

LibGuides as a Distance Learning Tool

by Shelley Arvin

The Cunningham Memorial Library at Indiana State University strives to give distance learners the same level of service as on-campus users. The library offers assistance to all students, but helping distance education (DE) students takes extra effort because the library must often go to the student. The library has identified some common problems encountered by distance learners, and certain questions are frequently asked of the reference desk. To respond, the library has created a Web space for distance learners to answer frequently asked questions (FAQs) using LibGuides. Design decisions are explained based upon distance learners' needs and ISU operations. Assessment and evaluation is needed to improve the space and better serve the needs of ISU distance learners.

Distance Learners at ISU

Distance learners at Indiana State University (ISU) are assumed to have the same information needs and skills of on-campus students but without the physical access to help. ISU enrolls a lot of students who are first generation college students, which means they may not have the support system desired for success. This may result in more questions and more need for reassurance. They have not necessarily learned the basics of how to do research. Distance learners sometimes require help learning to navigate the library Web site. They tend to choose Internet search engines as their first choice for information seeking, but being physically isolated, they cannot lean over and ask their classmates to provide support and answer questions. By definition, they are physically separate from the campus, and this affects the university's ability to provide them with a supportive community. This separation can challenge them to learn how to navigate campus services and to find someone to answer their questions.

The Cunningham Memorial Library of Indiana State University is dedicated to providing services to meet the electronic and traditional library resource needs of the distance learning community. The Dean of the Library has stated a desire to provide levels of service to distance learners equivalent to those provided to traditional on-campus students. The library offers assistance to all students, but helping distance learners takes extra effort because the library must go to the student. A

decision by the Cunningham Memorial Library was to consistently refer to "distance learning" and "distance learners" when discussing distance education, distance learning, online courses, e-learning and any other related synonyms.

Library orientation for distance learners is a particular challenge in communication. At the beginning of each semester, all distance learners are sent an orientation e-mail. However, it is known that some students do not read their e-mail. In light of this fact, Cunningham Memorial Library has created a Web space for distance learners using the software application LibGuides (www.springshare.com/libguides/) to answer frequently asked questions (FAQs). Links are included to other distance learning services offered by ISU. The Web space gives distance learners a place to go to find help navigating ISU and library services and resources.

In January 2008, a distance learning librarian was appointed. The distance learning (DL) librarian works with everyone in the library to provide and improve distance learning services. The DL librarian does not usurp ISU's liaison model of librarians being assigned to manage the collection, reference and information needs of specific programs or departments. Rather, she is the point person for information concerning distance education initiatives at the library and ISU. All ISU distance learners are informed of her existence and may contact her for help. Because requests for help may cover all kinds of needs, she stays informed of distance learning initiatives and services at ISU so she may connect distance learners with the appropriate person or unit to give them a solution. The DL librarian needs to be aware of challenges facing distance education students in their experiences of finding information and in their interactions with the library. With these goals in mind, the library faculty and staff keep the DL librarian informed regarding known issues of distance education students, give their suggestions, and share their experiences. In return, the DL librarian brings DL issues to the attention of the library so possible solutions may be discussed.

The orientation e-mail that distance learning students are sent at the beginning of each semester summa-

rizes library services available to them and proactively troubleshoots some common stumbling blocks. This option may not be possible at all universities because of student privacy protections. Distance learner e-mail addresses are acquired from the Office of Distance Support Services (ODSS). A justification for the e-mails must be provided to maintain student privacy, and adequate protection must be maintained for the received data. The ODSS played a larger role in distance education in the mid- to late-1990s. Over time, as distance education classes became more prevalent on campus, departments and professors were better able to manage their own classes, and the average distance learner became more computer savvy. This has resulted in ODSS moving into a more administrative role.

In August 2008, the Cunningham Memorial Library acquired LibGuides and created LibGuide subject guides for the fall semester. The library had previously posted distance learning information on an HTML Web page but it was out-of-date. The *Distance Learning at ISU Library* LibGuide was created.

