University Libraries
Libraries Faculty Research

Texas Tech University

Year 2007

The University Library's Role in
Planning a Successful Distance Learning
Program

Jon R. Hufford
Texas Tech University, jon.hufford@ttu.edu

The University Library's Role in Planning a Successful Distance Learning Program

Jon R. Hufford

SUMMARY. This article examines the role a university library plays in planning the student support services that are so crucial to a successful distance learning program. The content of the paper is based on the experience the author acquired as a member of Texas Tech University's Distance Learning Council. The Council's efforts to plan, prioritize, and develop a distance learning program that will include strong support from the Library are emphasized. The work of the Distance Learning Council and its committees is discussed when it relates to the TTU Library's contribution to the program.

A transformation is occurring in how universities teach students. New technology, changes in the makeup of student bodies, with adults, minorities, women, and foreign students participating in ever increasing numbers, and distance learning are major components in this transformation. The University Continuing Education Association recently published a report titled *Lifelong Learning Trends: A Profile of Continuing Education* (1998). This report describes several of the trends bringing about this transformation. One trend is the great potential of the adult population in the United States for participation in distance learning. According to the Association's report, distance learning has become an appealing alternative for working adults with career and family responsibilities who want to enhance their education. Other trends include the fast and consistent growth of jobs in occupations requiring more education, and the increased number of American households that have access to technology-based instruction. (*Lifelong Learning Trends*, 1998. p. 23, 79, 85).

THE UNIVERSITY'S ROLE

Universities are facing challenges and are offered opportunities in this new learning environment. Careful planning and determined action are needed to successfully meet the challenges and take advantage of the opportunities. Experiments in distance learning that have no clear goals will very likely fail.

One of the challenges is that, although greater demands are being placed on universities, resources have not grown proportionally. Given this situation, a plan of action can go a long way towards narrowing the gap between new demands and available resources. The planning requires a long-term strategic approach. This approach should include an analysis of the environment, making strategic choices, and setting and prioritizing goals. A liberal dose of imagination and action are also necessary. Throughout the entire planning process, it is vitally important that the

university faculty and staff responsible for the program focus on the key elements of the new learning environment. These key elements include recognizing the need for new educational systems, correctly identifying constituents that the distance learning program will serve, developing support services for the constituents, developing a good technical infrastructure and a cooperative network for sharing information and experiences, and acquiring skilled staff (Pohjonen, 1997, p. 369-371).

Another challenge is that views on education, learning, and information technology change quickly in today's environment. In fact, the life span of particular electronic learning environments that are dependent on particular technologies is becoming shorter all the time. Some of these environments are already out of date when they are introduced to the public. The rapid growth of knowledge and technology is responsible for this short life span. Because of this rapid development, universities must learn to respond faster and plan better. Also, they must spend sufficient amounts of money, time, and staff talent during the developmental phase of a distance learning program (Pohjonen, 1997, p. 371-2).

THE LIBRARY'S ROLE

More than anything else, the success of a distance learning program depends on the distance learning courses offered. A significant factor contributing to the success of these courses is the ease with which students can accomplish the library research needed to complete the assignments their professors give them (Edge, 1995, p. 10). Library personnel are expected to assist distance students in several ways. In general, the goals of a comprehensive university library support program for distance education should include reference services, information literacy instruction, and document delivery services. The successful implementation of these

goals depends on library staff projecting its traditional ethos of service to the patrons to also include distance learning students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Institutional planning for distance learning is reasonably well documented, especially in unpublished form. Several of the materials available include information about library contributions to distance learning. Whereas unpublished documents are available that treat planning in some depth, published materials tend to cover the topic in a cursory manner. Several of the unpublished documents are available in the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) Microfiche Collection. Also, several online documents are available on Web sites that define an institution's vision or plan of action for distance learning. Like the published materials, these online documents tend not to be developed plans. Rather, they are advertising instruments for distance learning programs. The ERIC Collection includes materials on the more traditional kind of distance learning that state universities and community colleges have been delivering for years through television, radio, and video and audio cassettes. Information on planning the kind of distance learning that is associated with the computer tends to be more readily available on the Internet, though it can also be found in unpublished documents in the ERIC Collection.

