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Who Trains Distance Librarians? A Study of the Training and Development Needs of Distance Learning Librarians

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Who Trains Distance Librarians? A Study of the Training and Development Needs of Distance Learning Librarians

Abstract

Distance librarianship is continuing to grow in importance in the life of academic libraries. Institutions are being driven to take their programs to the students as a matter of economic survival, and academic libraries must grow and change with their institutions. In libraries with a history of serving distance learners as well as residential students, the service requests from off-campus audiences have long surpassed those on campus. In addition, academic institutions are offering online courses to their residential students at an ever-increasing rate, which creates a new category of distance learning student. How do academic libraries respond to the increasing demand from the virtual library patron? How do librarians obtain the training they need to serve this growing user base?

This presentation looks at the cross-pollination of the variety of librarians and program foci targeted at reaching all students with quality support and service. The authors will consider five groups: the members of the ACRL Distance Learning Section (DLS), the participants in the ACRL Regional Campus Discussion Group, the membership of the LITA Distance Learning SIG, the participants in Central Michigan University's biennial Off Campus Library Services Conference, and the subscribers to the Offcamp listserv. Members of these groups will be asked about the training they have received and their ideas for new training programs and mechanisms. The results of this study may provide a framework for training that can be developed by DLS, LITA or suggested as an addition to library graduate education.

Introduction

The United States Distance Learning Association traces the evolution of distance learning from the mid-1830s (United States Distance Learning Association, n.d.). The early phase dealt primarily with correspondence courses. In 1921 the first educational radio license was issued to Latter Day Saint's University. Beginning in 1950, distance learning moved into the television age. The link between technology growth and education has long been a strong one, even considering the early stages where correspondence was carried through a range of mail and delivery modes.

Distance learning as a field was able to grow in strength and attractiveness through the growth of media and the increased ease of access that came over time. At the same time that distance learning as a field of study was developing and growing, the companion piece – library support, was also finding its way into the mainstream. In 1963, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) began to develop the first rendition of Guidelines for Library Services to Extension Students (American Library Association, 1967). Those guidelines set the stage for the evolutionary path that has culminated with the 2008 approval of the Standards for Distance Learning Library Services (Association of College & Research Libraries, 2008). In less than half a century, library support for distance learners entered the mainstream of the library world as a codified set of standards which can be used to establish or assess library support for distance learning programs.

A major reason for this growth and maturation can be traced to a dedicated group that has worked diligently over those many years to ensure that the students under their care did receive the levels of library support they needed and deserved in order to be successful learners in their chosen fields. Originating as the Extension Campus Library Services Discussion group within ACRL, this group took on the task of maintaining and updating those first guidelines as times and delivery methods changed. In 1991, the group successfully petitioned ACRL for a change in status from discussion group to section. Later, the name was changed to better reflect the reality of its focus, and the Extended Campus Library Services Section (ECLSS) became the Distance Learning Section (DLS). As the group grew and changed, the members also ensured that the guidelines grew and evolved to match changes in resources, delivery methods, and expectations until the final step in 2008 with the launch of the Standards. This is not the ending point, however. Even standards aren't carved in stone. This document must continue to be a living one that evolves and adapts as needed over time.

During the past twenty years, as the various iterations of the Guidelines/Standards developed, a recurring conversation among the Section membership also evolved. This conversation addressed a shared concern about training and communication. There was a feeling that the standards alone were not the answer, but that there was an unmet need to provide greater support to the practitioners. Many ideas were proposed and debated, but a definite plan never quite developed.

The authors of this paper hope to provide a glimpse of a starting point for the next phase of support for distance librarians. They are looking at questions of training. What sorts of training are needed by practitioners? What training opportunities already exist, and how can those opportunities be delivered to those who need them? What about establishing different levels of training in order to aid both the new distance learning librarian and the seasoned veteran who needs to move to new levels of service? There is a great deal of literature about training, and, as many of us regularly tell our student researchers, it is relatively easy to take a body of literature and tease out the pieces that apply to your situation. Now it is time for us to begin to do what we've taught. How can we best adapt current training data to the needs of distance learning librarians? How do we deliver the needed information to the right place at the right time?