Operating like a MySpace Web page but with more flexibility and designed for libraries, the LibGuides application can be used to publish subject-specific information quickly and easily. The administrative interface allows pages to be quickly put together in the form of boxes set to contain Web links, podcasts, text, images, library catalog links and more. The LibGuides administrators can establish a logo and set the color scheme for the pages. For a basic, thorough introduction to LibGuides, the reader is encouraged to refer to Kerico and Hudson (2008).

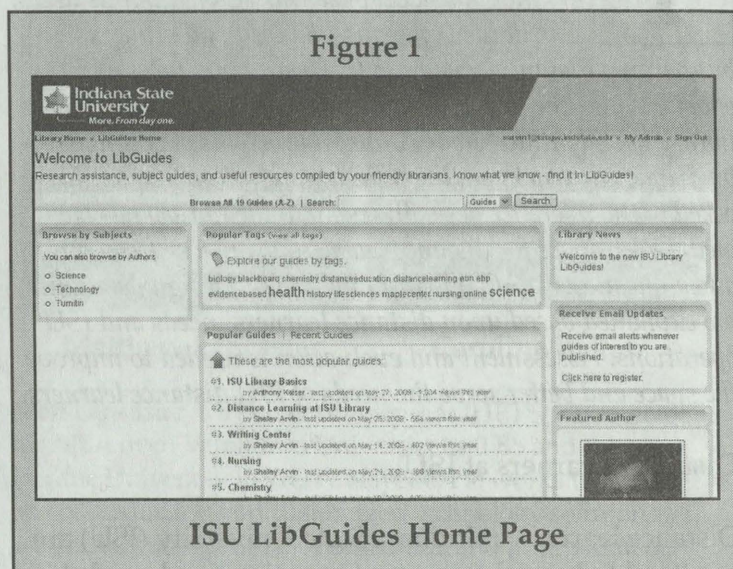
LibGuides has a few advantages over the traditional Web page. In the ISU library, changes to Web pages on the Cunningham Memorial Library Web site must be submitted to Systems, the library's information technology department. This ensures a consistent appearance to Web pages but slows down the creation and editing processes. Significant changes must be approved by the Library Web Committee. Because a consistent look and feel can be pre-established in LibGuides, it is a useful alternative to allow liaison librarians to quickly and easily create and edit their own pages.

LibGuide Structure at ISU

When Indiana State University purchased LibGuides in August 2008, librarians found many design, organizational and structural decisions needed to be made on the fly to have guides ready for the fall semester. These decisions may not be found to be optimal in the continuous cycle of evaluation, modification and re-evalua-

tion. However, lessons were learned in the process that may be of value to others.

The decision was made to create LibGuides based on major topics, such as Library Basics, Distance Learning, and Writing. Subject guides such as Aviation, Biology, Economics, Human Resources Development, etc. would contain subject-specific information and link to the major guides; they need not repeat basic information unless necessary. Course guides, assignments and subtopics would be tabs within the LibGuides (Figure 1).