Role of Libraries in Distance Education, SPEC Kit 216, an ERIC document that is dated July 1996, reports on the results of a survey of 119 Association of Research Libraries members that gathered information about distance learning initiatives in ARL libraries. The specific objectives of the survey were to identify libraries involved in distance learning activities and their level of involvement, to determine the kinds of library services delivered to remote patrons, and to ascertain the management and support levels provided by libraries for distance learning programs (Snyder et al., 1996). Additional statistics on distance learning are available in the

National Center for Education Statistic's issue brief: *Distance Education in Higher Education Institutions: Incidence, Audience, and Plans to Expand* and in its statistical analysis report: *Distance Education in Higher Education Institutions* (National Center for Education Statistics, 1998 and 1997).

A subject guide to Web-accessible resources concerned with library support of distance learning is available at a site titled *Library Support for Distance Learning* (<http://www.lis.uiuc.edu/~sloan/libdist.htm>) (Sloan). In addition to links to general sites on distance learning, it includes links to several Web-accessible papers and articles that provide a critical perspective to distance learning. There are also links to over 50 Web-accessible papers, articles, and reports dealing specifically with library support for distance learning and more than 60 individual library sites that include descriptions of how these libraries offer services to distance learners.

Information on distance learning policy at all levels of higher education is available on the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications' Web site (<http://www.wiche.edu/telecom/telecom.htm>). The Cooperative is a membership organization established in 1989 by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (*Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications*, 9 October 1998). Also, the State University of New York's University Distance Learning Panel recommendations are available on the World Wide Web (*The SUNY Learning Network*) at <http://sln1.esc.edu/admin/sln/original.nsf>, and a review of the policies guiding the Western Governors University is available online. The WGU, consisting of seventeen higher education institutions, began its initial pilot program phase in February 1998 (Edwards, 17 February 1998).

Documents are available in the ERIC Collection that report on the planning efforts of state educational agencies in the area of distance learning. *Toward a State of Learning (Achieving the Vision III)*; *Strategic Planning for the University of Maryland System* (1995) provides an overview of the challenges facing the institutions belonging to the University of

Maryland System in the coming years and the strategic planning efforts that the institutions' administrators and faculty will have to take to meet these challenges. *Coming of Information Age in California Higher Education* (1997), authored by the California State Post-secondary Education Commission, documents the vision this agency has for distance learning in California's future. This report presents an overview of some of the major issues facing California higher education as it moves into the Information Age. "Administration, Management and Policy," chapter nine of *Distance Education: A Systems View* (Moore and Kearsley, 1996), discusses distance learning issues related to planning, staffing, resources, budgeting, scheduling, quality assessment, and policy making.

Two ERIC documents discuss distance learning activities in foreign countries. *China's Radio and TV Universities and the British Open University: A Comparative Perspective* (Runfang, 1997) examines the origins, objectives, structures, costs, funding, programs, and teaching and learning of the radio and television universities in China and the British Open University. The author discusses the growth and development of higher education and the philosophies underpinning practice at these institutions. *Determining the Scope of Online Delivery at a Traditional Research-based University* (Mason, 1996) includes a brief summary of the key factors that have facilitated the implementation of the online delivery of teaching programs at the University of Melbourne (Australia), including the importance of strategic planning.

TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY'S PLAN OF ACTION

With the intention of meeting the challenges and benefiting from the opportunities associated with the transformation that is taking place in higher education, the Texas Tech University administration formed the Telecommunications Infrastructure Fund/Distance

Education Vision Committee in the fall of 1996. In an effort to encourage a sense of involvement and commitment at all levels across campus, faculty from various departments, departmental chairpersons, associate deans, directors, and a vice-provost were asked to participate as members of the Committee. The Committee's assigned task was to develop a vision statement for the future of distance learning at the University. The main theme of the Committee's final report (May 27, 1997) was that, by early in the next century, the University should become a national leader in changing the paradigm of higher education through distance learning (Texas Tech University, 1997, part 2).

The "Vision" Committee recommended in its report that a permanent administrative unit be created that would be responsible for insuring the university's ability to achieve this position of leadership. More specifically, the unit would be responsible for facilitating the development and delivery of distance learning and for fostering collaborative distance learning relationships with educational institutions throughout West Texas. The report recommended that the unit concentrate on four areas: distance learning infrastructure and operations, distance learning program development, coordination and support, and information services and technologies. The unit would insure that the academic components of the institution become equipped and supported at the level necessary to provide their constituencies access to and the benefit of developing distance learning and information technologies. Further, the unit would interface with other academic units on campus, respond to the inter-institutional distance learning challenges within Texas, and take advantage of new developments in distance learning and information technology which impact the University's mission.