Training Librarians on the Job

Jones (2002) introduces her article on locating training as a new distance learning librarian by stating, "I had over a decade's experience in libraries, but little with serving off-campus library users" (p. 309). This is a common sentiment among new distance learning librarians who may find themselves designated as the primary support for off-campus users with little in-house expertise to help them learn new roles. This innovative librarian found her own way to learn more about her new role by conducting a study among veteran distance learning librarians to discover what they considered to be the most important advice. She found it useful enough that she published the results for other new distance learning librarians. Interestingly, the most frequent advice she received was to tap into the expertise around the globe from other librarians (Jones, 2002, p. 311).

Training is not an issue that is isolated to librarians new to the distance learning field. In general, there is a continuum of on-the-job training for new librarians. Some libraries have training programs of some length and complexity while others throw librarians into the deep end and hope that they learn how to swim quickly. Indeed, a recent survey conducted among 111 new academic librarians in Canada revealed that 42% had received formal training, 46% were trained informally while 12% had no training at all (Oud, 2005, p.86). Of those respondents who had little to no training, the most common suggestion for methods was through the use of training manuals as well as some form of hands-on instruction.

Since each library as well as the responsibilities of many of the librarians vary considerably, it is not surprising to learn that staff development and training differ by institution and there is no *one size fits all* approach. There are many ways a library can facilitate training for new librarians. Among those are to look to other libraries for examples, set up peer training, assess what the training needs are, and take advantage of appropriate training offered elsewhere on campus (Wilkinson & Lewis, 2006). In addition, an investigation of staff development programs at member libraries of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) revealed that such programs reflected the local environments (Giesecke & Lowry, 2002). However, the researchers also learned that there were core elements present in many of them. These include a coherent curriculum, staff dedicated to program coordination, target groups identified for training, program assessment and evaluation, as well as a commitment from library administration (Giesecke & Lowry, 2002).

There are numerous examples of programs academic libraries have initiated to train new librarians. At North Carolina State University, a relatively new program focuses on incorporating organizational socialization into an orientation that not only trains librarians on specifics of their jobs but also introduces them to the organizational culture (Ballard & Blessing, 2006). At the University of Minnesota – Twin Cities, the library developed a list of core competencies in technology, assessed librarians and staff in order to learn levels of competency and then instituted training to fill knowledge gaps (Eells & Jaguszewski, 2008). In addition, formal mentoring programs, such as those at Mississippi State University (Lee, 2005) and Kansas State University (Farmer, Stockham, & Trussell, 2009), are common ways to induct new

librarians into the specifics of their job requirements. Other interesting approaches include a *train the trainer* program at the University of Arizona, designed to educate librarians and student assistants to handle new responsibilities related to staffing an information commons desk (Sult & Evangeliste, 2009), as well as a reference librarian exchange between branches at UCLA that resulted in successful cross-training.(Carr & Kawakami, 2002).

Research Design and Methodology

Those who identify themselves as distance learning librarians have several organizations through which they can network with colleagues doing similar work. Five of these serve as the source of participants for this study. They are the ACRL Distance Learning Section, the ACRL Regional Campus Libraries Discussion Group, the LITA Distance Learning Special Interest Group, the biennial Off Campus Library Services Conferences, and the Offcamp listserv.

The mission of the Distance Learning Section is to provide leadership in promoting and supporting the development and delivery of library services for distance learning programs in higher education. (Distance Learning Section, 1999). The Regional Campus Libraries Discussion Group serves to support its members by facilitating professional development, publication and collegial networking relevant to regional campus environments (Regional Campus Libraries Discussion Group, n.d.).

Established in 1997, the LITA Distance Learning Interest Group provides a forum for the discussion of the application of technologies to distance learning library activities (Library & Information Technology Association, 2009). The biennial Off-Campus Library Services Conferences, sponsored by the Central Michigan University Libraries began in 1982. It is an international conference that strives to bring together librarians, administrators and educators to discuss techniques and theories related to the provision of library services to students and faculty off campus or in the online environment (Central Michigan University, n.d.). The Offcamp listserv, dating to 1991, is an electronic forum for anyone interested in the discussion of library services to distance learners.