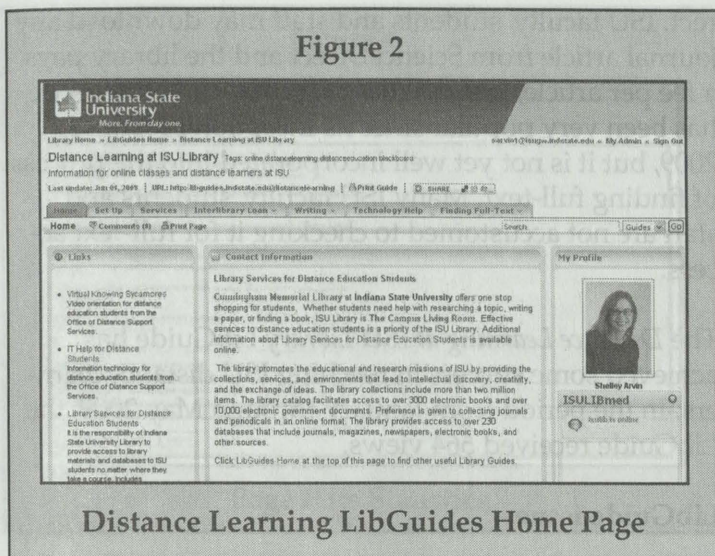


The Distance Learning LibGuide contained information and materials to answer distance learning challenges. Other library questions on research or specific disciplines would be put on other LibGuides, which students could click to from the Distance Learning LibGuide. Organization and structural decisions were based upon the support structure of Indiana State University for distance learners.

The Distance Learning LibGuide was organized by tabs broadly categorized as Home, Set Up, Services, Interlibrary Loan, Writing, Technology Help and Finding Full-Text. Some tabs contain additional tabs beneath them in drop-down menus. Future usability studies must be done to test design and usability and to determine if students overlook the additional tabs.

The home page is the first thing students see, and it includes introductory and important information. Boxes on the home page include a box of general information about the ISU Library, a box of links to ISU information and video tutorials appropriate for distance learners, a box about the weekly online reference session, and a list of the contact information of the Reference/Instruction librarians (Figure 2).

Figure 2



its own library Web page, information on this page is brief and links to that Web page. Avenues for help from the Reference/Instruction Department are prominently displayed. Distance students may call a toll-free telephone number, submit an online form, or instantaneously open a chat message. Contact information of the Reference/Instruction librarians are repeated here in a "linked" box. This box is set up so changes to the original box on the home page are automatically mirrored in this box.

Interlibrary loan is very important to distance learners, but they often have difficulty understanding what it is and how it works. The Interlibrary Loan tab focuses on briefly explaining the most important information and provides links to ILL Web pages containing more detail, which the ILL office controls. Some video tutorials were created that were embedded on another subtab underneath the Interlibrary Loan tab. These videos were created by ISU librarians, posted on YouTube, and then embedded into the LibGuides tab. Because embedded videos must be loaded from the YouTube Web site, the tab does not always download properly and sometimes displays a 404 Page Not Found message when clicked. For this reason, the videos were placed on their own tab. Refreshing the page or clicking the Back and Forward buttons often allows the tab to load properly.

The materials included came from the Office of Distance Support Services, the Office of Information Technology, and the ISU Library. The DL librarian reviewed the orientation videos available on campus and chose those that would be appropriate. Excluded videos primarily involved material about on-campus activities and locations. If media occur containing appropriate materials specific to distance learners from the disciplines, departments, and programs, the decision will need to be made whether to place them on the Distance Learning LibGuide or on the subject discipline's LibGuide. That decision is ultimately left up to the librarian liaison to the department.

The Technology Help tab includes information about connecting to library resources and information technology issues. One of the biggest recurring problems for distance learners is access to the library's electronic resources. This tab contains troubleshooting options for students to self-diagnose their own connection problems, if a librarian is unavailable. These troubleshooting steps are the first taken by the library to discover the possible reason for any connection problem and solutions are suggested. The tab also links to existing Web pages of information regarding technical specifications required by distance learners' computers and to information from the Office of Information Technology.

The weekly online reference session was placed on the home page because the Cunningham Memorial Library is still heavily advertising it. It is a pilot project using an online meeting space in Adobe Connect as a virtual location for students to come and submit questions. The Adobe Connect application allows the librarian to share her computer screen with visitors and demonstrate search strategies and library services.

Distance learners have a lot of difficulty with general writing issues and with finding the full-text from a citation. For this reason, even though these are not directly distance learning issues, specific tabs were included on the Distance Learning LibGuide to offer help.

