Serving Distance Learners:
A Few Tips for Public Librarians

by Jason A. Fields

According to a National Center for Education Statistics report (2008), distance education has been defined as "a formal education process in which the student and instructor are not in the same place" (p. 1). Public libraries often have resources that can connect students with their instructors and can play an important role in complementing the services offered by the library at the student's host institution, effectively bridging the gap between these two constituents.

It is important for public librarians to consider that while distance learners may have the support and resources of the academic institution's library at their disposal, they are often separated from these libraries by physical distance. Public libraries, therefore, will be the "face" of the library that these students see first. Being prepared to serve their needs alongside those of other patrons will create repeat users who not only rely on the local library's services, but will return for other programs or materials that may be offered.

The following are a few things which public librarians can do to make the services offered by their libraries more accessible to students engaged in distance learning activities.

• **Promote your library's services that appeal to distance education students.**

Does your public library offer interlibrary loan service? Test proctoring? Free internet access and/or Wi-Fi? Quiet places to study or work in groups? All of these are services that distance education students may wish to take advantage of.

For example, a college or university's interlibrary loan (ILL) services may be restricted because of postal service limitations, or distance education students' geographic locations impede borrowing materials from their home institution easily. Using their local library's ILL service can bolster access to materials and provide a convenient way for them to borrow items needed for coursework or research.

• **Incorporate content for distance learners into existing programs.**

Many public libraries offer public programs for basic Internet searching. Including information about how to find material useful for research, such as magazine articles or government and business information could make such a program more appealing for distance learners, while maintaining relevant content for the general public.

• **Immerse yourself in a distance learning experience.**

By becoming a distance learner oneself, it may be easier to understand the needs of a student in such a context. Many professional development opportunities exist for librarians which take advantage of distance learning methods. For example, participating in a Webinar or registering for an online skills development course via WebJunction or other popular provider, public librarians will be more familiar with the concerns and issues a distance education student may face.

• **Network with your academic colleagues.**

Is your public library near any academic institutions? Consider networking with the distance education or reference librarians at that school's library. If a public library routinely works with a particular institution's students, it may be worth a call or even a visit to investigate how you might work together to support these unique patrons.

A good starting point for ideas on how to support distance education students can be found in the Association for College and Research Libraries' *Standards for Distance Learning Library Services*. While geared toward academic libraries, the *Standards* may be used as a springboard for discussions regarding service ideas in public libraries, such as developing support for or identifying communities of distance learners.

Support for the distance learners in a public library's community can easily be included in what the library may already be doing. By further engaging in distance

learning activities, public librarians will have a better understanding of the distance education process, and may even find it helpful to collaborate with academic librarians if the community of distance learners warrants it. Service to patrons engaged in learning activities is not new for public libraries. By becoming familiar with ways to support those involved in a distance education experience, that similar service will continue to be relevant for many years to come.

References

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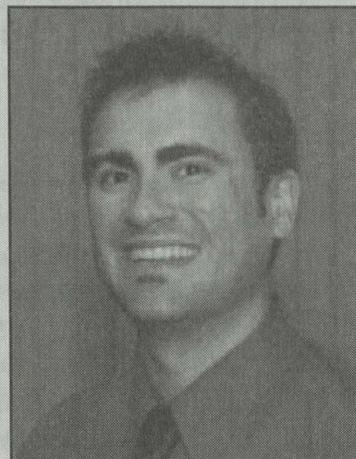
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