Each of the groups was approached by the authors in order to determine the best way to contact members. Since both authors are subscribed to Offcamp, they already had access to this group. In addition, as past OCLS conference attendees, both were subscribed to an electronic list developed for the conferences. In addition, Fritts is a subscriber and had access to the electronic lists of both the Regional Campus Libraries Discussion Group and the LITA Distance Learning Interest group. The fifth group, the Distance Learning Section of ACRL, was more difficult to reach. The list of members is accessible to DLS officers but may not be used for research outside activities of the section. However, the authors had access to a smaller electronic list affiliated with DLS and used this as a contact point. In addition, they are aware that DLS members generally also participate on Offcamp and so could be reached through this method.

The authors developed a brief, 13-question survey designed to learn whether distance learning librarians had learned specific aspects of their jobs through formal library education, through participation in library associations, through conference attendance or on the job. In addition, some open ended questions sought to learn what training formats respondents might recommend and what other sources of training they had received. The survey was submitted to the Institutional Review Board at Benedictine University, the workplace of one of the authors, and was approved. It was sent to each of the five group electronic lists in December 2009. It was available for a limited time period, one week. No additional reminders were sent.

Findings

During the week that the survey was available, there were 141 responses. Since it is very difficult to ascertain the number of people who received the invitation to participate, the authors do not have a sense of what percent of the population this constitutes, however, it is a higher response rate than they had anticipated.

The highest response rate (45.4%) was from those who have the title of distance learning librarian or something similar. Another 44.2% of the respondents were either reference or instruction librarians. An

additional major category was that of *other*, which at 22% of the responses, included such titles as access services librarian, public services librarian, outreach librarian, and branch campus manager. The final categories of library administrator and library staff made up 12.6% of the responses. In terms of membership in professional associations, the majority (56.7%) belong to the Distance Learning Section. Less than 6% each belong to the Regional Campus Group or the LITA Distance Learning Interest Group. Over 45% indicated that they belong to other professional organizations, such as state library associations.

The overwhelming majority of responses (75.9%) came from librarians working at institutions that grant graduate degrees. Those at community colleges constituted another 20.6% of responses with only 3.5% coming from four-year undergraduate colleges. Almost everyone who answered the survey (95%) has some distance learning-related job responsibilities. In response to the open-ended question that queried how participants became involved in providing distance learning services, many responded that the library added that responsibility to another set of duties. Some reported that they saw a need to support distance learners and started offering services, while others were attracted to distance learning jobs after having been distance learning students themselves.

Of those, 91.5% responded that they had received no training in distance learning librarianship in their graduate library education. The majority (68.8%), however, have received some training through conference and workshop attendance. In terms of receiving training from national professional associations, the highest number (37.6%) reported that they had received training from the ACRL Distance Learning Section. Of the other professional associations listed, ACRL was listed by 27%, ALA by 15.6%, the Regional Campus Group by 4.3%, and the LITA Distance Learning Interest Group by 5.7%. Over half (53.2%) listed *other*, which included state library associations, library consortia, as well as the Off-Campus Library Services Conference, which was the most popular entry in the category. The question asking about types of on-the-job training the respondents received was open-ended and yielded a variety of responses, the most common of which was *none*. Other responses included reading professional literature and training manuals, mentoring from colleagues, and figuring it out as they went along.

In response to a question about what training formats the respondents would recommend for distance learning librarians, 80.1% suggested workshops and 83.7% recommended webinars. In addition 44.7% thought training should be included in LIS courses, while 11.3% thought using a consultant would be beneficial. Other suggestions included mentoring, social networking sites and professional literature as other means by which librarians can receive training.

The final question solicited many relevant responses on the topic. The answers varied but there were some common themes. Respondents noted that there is increasingly little difference between distance learning and other public services librarians and that training is important for all. Others suggested more course work in graduate library programs might help, as well as longer workshops at conferences. In addition, respondents added that broadcasting workshops and relevant conference presentations using technology might reach many of the librarians who cannot attend conferences. The respondents also consistently emphasized the need for current awareness and ongoing training and development activities for distance librarians.

