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Keeping Your Eye on the Prize: Remaining Focused on the End User When Everything Around You Appears Chaotic

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Abstract

Digital library services have become integral components of 21st century educational institutions. Librarians have been quick to adopt new technologies to serve their new remotely located patrons. This eagerness to adopt new technology, along with a willingness to adapt to new working environments and a continuing emphasis on the end users of our services have enabled success with regards to serving the distance education patron. This paper will review and discuss the evolution of Embry Riddle Aeronautical University's (ERAU) Extended Campus Library Services (ECLS), and how a conscious effort to focus on the end users of Embry-Riddle's ECLS has helped Embry-Riddle manage and respond to the explosive growth of its distance learning population over the last 30 years.

Introduction

There is a growing body of literature that discusses the changes and fluidity of librarianship as a profession, especially the segment supporting remotely located patrons. Technology, delivery methods, changes in both library personnel and in the distance education students themselves are forcing us to step back and examine where the profession is headed and how to best manage our way there. By embracing new technologies, adapting to the forces of change within the workplace, and by not forgetting who, ultimately, we are trying to serve, libraries will give themselves the best chance to succeed in an era that may seem chaotic, as well as difficult to plan for and effectively manage.

While Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University has established a fine reputation of providing a quality engineering and aviation/aerospace education, in actuality the main residential campus and the Hunt Library that supports it and the distance learning programs are not unusual. Embry-Riddle is a medium-sized academic institution serving a population of approximately 5000 students in Daytona Beach, Florida, with an additional 25,000 distance learning students scattered throughout the world.

Embry Riddle began its extended campus operations in 1970; the earliest classes were offered at army bases in Georgia, Alabama, Texas, and Virginia. Enrollment in 1970 was only a modest 175 students. The United States Army, Air Force, and eventually the Navy soon realized that Embry-Riddle's niche within the field of aviation and aerospace education was a perfect fit for many of their own educational goals and they were eager to establish partnerships with the newly formed extension services. The early growth of Embry-Riddle's distance learning programs was remarkable, with new centers opening every few months throughout the seventies. By 1980, Embry-Riddle had offered its first graduate degree programs through the extended campus and would soon have satellite operations across much of the United States and Western Europe.

The 1980s would see further expansion to include the opening of Embry-Riddle's 100th extended campus center. However since it was still closely allied with the military, the distance education student population would rise and fall with the military buildups and draw downs of the United States government, and enrollments would fluctuate from anywhere between 1000 and 13,000 students. The 1990s would see the extended campus remain relatively stable with further expansion to 135 centers worldwide and ultimately to 25,000 students in FY 2004-2005. Within 25 years, Embry-Riddle's distance learning population had exploded from 175 students to an astounding 25,000 students. Embry Riddle's College of

Continuing Education (as it was now called) had quietly grown to be one of the largest off campus, regionally accredited (by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools) colleges in the United States.

Ten years ago my predecessor submitted a paper to the 7th Off-Campus Library Services Conference relating the experiences of Embry Riddle's extension services as they began to develop a plan for providing resources to a new type of distance education student, one now equipped with a personal computer and online access. Although Embry-Riddle had been in the business of providing distance education courses and supporting materials for 25 years prior to 1995, many new and exciting developments were just coming online that would eventually transform the extended campus into something totally unrecognizable to my earlier colleague.

Young (1995) sounded almost weary as he wrapped up his presentation regarding the successful, and the not so successful, trials of delivering library services to a student population of roughly 1500 graduate and undergraduate students, at that time distributed across 37 states and 22 different countries.

As explained above, it is a daily challenge for ECLS to prepare for and anticipate the needs of such a geographically diverse user population. One solution to these problems is to provide the students with access to the appropriate resources, which would allow them to identify, evaluate, and procure the information they need for their graduate research.

The universities extended campus library services (ECLS) looks forward to the day when all independent study students can conduct research from home. This will allow the reference librarians to educate students and help them find information "on their own." Until then, ECLS must meet the challenges of working with existing technologies and access issues in order to provide quality reference service. (p. 401)

Literature Review

It is soon apparent to anyone surveying the current state of the electronic library and/or the delivery of library services to a remotely located distance learning population that the working environment is in a continuous state of change. What is also evident is that the basic needs of our end users have remained uncannily the same regardless of the era; "we need it, and we need it now" is the message that has reverberated from the earliest attempts to support our distance learning patrons up until the most recent requests for assistance.

