# Going the Extra Mile: Serving Distance Education Students

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## Introduction

Formal, accredited distance learning opportunities are growing at exponential rates. Recent statistics reveal that 85 percent of higher education institutions offer some form of distance education. While such growth is commendable, it is prudent to examine institutional support mechanisms for distance students early on, and as these programs grow and expand, institutional support systems must also grow.

In addition to such support as advising services, job placement services, and tutorial assistance, of particular importance to distance learners is the provision of and access to library materials and services. A common error surrounding the provision of library resources and services to distance students is that "they can get 'it' on the Internet;" there is no need to provide additional services, many think. Students are often left alone to locate and acquire materials, spend great amounts of time downloading electronic reserve materials, access supplementary resources, and decipher electronic indexes and databases. In some extremes, the electronic indexes and databases available to on-site students are restricted by licensing and are therefore off-limits to distance students, putting them at a serious disadvantage in their coursework.

If colleges and universities want to succeed in the online education environment, they must begin to reassess the ways in which distance students are treated across the board; their tuition dollars, while often greater than on-site tuition-is a significant factor in the continuing success of distance education enrollment. While students are clearly benefiting from the convenience and availability of online courses, additional mechanisms must be established and sustained if distance education is to continue its successful run: Students will likely tire of their "second-class" student status unless institutional precautions are taken.

## Planning for Distance Education

A number of strategies and procedures can be established to ensure the best educational experience for distance students. These can be identified as instructor strategies, library strategies, and. institutional strategies. Each is extremely important, and institutional cooperation and collaboration will lend to a strong distance education program. Unfortunately, a major lack of holistic and strategic planning plagues many institutions. Kirk and Bartelstein (1999) report according to the 1998 National Survey of Information Technology in Higher Education, of a representative 600 institutions, less than one-third have a plan for distance learning through the Internet . And, given that Web-based learning is quickly becoming the norm, replacing satellite and compressed video delivery, these institutions must begin to develop solid, working plans for distance education programs.

### Strategies for Instructors

Faculty and instructional staff in higher education are relearning their roles in the face of distance learning. Unfortunately, many are learning to teach in the online environment as they proceed, and this serves noone well. To avoid failure in the online classroom, and to maximize efficacious learning environments, Buchanan (2000) has offered a series of questions and considerations individuals should consider before they agree to teach online. Such requisite qualities include a comfort level with multiplicitous perspectives, active questioning from students, the ability to convey emotions through the written word, dedication to the online class above and beyond a traditional class, and a sound commitment to "listening" and relinquishing the "sage on the stage" role, among others.

Strategies for successful teaching are emerging as distance education in the form of Web-based learning continues to develop. Kubula (1998) suggests that instructors must be "master teachers and be able to translate their style into an effective educational format" and to focus on the needs of students (74). Distance learners, while characteristically more mature and self-directed, still require certain arrangements above and beyond that provided to on-site students.

Strategies for meeting these needs include:

> **1. Have the course materials prepared and loaded by the beginning date of the class or semester.** Distance students often like to obtain all materials, including their lecture notes, readings, supplementary materials, and so on prior to the course inception.
> **2. Check into the class at least once daily.** Criticisms of distance learning often surround a lack of interaction and feedback from instructors.
> **3. Develop activities that promote interactivity and socialization among students.** With the lack of face-to-face contact, such activities assume a large importance.
> **4. Work closely with the library and other institutional departments to ensure that distance students receive timely announcements and news**. The feeling of isolation and disconnection can grow quickly. The library in particular must receive materials as early as possible in order to provide them to students early in the course.
> **5. Provide feedback and responses to questions in twenty-fours or less.** If the instructor will be off-line for longer than that time frame, alert the students.
> **6. Work in a "no-post" or "reading" day once a week.** Students, as well as the instructor, will greatly appreciate this. It provides a "down-time" that guards against burn-out in Web-based course work.

**Strategies for Libraries**
McManus (1998) offers a pessimistic vision for libraries in 2020, one that hopefully will not come to fruition: "Unless we are cautious in how we define and program [extended campus] services…distance students will sit at their home PCs and electronically debit $20 per course to the university and $400 to Time-Warner. That is, the library will not be a key player in distance education…" (432). McManus rightfully suggests that libraries in particular must have a major role and involvement in the development and early stages of distance education programs. The library, as a cornerstone of higher education and a seminal resource for students and faculty, can make distance learning either a most pleasant or most distressing experience for remote students.

While the library as we know will continue to exist as a brick and mortar facility, its services and resources will change, and the conception of the library must change also. The library's role in instruction is assuming a newfound importance in our information-laden environment, and critical research skills and strategies are more important now than ever. Library services and resources are changing, and with the growing number of distance learners, the library must evolve into a proactive entity reaching out to students instead of a passive entity, awaiting

visitors.

The ACRL (Association of College and Research Libraries) issued new guidelines in 1998 for providing distance learning library services. Such areas as management, finances, personnel, facilities, resources, services, documentation, and library education were addressed and redefined for the distance learning environment. The ACRL has taken initiative in providing these guidelines, and are cognizant of the importance of changing policies and procedures in light of distance learning. Other formal organizations must follow this lead and offer standards of practice. The guidelines are available at http://www.ala.org/acrl/guides/distlrng.html, and are fundamental for libraries' success in serving distance education programs.