Discussion

Clearly this selected set of responses indicates a need and a desire for training in distance learning librarianship. A series of open fora held by the DLS Strategic Planning Committee in 2008 also elicited a sense of need for specific types of support for DL practitioners, especially those new to the field.

It is interesting to note that while only 95% of the respondents report some responsibilities related to distance learning, only 45% have a job title that reflects that. In addition, a large number of participants answered that their job title is either reference librarian or instruction librarian. This speaks to the supposition that appeared in several of the final comments, that most academic libraries and librarians are providing some type of support for students and faculty away from a traditional central campus setting. However, respondents also note that they need to learn more about how to use technology effectively and

how to reach students and faculty who are not across the reference desk or in the library instruction classroom and they are often not receiving this in school or on the job.

The most common formats for training that surfaced were workshops and webinars. Many of the respondents advocated for new training to be delivered in a workshop format to them. Funding is no longer so plentiful as to allow for travel to workshops at conferences or elsewhere. The fact that a strong majority indicated that they had participated as students in online courses may underscore the efficacy of professional development workshops in webinar format. However, there also emerged a strong opinion that some foundation for distance learning library techniques should be developed in graduate library programs. In other words, if distance learning librarianship permeates the fabric of academic libraries to a continuously growing degree, then the basic professional degree should be providing more education in this area.

Many of the respondents became distance librarians through chance rather than design. These respondents especially illustrated the need for the development and implementation of some type of training or support network. A common theme in the responses was that many started in other areas and gradually their positions evolved into support for distance learners. In some cases library support followed well after the launch of distance learning programs after faculty began asking for support. A majority of comments addressed the perceived need for ongoing training and support, whether through library schools or other agencies.

Of the five distinct groups that were investigated regarding their possible role in training distance learning librarians, the Distance Learning Section had the strongest showing as a provider of training for the respondents. In addition, a majority of the participants reported that they are members of this association, which may both speak to the fact that members are more aware of training from this group than elsewhere and also to the fact that some mechanisms may be in place to provide further training through DLS.

Conclusion

It is clear from the results of this survey that distance learning library services are pervasive and that there is a strong need for further training and professional development opportunities for academic librarians. There are many avenues to training; however, there were two potential means that emerged more strongly from the survey responses. These indicate that the Distance Learning Section should increase training opportunities for members, particularly in the form of workshops offered through webinars, and that library and information schools need to be encouraged to incorporate more basic information on distance learning librarianship into their curricula. The Distance Learning Section, as the primary organized advocacy body in the U.S. for distance learning librarians is in the best position to take a lead in proposing such changes to graduate library educators.

The authors are strongly committed to the development of enhanced opportunities for training and development of distance learning librarians and others with responsibilities for serving remote populations. They will encourage appropriate committees within the Distance Learning Section to begin looking for ways to provide a range of training and development opportunities. Some options, in addition to webinar presentations, could include the implementation of a mentoring program similar to that developed by Larry Hardesty and others to provide support for new directors during their early years as administrators. Another approach may be the development and presentation of a distance learning primer as a preconference in conjunction with the ALA Annual and/or Midwinter Conferences. Finally, a concerted program of outreach to library schools and programs is a necessity, given the increasing reliance on distance learning by higher education institutions. Distance learning librarianship is moving toward the mainstream of academic librarianship, and that reality needs to be recognized and celebrated by providing the best possible training for members of the library profession. As one of the survey respondents commented:

As online education and hybrid education become more ubiquitous, all public service librarians need to be able to work with online and field-based students. However, it is still important to also have a librarian who advocates for on-line and field-based students. "Off-campus" students tend to

be "invisible", particularly in institutions with a traditional student body on campus, and the distance students need to have someone represent their perspectives in the library when it comes to both services and library policies

As the trend toward blended, hybrid, and fully online programming continues, it is incumbent upon the librarians to continue to take the lead in insuring the strongest possible support for all learners, regardless of their location.

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