The digital or electronic library has had such a dramatic impact on traditional library services that much of the literature is full of absolutes and calls to immediate action before it is too late to react. Ferguson and Bunge (1997) began by calling for the complete "metamorphosis of the user services particularly reference and instruction". Tenopir and Ennis (2002, p. 265) reiterated, stating "there is no doubt that digital information sources have had profound effects on university reference departments over the last decade and have changed libraries forever." Studies identifying and calling for "paradigm shifts" and "organizational restructuring" within the library as a place as well as librarianship as a profession routinely appear in library literature as we struggle to come to terms with phenomenal changes in our physical and technological environments.

Radical changes of the workplace must also have an effect on those in the workplace, and again there is ample evidence in the literature calling for training, understanding, and adoption of new workplace models before we can expect the success of our technological achievements to translate into the success for our students. Voulalas and Sharpe (2005) felt that the "characteristics of "good" schools or learning institutions are those that participate in a lifelong learning culture, a commitment to professional development" (p. 191). This will foster a spirit of "vitality and empowerment" among those immediately concerned with the delivery and utilization of new methods of instruction and support, and would eventually transfer to improved student outcomes. Smith (2005b) saw libraries a little more challenging than other types of workplaces, but stated however "by developing the capability to make radical changes (the library) has the opportunity to position and solidify the libraries role in a new information age" (p. 153)

Lamont (1999) underscored the above sentiments by identifying the “human issues as more likely to determine the success of a project,” and “without the support and understanding by staff members, a project may well be doomed” (p. 390). Article after article reiterates the importance of continued training and support of librarians as they cope with rapid organizational changes, and article after article concludes that without additional training and support from library administration many librarians might be left struggling with the pace of technological change (Farley, 1998; Moore, 2003; Pankl, 2004; and Smith, 2005a).

Today’s students come equipped with a wide array of technology. It would not be unreasonable to expect to find a cellular phone, a personal digital assistant (PDA), a laptop computer, a digital camera, perhaps even a global positioning system (GPS) inside a student’s book bag. These devices can now be coupled together and can communicate with other users with an equally impressive array of networking and communication technologies. Wireless (WAP) protocols, Bluetooth, and the World Wide Web can now all be used to communicate between each of the individual’s devices as well as communicating with other individuals. This is not to say that a significant number of students may have never learned to program their VCRs, let alone their digital video recorders, or their Tivos. Garfinkel (2003) in his article “The Myth of Generation N,” did not feel that there is enough evidence yet to argue that today’s students are any more computer literate than those of a few years ago, although he does admit that there are plenty of statistics supporting the growing number of personal computers and the growing percentage of homes with Internet access throughout the United States.

Now that we have identified the library has undergone radical change, and that the librarians themselves have had to react in order to keep pace with the fluid nature of delivering library services to distance learners, what about the end users themselves? Are there any generalizations that can be made about today’s distance learning students? Kazmer’s (2002) year-long survey of distance education library students intimated comfortableness with both current technology and with methods of delivery and support services available; however, these were students enrolled in library school and likely had a fairly good grasp on what to expect from a distance education program. Prensky (2001; 2005) wrote numerous articles warning us not to underestimate or “dumb down” technology or resources for today’s students. He believes that the generation of students in our schools now could very well teach us a few things about technology and about adapting and adopting new technology with regards to completing coursework, in communicating electronically, and with locating information online.

Discussion

Many of Embry-Riddle’s remotely located students attend classes at physical satellite locations (extended campus centers): about a third of them are completing a good deal of their coursework without seeing the inside of an ERAU classroom. The remaining are an interesting breed of “hybrid” students--those who have combined (either by choice, or by circumstance) the experience of attending classes at one of our residential campuses along with classes at one of our extended campus centers or with one of our entirely Web-based courses. These hybrid students have become increasingly more comfortable with the experience of attending a university and completing coursework over the Internet (Prensky, 2001; Long, 2005) or through any number of alternative outreach methods, and many of them are now reporting that they actually prefer this method of instruction (Prensky, 2005) as the generation of students that have grown up with the desktop computer takes its place at the university.

