

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 427 776

IR 057 256

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TITLE Library Services to Distance Education Students at UNL.
PUB DATE 1998-05-08
NOTE 5p.; Paper presented at the Joint Nebraska Library Association College and University Section/Iowa Library Association ACRL (Association of College and Research Libraries) Chapter Spring Meeting (Des Moines, IA, May 8, 1998).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Libraries; Access to Information; *Distance Education; Graduate Study; Higher Education; Information Sources; Information Technology; Library Automation; *Library Services; Program Evaluation; Student Surveys; Use Studies; User Needs (Information)
IDENTIFIERS University of Nebraska Lincoln

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a program overview of library services to distance education students at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL). In the fall of 1997, a survey on use of library services was sent to students in an interdepartmental master's program. Questions focused on the use of the library online catalog, the World Wide Web, and the Internet; reference assistance provided by liaison librarians; ease of requesting library materials, as well as the delivery of these materials; use of academic libraries other than UNL; demographic or statistical data; and suggestions for improvements of library services to remote users. Findings showed that students were more likely to use libraries other than UNL; the three other libraries in the University of Nebraska system were used more frequently, as were other academic and community college libraries. There was little use of public libraries. A survey was also sent to faculty who had taught classes in the master's program. In general, respondents appeared to require the same use of library resources for distance education classes as for on-campus classes. Support for distance education at the UNL libraries is provided by the Distance Education Coordinator, liaison librarians, the Interlibrary Loan Office, and circulation staff. (AEF)

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Library Services to Distance Education Students at UNL

By

Kate Adams and Mary Cassner
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Abstract: This program describes the distance education programs at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and the University of Northern Iowa and the efforts made to determine and address library needs of their distance education students and faculty. Results of surveys done at the respective institutions are shared.

Library Services to Distance Education Students at UNL

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The University Libraries provide library services to students enrolled in seven graduate degree programs offered through distance education at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (known as UNL). The interdepartmental master's degree in the College of Human Resources and Family Sciences is the largest of the seven programs. Only a small percentage of students enrolled in this degree program are pursuing a Master's Degree or have already graduated from the program. The majority of students are home economics teachers or extension educators taking classes for teacher re-certification or for enrichment.

In Fall 1997 a survey on student use of library services was sent to 184 students who had taken one or more classes in the College of Human Resources and Family Sciences interdepartmental extended education master's program since it first began in 1994. In addition to the self-administered questionnaire, students were sent a cover letter and a self-addressed stamped return envelope. Two weeks later a second survey packet was mailed to non-respondents. Sixty-one percent of the students returned a completed survey.

Most of the twenty-four survey questions were partially close-ended. While suggested answer choices were provided, respondents also had the option of adding their own replies.

Questions focused on the use of the library online catalog, the World Wide Web, and the Internet; reference assistance provided by liaison librarians; ease of requesting library materials as well as the delivery of these materials; use of academic libraries other than UNL; demographic or statistical data; and suggestions for improvements of library services delivered to remote users.

The survey showed that students were more likely to use libraries other than the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. In comparison to the UNL Libraries, the three other libraries in the University of Nebraska system were used more frequently by students as were other academic and community college libraries. However, there was very little use of public libraries.

Students in the survey tended to be either degree-seeking or taking only one or two classes in the program. Ninety-four percent of the students were female. Fifty-two percent of the respondents were in the 40-49 age group category.

In late 1997 a seven question survey was sent to thirteen faculty who had taught one or more classes in the Interdepartmental Master's Program. Seven faculty members, or 54%, returned completed questionnaires. In general respondents appeared to require the same use of library resources for distance education classes as they did for on-campus classes. Also, the survey showed that few faculty contacted UNL staff regarding support for extended education courses.

[For additional survey findings, see:

Cassner, M. & Adams, K. (1998). Instructional support to a rural graduate population: An assessment of library services. In Eighth Off-Campus Library Services Conference Proceedings (pp.117-131). Mount Pleasant, MI: Central Michigan University.]

Program Support

As the UNL Libraries' Distance Education Coordinator, Kate Adams coordinates the program and monitors all aspects of library service and policies to ensure that distance education students have full and equitable access. She works with staff in several university administrative units to distribute print handouts describing library services and collections. She alerts distance faculty to programmatic changes, and informs prospective distance faculty of library services available to remote students. The Coordinator also represents the Libraries on distance education committees within the university.

The Coordinator is developing a distance education web page, designed to be point-of-need, answering student questions as to how to request a book or journal article, and linking to other library services. As more library handouts become electronic, print handouts may be scaled back. Both print and electronic handouts will be reviewed for effectiveness in meeting the distant student's needs.

Distant students can access the Libraries' integrated library system remotely, both from a text-based (telnet) and a graphical web interface. Electronic resources include the UNL Libraries Catalog, Expanded Academic Index, Internet Resources Collection, UnCover, FirstSearch, Nebraska Library Catalog, and numerous other specialized databases. The majority of electronic databases and resources are available in both telnet and web versions. Access to electronic journals is through a proxy server. The Libraries' web page is <<http://iris.unl.edu>>. As the Libraries review electronic databases for purchase, the needs of distant students are considered. Multidisciplinary and/or full-text databases are desirable.

The Distance Education Coordinator works with subject Liaison Librarians collaboratively and via referral to provide distance learners with reference assistance and instruction. Liaison librarians provide assistance with electronic resources and print materials. This instruction may be given formally to the class during a satellite-delivered class session or prepared via videotape, or one-on-one with a student via e-mail or phone. Liaison librarians also occasionally conduct fee-based mediated searches. Liaison librarians routinely contact faculty who teach distance courses to relay information about electronic resources. Recently, some liaison librarians have been included on class listservs. This is another avenue for increased communication between librarians and distance classes.

Future directions include additional instruction sessions and more liaison librarians as members of class listservs, to foster the dialogue between librarians and remote students. Also, as the Libraries transform its Library 110 (library instruction skills) course from print manual to multimedia modules, the needs of distant students are considered.

Distance students have access to electronic reference service offered through the main library. Queries are answered within 24-48 hours weekdays. This service complements reference assistance provided by liaison librarians. Expansion of electronic reference is imminent with the agriculture branch library providing electronic service.

The Interlibrary Loan Office handles delivery of materials to distant students. Requests may be placed electronically, by fax, or by mail. Books, microforms, and photocopied journal articles from the UNL collections as well as from other libraries are sent to the students at their homes. Fax delivery of journal articles is now utilized as often as possible, in order to decrease turnaround time. Speedy turnaround time was requested by the surveyed population. Since fall 1997 Interlibrary Loan Office has extended its hours, open 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. Monday through Friday, to be more available to users.

Circulation staff are responsible for creating the patron record and mailing library cards to distant students. This summer the Libraries will experiment with issuing library cards automatically, using rosters supplied by the distance education administrative units. This approach will save student time of completing a form, and will increase the Libraries' visibility. Another future direction is providing electronic reserves with password option to limit access to students enrolled in the course.

The Libraries' program of service to distant students is designed to be equitable with service provided to campus-based students. Changes to specific policies and procedures reflect the needs of the surveyed population as well as other distance education students. The Libraries continue to implement new technologies and collaborate with other units on campus in order to effectively serve the distant student.



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EFF-088 (Rev. 9/97)