **OR** substance abuse) **AND** (Teens **OR** youth **OR** juvenile)

E-Journals and Databases: Any Preference?

If you want to search in a specific journal only then you should check if that journal is available as Electronic Journal. That way you can browse the table of content or search within that journal. However, if you want to search using descriptors or subjects, you may want to search in subject specific database. For example, for articles about juvenile delinquency and drug abuse, you would search in Social Work Abstracts. Searching this way yields you more articles from a variety of social work related journals, not just one journal. There is no right or wrong way of searching. It depends on what you are looking for.

Cite what you write!

Properly citing materials is a vital part of your research process. Plagiarism is a serious offence at academic institutions. Please cite everything that is not yours.

- Take clear notes about where you found ideas, paragraphs, quotes, images, etc.
- Write down the complete citation for each source you use whether it is from a book, report, newspaper; journal article or any other source.
- Do not worry about putting your information in the appropriate citation format at this point. Just get all information that you can.
- Use quotation marks when using author’s exact words
- Make sure you check with your instructor what style (MLA, APA, Chicago Style Manual) should be used to cite works used.

Helpful sites:

• Citing for Social Sciences A well-organized & complete guide to documenting sources using APA.
• APA Style APA Style Guide 5th ed.
• APA Style Workshop Includes explanations and detailed discussion
• APA In-text Citations General guidelines for in-text citations used for APA Style. In-text citations are used when source material is quoted, paraphrased, or summarized.
• APA style helper CD-ROM available at SG Library Reference Desk

Bibliography and Annotated Bibliography:

- A bibliography is a list of all the sources you have used to write your research paper. This includes books, articles, websites, interviews, or even personal correspondence. You should follow the format required by your instructor.
- An annotated bibliography is an also alphabetical list of research sources. In addition to bibliographic data, an annotated bibliography provides a concise summary of each source and some assessment of its value or relevance. Depending on your assignment, an annotated bibliography may be one stage in a larger research project, or it may be an independent project standing on its own.

Additional Useful Guides:

• Downloading References into Bibliographic Management Software
• Evaluating Web Sites
• E-References
• Social Work Resources

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