

# ***Learning from Experience: Strategies for Assuring Effective Library and Information Services to Web-based Distance Learners***

*Kathleen Burnett and Marilia Painter*

## **Introduction**

This paper examines the evolution of library services for distance learners enrolled in one of three web-based degree programs offered by the Florida State University School of Information Studies. The evolution of these services is examined through the lens of the *ACRL Guidelines for Distance Learning Library Services*, 2000 revision (<http://www.ala.org/acrl/guides/distlrng.html>). It is important to note that these guidelines were not in place as the School sought to ensure equitable access to library resources and services for distance students.

## **Background**

The Florida State University School of Information Studies has been engaged in distance learning in some form or another since 1948, within one year of its founding. In Fall 1996, the School began delivering its first non-site based courses toward the M.S. in Library and Information Stud-

ies. Initially, this program was delivered by interactive television (compressed video) with web support. By Fall 1998, all courses had migrated to web-only delivery. Today, the School's online offerings include a B.S. with a major in Information Studies and M.S. and Specialist (post-master's) degrees with majors in Library Studies and Information Studies. During the 2000–2001 academic year, over 40 separate course offerings will be delivered via the web, with enrollments ranging from 25 through 275 students per course. Students are located throughout Florida, the United States, and internationally.

Florida State University is a senior member of the ten public universities that comprise the Florida State University System. Distance students within the state who live within 50 miles of one of the members of this system are expected to use the libraries of that institution as their primary research facility. In all other cases, including students living outside the state, the FSU libraries serve as the pri-

---

*Kathleen Burnett is associate dean and associate professor and Marilia Painter is a student at Florida State University.*

mary research facility. Reciprocal borrowing privileges are also available to all FSU enrolled students at the state's twenty-eight community colleges. In addition, the state supplements the provision of library services to distance learners through the Florida Center for Library Automation (FCLA) and the Distance Learning Research and Referral Center (RRC).

At the beginning of the five year period covered by this case study (1996–2001), library services for distance learners were site-based much like the educational programs themselves. Today, although there is still much more to be done to make services to this clientele truly user-oriented, the library service model has changed radically.

### **FSU Libraries Resources & Services for Distance Learners** **Strozier Library**

Resources and services for FSU distance learners are largely managed through the Strozier Library, the main library on the FSU campus. The library coordinates borrowing privileges, inter-library loan, and access to online databases beyond those provided by FCLA (see below) for all distance learners whose primary research facility is FSU. In practice, the library has served in this capacity for all distance learners enrolled in the School of Information Studies regardless of their location. The Strozier began offering an online course reserve service in 1997. The School of Information Studies has elected not to use this service because of concerns about the liability that may be incurred by individual faculty under current copyright law, and because the School had already developed a system for electronic distribution of required readings prior to the initiation of the service Strozier provides.

### **Goldstein Library**

The Harold Goldstein Library, originally a branch of the university libraries and since July 2000 an independent library managed by the School of Information Studies, has played the role of primary intermediary in distance learning library services. The Goldstein Library has initiated several projects in support of distance learners as part of its activities, including online reference service utilizing its collection in library and information studies (1998) and coordination of delivery of recommended readings to students enrolled in the School's courses (2001). This academic year two graduate assistants assigned to the Goldstein Library (Bob Bertoldi, a distance student residing in Washington and Colette Drouillard, a local student) designed a survey on library resources and services for distance learn-

ers that will be administered during the Spring 2001 semester to all distance learners enrolled in courses through the FSU School of Information Studies. Results of this survey will be reported at the ACRL 10<sup>th</sup> National Conference.

### **State of Florida Resources and Services**

#### **Florida Center for Library Automation (FCLA)**

The Florida Center for Library Automation (FCLA) "... provides automation services that assist the university libraries of the State University System (SUS) of Florida in meeting their teaching and research objectives for students and faculty. To achieve this mission, FCLA provides computer services that assist the SUS libraries in their daily operations and record keeping as well as providing students and faculty with electronic access to scholarly materials." (<http://www.fcla.edu/FCLAinfo/aboutinfo.html>) While supporting services for distance learners is just a small part of their mission, in 1998–1999 FCLA installed a proxy server to provide access for this population to the resources, such as online databases, provided through FCLA and the university libraries they serve. Provision of this kind of infrastructural support is crucial to the success of the School of Information Studies distance learning initiatives, especially since our students need to study the format and delivery of such resources as well as making use of their contents. Distance remains a challenge in the delivery of library and information studies education in Florida, even given flexibility that web-based learning provides. The distance from the western tip of the panhandle to the most southern of the Keys is greater than the distance from Chicago to the northern border of Florida. The ten state universities are not distributed evenly around the state, so in many cases students must drive for three or more hours to reach a research library.