Each semester, many distance learners are unable to use library resources because they do not yet have a university ID, a network login, and an interlibrary loan (ILL) account. The orientation e-mail includes this information, which is repeated on the Set Up tab. Students may ask for these items at any time, but they often do not do so until they are in the middle of a research project. The ID card and the network login require time to process, and the ILL account is occasionally delayed because students incorrectly complete the form. Early processing resolves problems before they interfere with assignments.

The Writing Center has its own LibGuide and the Distance Learning LibGuide includes a Writing tab linked to that LibGuide. ISU faculty report that students face a lot of challenges when it comes to writing. The Indiana State University Writing Center opened a second office in the Cunningham Memorial Library

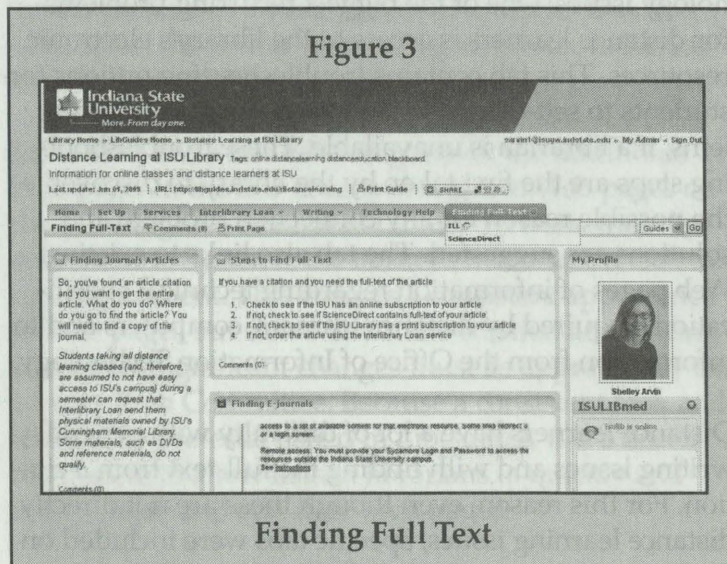
in the fall 2008 semester. The English Department and the Cunningham Memorial Library share its costs and management. Both the distance learning librarian and the Writing Center coordinator may edit the Writing Center LibGuide. The Writing Center also maintains its own Web site.

The Writing tab includes basic facts about the Writing Center and links to both the LibGuide and to the main Web site of the Writing Center. Boxes provide a general description of its services, hours, links to the major citation styles, and links to other useful LibGuides. The Writing tab informs students about the Writing Center's tutoring program for distance learners. This program is being piloted to provide scheduled phone consultations with students to discuss a writing sample.

Two sub-tabs exist in a drop-down list under the Writing tab. A Plagiarism tab provides definitions of plagiarism and copyright and includes links to additional copyright information. The Academic Integrity sub-tab links to an external ISU Web page that opens in a new window and includes information about ethical, professional standards in research, writing, and assessment.

Lastly, one of the most frequent reference questions is "How do I find the full-text of this citation?" Therefore, the Finding Full-Text tab is repeated on several LibGuides (Figure 3).

Figure 3



Finding Full Text

The tab includes step-by-step instructions for how to find full-text online or in print and how to place an interlibrary loan request. Beneath the Finding Full-Text tab is an ILL tab and a ScienceDirect tab. The ILL tab links to the ILL login Web page that opens in a new window. The ScienceDirect tab explains how to use ISU's new transactional access service with ScienceDirect.

ISU faculty, students and staff may download any journal article from ScienceDirect and the library pays a fee per article, instead of a subscription. This service has been very popular since its inception in January 2009, but it is not yet well incorporated into the process of finding full-text. Many ISU faculty, students and staff are not accustomed to checking it for full-text access.

The *Distance Learning at ISU Library LibGuide* has achieved some success in reaching ISU distance learners. In the period from January through May 2009, the LibGuide received 564 views.

LibGuide Issues

The librarians at Indiana State University have found LibGuides to be a useful tool to quickly and easily produce Web pages of information for library users. However, the LibGuides experience has provided some interesting lessons regarding its opportunities, issues and limitations. Libraries that have recently purchased LibGuides may benefit from considering the basics of its structure, organization and function.