The following are suggested strategies for libraries serving distance students:

> **1. Establish relationships with vendors and service providers** to allow off-campus access to licensed databases and indexes. Site licenses are often restrictive and dial-in access prohibitive. New policies must permit access by distance students regardless of their location. A dedicated connection with ample lines must be established to fulfill the information needs of the distance learners.
> **2. Create a full-time distance education librarian position**. This professional works closely with departments and instructors to ensure access to materials and services. This person must develop instructional tutorials that can be accessed via the Internet, as well as provide telephone and email assistance to bibliographic instruction.
> **3. Provide timely access to course materials** through electronic reserve, document delivery, or inter-library loan. Course materials must be ready prior to the course inception, as many distance students visit their campuses once early in the semester to complete scheduling, obtain course materials, and meet with faculty members. The earlier the materials are available, the more convenient for distance students.
> **4. Provide a toll free number specifically for library-related requests and services.** If the distance education librarian is unable to take the call, a voice mail system must be in place and return calls guaranteed in a 24 hour time frame.
> **5. Make certain electronic reserve articles are clear** and scanned at the highest possible resolution.
> **6. Provide the file size** so the student has a sense of the time it will take to download the file. Documents should not exceed 15 pages as modem connections may not support file transfers of high size. Larger documents should be broken into multiple parts.
> **7. Students should have a choice** to purchase the requisite documents or download and print them themselvesIn conjunction with the department from which the distance class originates, hard copies of all documents should be made available prior to the beginning of class. .
> **8. Long-term partnerships should be explored with other libraries and library systems.** For instance, in the State of Wisconsin, a proposal is pending to establish a collaborative program of library services for distance students in the UW system. This proposal calls for various collaborating libraries from higher education institutions and private academic libraries throughout Wisconsin to join together to serve the needs of distance students. Such services as inter-library loan with delivery to the closest library to a student or delivery to the student's designated address, full text document delivery via email, and access to course materials would be readily accessible through a consortial agreement of the state's libraries.

Finally, and most importantly, institutional support and services dictate the success or failure of a

distance education program. While individual departments and instructors must uphold their end, institutional mechanisms assume a highly significant role. Distance students are faced with the challenges of tracking down the appropriate contact person for administrative questions; they must obtain registration materials, transcripts, and other official business in a timely manner through telephone or email contacts; and, they must seek out their own guidance and career assistance from outlets removed from the campus. These can be challenging obstacles, and often lend to the high attrition rates associate with distance learning. Institutions must take precautions to avoid such attrition, and ultimately, the collapse and failure of their distance programs. These programs can not and do not run alone. They require highly organized and strategically developed plans for the provision of services and resources to distance learners.

Institutions of higher education must be willing to change and adapt to new circumstances and new student needs. Such institutions as Western Governor's University and the Open Universities reveal a commitment to planning and to providing resources and services to distance students analogous to those provided to on-site, traditional students-or, they have shown the importance of providing services and resources above and beyond those for on-site students.

## Strategies for Institutions

**1. Provide a toll-free telephone number specifically for distance students.** This number should allow them to be transferred to any department or individual they may need to contact.

**2. Provide e-mail help lines for reference and service questions.** Turn around time should be no more than 24 hours.

**3. Provide a contact person or distance education liaison** who maintains regular hours and availability. This person should answer questions regarding administrative details of the student's enrollment and progress in the institution.

**4. Devise mechanisms whereby distance students are easily provided with an identification card or number.** Requiring them to obtain a photographic id card from campus entails an additional trip to campus. While many schools are no longer using social security numbers for student identification, distance students should be given this id for virtual use upon admission to a class or program. Further, should the student use campus facilities such as the library, circulation and other procedures must accept the number alone in lieu of a photographic card. A graduate student in the UW-Milwaukee School of Library and Information Science program relayed this experience: "if a distance student takes a class on campus, we do not have a student ID and cannot easily access the library. I had major problems because I didn't know what I needed to do to get the card and had no time to get to the office to take care of it. Another student using the library from the same class let me photocopy the articles I needed. After that experience I will try hard NOT to come to campus to take another class."

**5. Eliminate segregated fees for services distance students will obviously not use**, such as bus passes, campus student groups, or gymnasium visits. A distinct fee structure must be created by institutions to ensure fairness and equity for all students.

**6. Provide career assistance and guidance through electronic means.** Distance students must have access to the same materials and personnel as housed onsite in guidance and career placement offices. Workshops and lectures should be video streamed and archived on the institutional web site.

**7. Develop delivery mechanisms with campus or other bookstores,** or ensure that course texts are available through Amazon or Barnes and Noble Online. Students should be able to procure their texts as easily as on campus students, and this may require a toll free order line and direct delivery without additional delivery costs.

## Conclusion

Distance education is a core educational strategy. It holds great potential on a number of levels. Yet, the potential for failure, or for mediocre distance programs is high, unfortunately. Developing proactive, strategic plans requires the commitment of entire institutions, as have been described herein. Going that extra mile will ensure pedagogical integrity, student satisfaction, and ultimately, the success of distance education programs.

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