#### **Florida Distance Learning Reference and Referral Center (RCC)**

The Florida Distance Learning Reference and Referral Center (RCC, an outcome of the Florida Distance Learning Library Initiative (DLLI, 1997) began providing "... library support to students enrolled in distance learning courses at Florida's accredited colleges and universities [in 1998. They] ... assist distance learners with their research-related projects, offering advice on how to do research from a distance." (<http://www.rrc.usf.edu/>) The director of RCC, Stephanie Race, has attended the annual orientation required of all new graduate students at the School of Information Studies each year. The RCC's services, like those of

XXXXXX  
 all the providers the School has utilized, have evolved over time and as the methods of distance course delivery have changed. For example, early in the RRC's history, when its mission focused largely on access to print materials, attempts were made by the School of Information Studies to involve the RRC in exploring alternative methods for providing access to reserve materials for distance learners. The School had hoped that the RRC would be willing to work with us to provide materials specific to the field of library and information studies (and therefore not readily available in most of the SUS and community college libraries) for reserve use at the community colleges, but received little support and no encouragement from the RRC. However, as the mission of the RRC has evolved to its current focus on reference and referral services, it has proven to be very responsive to faculty requests for support of course assignments. Recently, the students enrolled in a course on ? interviewed the RRC librarians regarding an upcoming project. Their unsolicited comments on these interviews were overwhelmingly positive.

### **The School of Information Studies**

XXXXXX  
 The Florida State University School of Information Studies is an acknowledged pioneer in the area of web-based distance learning within the field of Library and Information Studies. The School has taken a proactive role in ensuring equitable access to information resources for all of our students, whether on-campus or at a distance. It is the School's basic philosophy that all learners should have equitable access to all services and resources to support learning.

Most of the required reading is delivered to the student at no extra cost through the course website. The relationship with publishers, like that with the various library service providers, is an evolving one. In 1996, publishers were consistently reluctant to give permission for online delivery of required readings, and where permission was granted, it was considerably more costly than in the years to follow. Today, many publishers have agreed to allow us to deliver articles and book chapters to the students at little to no charge, provided that the delivery occurs in a secure environment and access is limited to those with a legitimate educational need. Textbook publishers are an obvious exception to this developing understanding. In some cases (as with Libraries Unlimited) we have received permission to place an entire textbook online with the proviso that purchase be required. Florida State University began providing access to NetLibrary electronic book offerings in 2000. The School anticipates many of our needs being met by this library-

saavy enterprise.

During Spring 2001, the School, in cooperation with the Goldstein Library, will pilot extended services for the delivery of recommended readings on an on-demand basis. Two courses, one undergraduate and one graduate have been selected to pilot this new service. All texts have been scanned and stored as PDF files on a secure server. Publishers have been contacted, and agreements established on a cost-per-use basis. During the pilot period, the School will absorb these costs, as it does with required readings. Our motivation in piloting this project, however, is to demonstrate to commercial providers that such a service is marketable.

### **Virtual Internship**

In the fall of 1999, Marilia Painter did a virtual internship with the Florida State University School of Information Studies while working on a specialist's degree in Information and Library Studies. She became part of the School's effort to provide more personalized distance learning library services in support of its online undergraduate and graduate courses. Students contacted Painter via e-mail to request assistance with the online access of library resources and the search and retrieval of web-based information to fulfill course assignments. Two main problems led students to seek her assistance.

First, the steps and procedures involved in accessing online databases were not clear to many students. While they were told they had to set a proxy to access online databases, they had problems both setting the manual proxy configuration as well as using it in a mixed-proxy environment. The problems with setting the proxy ranged from browser or ISP specific problems to faulty instructions scattered throughout different pages in the university's web site. Once the student successfully set the proxy, often times he/she had difficulties navigating in a catalog that contained databases that did and did not require access through a proxy server. As part of the learning contract for the internship, Painter created two pages called *Databases and Setting a Proxy*, dedicated to explaining the access to online databases and configuration of the browser to support a proxy server. These two pages are part of web site called *Information Resources Web Site*, which is located at <http://home.earthlink.net/~mariliapainter/index.htm>. Later, these pages were adapted and incorporated into the help section of all online course websites on the School of Information Studies webserver.