The University President accepted the Committee's recommendations and, late in 1997, appointed the Vice-Provost for Outreach and Extended Studies to be the administrative officer responsible for the unit. The Vice-Provost for Outreach and Extended studies serves permanently as the Distance Learning Council's chair. At the same time, the President accepted the recommendation that a Distance Learning Council be created to advise the Vice-Provost and to

assist in providing strategic direction for the distance learning program. The Council is a standing body with representation from each of the major academic and service units of the University. It is presently responsible for developing policies that will define distance learning priorities and activities. When completed, these policies will guide the overall development and implementation of distance learning at Texas Tech University (Texas Tech University, 1997, p. 2-3).

In addition, the Distance Learning Technology Committee was created as a standing subcommittee of the Council. This Committee will be responsible for the ongoing development of recommendations for campus computing and network standards and design, system computing and network standards and design, distance learning classroom design, interactive video systems design, and satellite and other alternative delivery systems. The Committee also will coordinate the review, evaluation, and demonstration of new technologies for potential adoption and application in the distance learning programs of the University. The Council will be able to appoint additional standing and/or ad hoc committees when the need arises.

THE DISTANCE LEARNING COUNCIL AND ITS COMMITTEES

Early in 1998, the chair of the Distance Learning Council set up working committees to address the Council's responsibilities. Each council member is assigned to one of these Distance Learning Council committees. Each committee has undertaken to study its assigned area and then write a report that will include recommendations for its area of responsibilities. Working committees are in place to address student services and course management, faculty issues and programs, and institutional relations and issues. Although it is likely that these committees will sit for several months, it is unclear at this time whether they will continue to exist once all the reports are completed.

THE STUDENT SERVICES AND COURSE MANAGEMENT WORKING COMMITTEE

An area frequently neglected in the development of distance learning programs is student support services. Support for students at a distance includes registration, enrollment, and transcript services; access to student advisors; academic counseling; and financial aid services. Also included are such services as access to library and research materials, bookstore services, timely receipt of instructor materials for courses, technical support, and communication with other students.

The Distance Learning Council decided early on to make student support services an important part of Texas Tech University's distance learning program. Several members of the Council identified library services as being especially important. The fact that the Associate Dean of the University Libraries and the Libraries' Coordinator of User Instruction are members of the Council has helped to reinforce this belief.

With this in mind, the chair of the Distance Learning Council established the Student Services and Course Management Working Committee. The Committee's members include the University's Director of Extended Learning, who is serving as chair, the Libraries' Dean and Coordinator of User Instruction, the Director of the University Transition Advisement Center, and the Associate to the Vice President for Student Affairs. Some of the Committee's more important responsibilities are developing an inventory of potential constituents to be served, defining their characteristics, identifying the elements of the learning context for constituents, identifying market forces driving educational requirements, developing approaches for providing service, and developing uniform guidelines for support services for distance students. These responsibilities will serve as a framework for writing the Committee's report.

The Student Services and Course Management Committee began its work in February of 1998 and has met several times since. However, the original goal of completing its report by the

end of the summer turned out to be unrealistic. Efforts to write the report have continued into the fall, with no prospect for completion in the foreseeable future.

Nevertheless, much discussion and research on policy issues such as those discussed below have and will continue to take place. The Committee recognizes that thorough and careful policy development is a key component of a successful distance learning initiative. Its rationale is that all too frequently the toughest distance learning policy questions remain unasked. Also, some issues may seem minor at first and thus receive minimal consideration. Yet later on these issues often become major stumbling blocks to a successful distance learning program. Asking the really tough questions early in the policy development process can go a long way towards avoiding potential policy pitfalls and contribute to the quality, rigor, and strength of a distance learning program. With this in mind, the Student Services and Course Management Working Committee has approached its responsibilities in a deliberate manner.

The Committee has discussed on several occasions the issue of what should be the appropriate level of service for distance learning students. It decided that Texas Tech University's distance learning student must be offered the same level of service quality that on-campus students receive. The Committee is acting on the assumption that it is critical for a program's student service policies to be developed with quality service to the distance students always in mind. Committee members have found it helpful when discussing policies to work through the steps that students must take to learn about courses and programs, enroll in them, participate in the classes, and successfully complete a distance learning course or program. The Committee is firmly convinced that strong student service policies can greatly increase a distance learning program's chances for success.