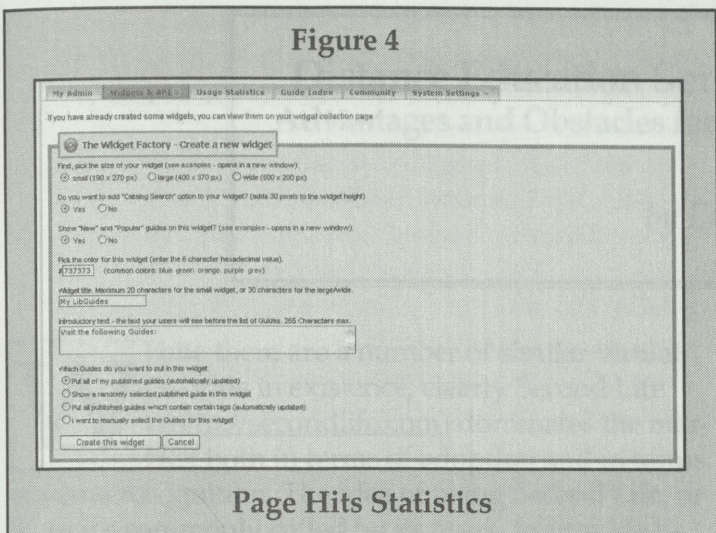
Libraries will need to decide who will have administrator rights. Administrators have the power to change any LibGuide, to change the permissions of others, to set the background options, and to see more statistics than owners and editors. Some libraries may not wish every librarian to be an administrator and be able to change everyone else's LibGuide.

Regardless of who receives administrator rights, up to three editors may be assigned to edit a particular LibGuide. Libraries may wish to decide who should have rights to edit specific content. Multiple editors may change each other's work.

The LibGuides application offers the opportunity to create boxes of content that are reused on multiple LibGuides. Changes to the original box would be mirrored instantly by the other "linked boxes." Theoretically, one could create a master LibGuide of repeatedly-used content that could be linked from several different LibGuides. The original LibGuide need not even be published and visible. Changes could then be made to the master LibGuide, and librarians would not need to remember which LibGuide held the original boxes.

For assessment purposes, the LibGuides application provides statistics of the number of page hits, link hits, event hits, and book hits. See example (Figure 4) on next page. Many ISU links were initially established using the Rich Text/Dynamic Content boxes because of

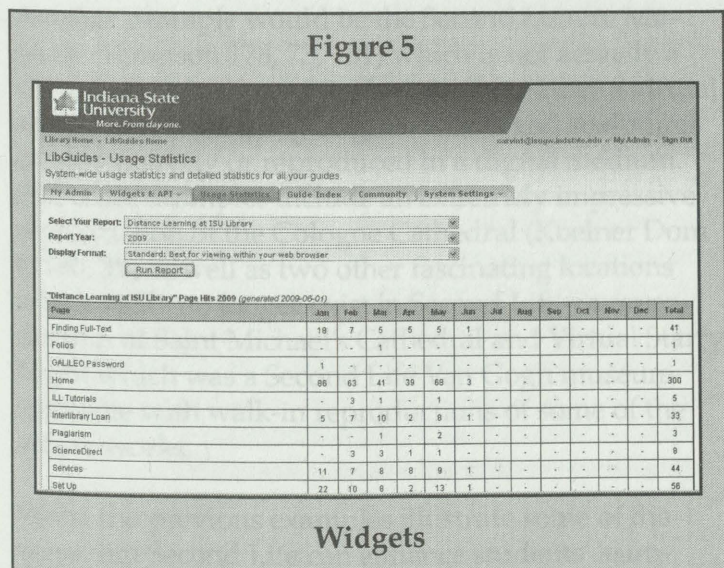
Figure 4



Page Hits Statistics

their flexibility. However, box types are being gradually changed to take advantage of the LibGuide link checker and link hits. The LibGuides application can only check links for boxes of Web Links, Links & Lists, Dates & Events, RSS Feeds, Podcasts, Books, User Submits and Polls with the LibGuide link checker. LibGuide boxes created using Links & Lists or Web Links will show up on the broken link report. Links simply embedded into the text narrative using HTML will not. Presumably, statistical numbers will be low for 2008-2009 because of changes to the boxes during this time period, but they should still offer some useful information.