Second, the ability to search and retrieve information in online databases was impaired by the students' inability to

distinguish between the different types of online resources. This was reflected in the difficulties many students had in writing proper citations for records found in online databases and/or catalogs—a basic requirement for any course. There was great confusion between a record found via an electronic catalog like *WebLUIS* and a record found via *Academic Universe*, the WWW interface to the *Lexis-Nexis* news and information service. The novelty of navigating online databases and catalogs and/or the lack of an intuitive interface of some seemed to add to this confusion. Thus, the problem had two layers: all resources found online were treated as Internet resources and were cited as such; and the paths within a service like *Lexis-Nexis* were not acknowledged at all. Since the first-year undergraduate courses like Information Sources and Services require students to search different online resources and cite them properly as part of a series of assignments that culminate in a final project, Painter's task was twofold: to assist and educate at the same time. Painter helped students select resources, formulate search statements/strategies, and cite properly.

While there were requests for help in downloading documents, opening pdf files, obtaining a library card number, and locating materials, Painter's efforts centered around setting the proxy configuration and searching and citing online resources. In her experience, the School was successful in not only accommodating the informational needs of the distance learning community but also providing students with more personalized attention than most students normally get on campus. From the comments Painter received from students, it is clear that the provision of these services had a positive affect on retention rates.

### **Philosophy**

Equitable access to information for distance learners requires rethinking the traditional library services paradigm. The experience of the Florida State University School of Information Studies demonstrates that:

1. Access will not be equitable if it does not respond in a reasonable way to the challenge of geographical distance faced by the distance learner.
2. Access will not be equitable if it does not respond in a reasonable way to the challenge of temporal disjunction faced by the distance learner.
3. Access to information in specialized fields such as library and information studies that are not collected by all college libraries presents a set of challenges that may be most reasonably be met through investment in electronic resources.

4. Although libraries, publishers, and other information services providers are beginning to understand the needs of web-based learners and take the initiative in providing resources and services to meet these needs, library and information studies programs and professional organizations such as ACRL will be required to play a major leadership and advocacy role for some time to come if equitable access is to be achieved.

### **Management**

The information needs of distance learners cannot be met by a single institution working on its own. Inter-library and inter-institutional cooperation is key to successful access for distance learners. Existing state and regional library cooperatives provide an infrastructure that may be adaptable for this function, but there are significant challenges to be faced while preparing cooperatives to serve this new clientele. The experience of the Florida State University School of Information Studies indicates that:

1. Inter-library and inter-institutional cooperatives will question the centrality of such services to their missions and resist adjustments to those missions;
2. Services to distance learners may be a relatively low priority among those cooperatives that do see such services as part of their missions;
3. The terms "distance learning" and "web-based learning" deceptively imply a commonality in service needs that may not in fact exist. Different programs may have different needs and require different services.

### **Finances**

Financing information services for distance learners is another area that has received very little attention in the literature, but which would seem to require inter-library and inter-institutional cooperation. The challenges to management are echoed here. In working to establish a consortium of library and information studies schools to share course offerings, the School of Information Studies found agreement that this was an excellent idea in concept and almost impossible to implement in practice because of institutional barriers to such cooperation. Similarly, cooperation would be a tremendous asset in negotiating with publishers and vendors for new resources delivered in ways that make them reasonably accessible to distance learners, but institutional barriers often hinder such cooperation.

### **Personnel**

In a 2000 survey of library services for distance learning

students in ALA-accredited LIS Schools, Don Latham and Stephanie Maatta found that most “libraries appear to be providing adequate services to distance learning students, even though 60% do so without benefit of a specialized librarian” (Latham and Maattan 2000, 14). The survey was inconclusive as to whether specialized training is required to provide services to distance learning students. The experiences of the Goldstein Library and the School of Information Studies, and with the internship described above, indicate that while some specialized training is desirable, the more important factors in successful service to distance learners may be attitude and creativity. Our experience indicates that at this stage in the development of services for distance learners, librarians need to be thoroughly conversant with the delivery technologies employed by the programs they serve, sufficiently knowledgeable about technology in general to either design and implement web-based services themselves, or to communicate effectively with technical specialists who have this responsibility; believe that equitable access for and service to distance learners is a part of their mission; and be patient, flexible, and creative problem-solvers.