Embry-Riddle’s extended campus students are now probably somewhere between Prensky’s and Garfinkel’s examples. For many years the extended campus did not have many of what would be considered “traditional” age undergraduates. The Embry-Riddle distance learning students of just ten years ago could have easily been characterized as “non-traditional” as they were predominantly serving members of the military enrolled in the Professional Aeronautics program. However, the university’s latest institutional research reports indicate that the majority (63%) of our distance education students are now from the civilian sector, and the remaining (37%) are currently serving members of the armed forces. This is a complete turnaround from just ten years ago. The number of undergraduate courses now being offered through Embry-Riddle’s extended campus has also increased significantly, which may also indicate a shift towards a more “traditional” age student.

In the late 1990s Embry-Riddle began to re-examine and consolidate its support to the extended campus and to the distance learning community. Before that the Extended Campus Library Support (ECLS) staff had been a separate entity from the Hunt Library, for many years existing in buildings a few blocks from the main campus. ECLS eventually moved onto the main campus and was fully incorporated into the Hunt Library under the Associate Director for Reference and Extended Campus Services. There are now 13 professional positions that deal directly with the extended campus community assisted by four paraprofessionals along with a cadre of student workers.

In the ten years since my predecessor presented his paper to the 1995 Off Campus Library Services Conference, the changes in technology and in the support services now available to a distance education student are astounding. Online services were just being explored by Embry-Riddle's extended campus in 1995; CompuServe and text-based browsers were just beginning to complement the print resources, co-operative agreements, video, toll-free telephone numbers and regular mail services used by the Hunt Library at that time as a means of student support.

Since then numerous e-mail programs, graphical browsers, intranets, the World Wide Web, VHS videotapes, CD-ROMs, DVD's, chat services, instant messaging, electronic document delivery, online databases and periodical indexes, full-text digital documents--including e-books, and streaming media content have all been used to support distance education students.

Is it surprising that students have reported that the simpler the design of the support operations to distance learners, the easier it is for them to navigate and to utilize the services? "Having a single contact point for all transactions was preferable since they didn't have to explain themselves each time they contacted the home campus" (Kazmer, 2002, pp. 396-397). Zheng and Smaldino (2003) and McGuigan (2002) also reported that by surveying end users, responding to their particular needs, and by making contact with the main campus as uncomplicated and unencumbered as possible reduces frustration levels and goes a long way to ensuring successful transactions.

Embry-Riddle and the Hunt Library in particular have made a concerted effort to reduce what the students have ruefully called the "Riddle runaround," ECLS utilizes tracking mechanisms and reference transaction transcripts to avoid precisely the concerns stated above. Regardless of which librarian handles a particular contact, they can quickly scan previous reference transactions and avoid potential redundant and frustrating contacts. The Hunt Library has also consolidated all of its contact information and services into a "one-stop-shopping" model; now any and all contact with the library and with library personnel can be made through one e-mail address. This single e-mail access point is "post mastered" by a librarian who ensures that the messages get to the correct department or to the correct contact person. In Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University's 2003 online distance learning student satisfaction survey, students overwhelmingly reported favorable responses to contact with the Hunt Library with regard to ease of use and with the overall effectiveness of their transactions.

The Hunt Library's ECLS has also been vigorously surveying and soliciting their end users in an attempt to be proactive in meeting their needs. Many of the successful initiatives and collaborative partnerships have come directly from in-house user surveys and end of semester course feedback. One of the latest initiatives has been to give the virtual/electronic library more of a sense of place. There had been an overwhelming response indicated on training feedback forms and from in-house surveys requesting tours and instruction in the physical library whenever members of the distance learning community were in Daytona Beach. It was a simple enough request to accommodate and now tours, meet and greets, and training are routinely conducted at the Hunt Library whenever possible.

Conclusions

Embry-Riddle has been in the business of providing quality distance education programs for over thirty years. The Hunt Library has been supporting the distance learning community since the inception of the extended campus and the College of Continuing Education in 1970. There have been so many dramatic changes in the types of support services that we have offered to our distance education patrons that my predecessor from only ten years ago would not recognize today's library support operation.

Technologies have come and gone, our student populations have literally exploded, and physical satellite locations have opened in the most remote of locations imaginable. Any attempt to predict how and where Embry-Riddle will be operating any significant length of time from now is definitely a challenge. From past experience it would appear first and foremost that the easier we make it for students, staff and faculty members to simply communicate with us the more successful we will be.

Technology has proved to be tenuous and fleeting; the constants have always been the information providers and the end users. By continuing to focus on these end users, responding to their feedback, and supporting and training those who deal with the extended campus community at the immediate service points we will give ourselves the greatest chance for continued success, and our students the greatest chances for their success.

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