Libraries have the option to create LibGuide widgets for regular Web pages, such as links back to selected LibGuides posted on the library Web site (Figure 5).



Widgets

The LibGuides application's statistics will track the number of uses of those widgets. If a library chose to create different widgets for specific Web pages, the library could distinguish which widgets are being used to access LibGuides.

Features that must link out to content do not always load well, resulting in a 404 Page Not Found error message and potential confusion for students. This can occur with boxes containing RSS feeds, podcast feeds, images and embedded videos. The LibGuide may be refreshed until the page loads properly, but students may not know to do that. The LibGuides application offers an extra module to upload images into LibGuides, but that costs extra.

Also, sometimes LibGuide changes do not save. Either the window locks up or the new changes simply don't appear. Multiple attempts to make changes will not work. Usually, the changes can be made the next day, but this can be inconvenient if changes must be made immediately.

The LibGuides application can create tables, but it requires the table features be decided before content is added. As an alternative, one can also create a table in Word and then cut and paste it into a text box. LibGuides' tools can then be used to edit the table, if desired.

Conclusion

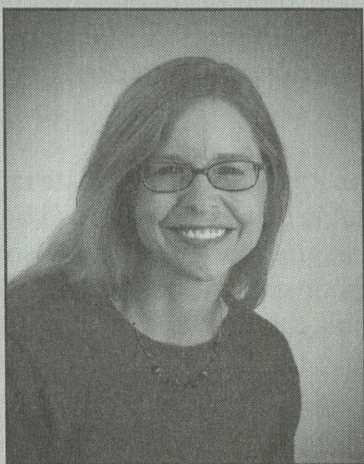
Distance learners are physically separate from campus, and this affects the university's ability to provide them with a supportive community. The Cunningham Memorial Library strives to give distance learners the same level of service as on-campus users. The ISU librarians have utilized to quickly and easily provide information to distance learners about library resources and services. The use of LibGuides has met with some success in its first year. Librarians have learned more about the LibGuides application's strengths and limitations and are using that information to re-evaluate and improve the ISU LibGuides. Are the ISU LibGuides optimally designed? Do students overlook the drop-down lists under the tabs? The Distance Learning LibGuide links to other ISU LibGuides, but do students notice and use the links? ISU LibGuides were created quickly in August 2008 but have had boxes and links changed and moved. How well do the statistics track those changes? Are the statistics accurate? Usability data and a conversation among librarians should make Indiana State University library services even better. Hopefully, other libraries can learn from ISU's experiences with distance learners and LibGuides. Libraries who are intrigued by the ease of LibGuides, but who dislike a subscription model, may wish to investigate the open access Library à la Carte (<http://alacarte.library.oregonstate.edu/>) from Oregon State University (2009).

References

Kerico, J., & Hudson, D. (2008). Using LibGuides for outreach to the disciplines. *Indiana Libraries*, 27(2), 40-42.

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About the Author



Shelley Arvin

Shelley Arvin is the Distance Learning Librarian and the Library Liaison to the disciplines of Biology, Nursing, Chemistry and Physics at Indiana State University. She received a B.A. in biology and an M.A. in information science from Indiana University in Bloomington. She worked at the Life Sciences Library at Indiana University while in graduate school. She then worked for three years at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne and two years as librarian to the Rivers Institute at Hanover College.

E-mail: shelley.arvin@indstate.edu