### **Facilities**

In rethinking the information services paradigm, it is essential to rethink the issue of facilities. In 1998, Fran Miksa described this paradigm shift as one from “public” to “private” space:

...it now seems evident that the library which we all know—the library which has been evolving for over a century since its beginnings in the late nineteenth century, which was a direct response to the rise of the modern print publishing culture and reading markets, and which has long been called the “modern library” as a way to distinguish it from the expression of the idea of the library which preceded it—is now going through a period of dramatic reformulation. This reformulation ... has been accelerated with the widespread introduction and use of computer and telecommunications information technology in society. This acceleration has increased even more rapidly since the rise of the World Wide Web in the present decade. The new technology has the potential of creating a new expression for the idea of the library, one which for the first time since the early nineteenth century can sanction in terms of what is conveniently

characterized as a “personal-space” rather than a “public-space” information environment. (Miksa 1998, 84)

What kinds of facilities are required to support personal information spaces? Our experiences with distance learners are probably our first real indication of what these may look like. Our experience at the School of Information Studies provides some indications that may initially appear counter-intuitive:

1. Personal information spaces are best created, maintained, and supported by “teams” that consist of a mix of individuals (designer, developers, project manager, librarian, user support specialist, content expert) working in close proximity to one another.

2. The design and maintenance of personal information spaces requires easy, just-in-time access to a wide variety of resources. Thus, libraries must be closely associated, if not part of, the facilities.

### **Resources**

The most frequent lament that we receive from our distance learners is that their concern that their decision not to come to campus has curtailed their ability to extend their studies beyond the resources required for a particular course. The FCLA and Strozier Library efforts to provide access to electronic resources has improved this situation to some degree, and the pilot recommended readings project may be another important step. Ultimately, however, it is access to electronic “books”, such as that provided through Strozier’s contract with NetLibrary that we believe will make the difference for our distance learners. It is that the geographic and temporal challenges that distance learners face be foremost in our minds as we design resources and resource delivery options to meet their needs.

### **Documentation**

If the experience of the FSU School of Information Studies is any indication, the ACRL guidelines for documentation are not being implemented with much consistency by the libraries providing service to our distance learners, or if they are being implemented, the information is not readily available online where it may be easily accessed by students. Among other things, our distance learners have reported that they have had difficulty determining:

- which library is considered to be their “primary research facility”;
- what services this library provides to distance learners;

- how to make an interlibrary loan request; and
- whether there is a distance learning librarian or who they should contact if there is not.

### **Library Education**

As mentioned earlier, a survey of library and information studies librarians in late 2000 provided no clear indication as to whether specific training was desirable for distance learning service provision. As should be clear from this case study, there are many issues and concerns that are emerging concurrent with the rise in web-based learning delivery. The School of Information Studies experience indicates that during this period of change, education in distance learning library services may be appropriate. Although Latham and Maatta (2000, 14) found that “many of the skills identified in the survey responses are those taught in current library school curriculum, including reference work, knowledge of electronic resources, and subject knowledge”, our experience indicates that librarians may be having difficulty transferring the knowledge and skills they have acquired in traditional contexts to the service of this new user group.

### **Conclusions**

There has been a great deal of progress in redesigning information resources and services to meet the needs of distance learners in the past six years, but there are still major challenges ahead of us. The ACRL guidelines are one positive step in providing direction to libraries and other information services providers for ensuring equitable access for distance learners.

### **References**

- ACRL Guidelines for Distance Learning Library Services*. 2000. Available at: <http://www.ala.org/acrl/guides/distlrng.html>.
- Kirk, E., and A. M. Bartelstein. 1999. Libraries close in on distance education. *Library Journal* (Apr. 1) 40–42.
- Latham, D., and S. Maatta. 2000. Practicing what we teach: A descriptive analysis of library services for distance learning students in ALA-accredited LIS schools [unpub. Ms.].
- Miksa, F. L. 1998. *The DDC, the universe of knowledge, and the post-modern library*. Forrest Press.
- Slade, A., and M. Kascus. 2000. *Library services for open and distance learning: The third annotated bibliography*. Libraries Unlimited.