Another issue that the Committee is discussing is whether a single department or office should handle all questions from distance learning students who may have difficulties in any number of critical areas, including computer-related connection problems, registration glitches, undelivered textbooks, or advisement options. Would a single office serve the students best? If

so, which office should be responsible? Or should there be a central office or clearinghouse that refers students to other offices or departments for specialized assistance?

TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES' SERVICES
CURRENTLY IN PLACE FOR DISTANCE LEARNERS

The Libraries' are well positioned to support distance learning at Texas Tech University. The primary means of providing library services to Texas Tech University's distance students is through Internet access to the Libraries' Web site. The University's Academic Computing Service provides Point-to-point Protocol (PPP) accounts for access to Web-based electronic resources requiring user validation/IP addresses. The cost of these accounts to distance learning students is \$45.00 per semester plus long distance phone charges. Telnet access to the Texas Tech University Libraries' online catalog and several other databases are also available.

Several resources that provide valuable services to distance students are available on the Libraries' Web site. A link on the site introduces distance students to all the services available to them. This same electronic document is also available as a printed handout. The Web site also provides access to reference assistance. Distance students can submit questions on the site and expect to receive answers either on the same day the questions were submitted or the morning of the next workday. Additional links provide current news about the Libraries, a staff directory, and links to Internet resources compiled by the Libraries' subject librarians. The staff directory includes e-mail links to subject librarians and other staff personnel. There is also a tutorial available on how to conduct library research and online forms for requesting delivery of University-owned material and interlibrary loans. Both the library-owned and interlibrary loan

materials that are requested using the forms can be mailed or faxed to a distance student's home or office. Finally, distance students have access to scanned materials placed on reserve by instructors at the Electronic Reserve link on the Libraries' Web site, and there are countless full-text resources available on the site and throughout the Internet.

Upon request, distance students who want to avoid purchasing a bar-coded Texas Tech University ID card are mailed a library card with a barcode. The bar-code number is necessary for access to all databases requiring user validation. Also upon request, a TexShare library card will be mailed to distance students. This card permits the holder to borrow books from other Texas academic libraries.

The Texas Tech University Libraries will have additional services made available to distance students in the near future. The Libraries will soon have a proxy server that will provide direct access to Web-based databases restricted by Internet Protocol (IP) addresses, thus bypassing the need for a Texas Tech University Point-to-point Protocol (PPP) account. Students will then be able to use America Online (AOL) or other Internet providers to access all Web-based resources supplied by the Texas Tech University Libraries.

Another service that will be implemented soon is desktop (computer to computer) delivery of articles to patrons from Texas Tech University Libraries and interlibrary loan sources. Renewal of books, requests for "recalls" of books and other material checked out to someone else, and accessing personal borrowing information, such as information on books currently checked out or overdue items, are other services that will be made available in the next few months.

TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES' SERVICES IN THE PLANNING STAGES

There are several services for distance students that Texas Tech University Libraries may adopt soon. Some of these services are a distance learners' Web page, an 800 phone number, a library card that is electronically transmitted to students, customized library instruction, express delivery of Library materials, and the establishment of a Library team that would coordinate distance learning services and respond to future needs.

CONCLUSION

As was pointed out earlier in this article, careful planning and determined action are prerequisites to successfully meet the challenges and take advantage of the opportunities in the new learning environment. The strategic approach required should include an analysis of the environment, making strategic choices, setting and prioritizing goals, imagination, and action. The university faculty and staff responsible for the distance learning program must recognize the need for new educational systems, correctly identify constituents, develop adequate support services, develop a good technical infrastructure and a cooperative network for sharing information and experiences, and acquire skilled staff. Also, universities must respond to new developments quickly and be ready to spend sufficient funds for development.

A university library's role in this strategic planning is to provide the best possible support for distance learning courses. A significant factor contributing to the success of the courses is the ease with which students can accomplish the library research needed to complete the assignments their professors give them. Generally, the library support that makes success possible includes reference service, information literacy instruction, and document delivery services. Ultimately,

the successful implementation of these services depends on library staff projecting their traditional ethos of service to the patrons to also include distance learning students.

Texas Tech University, with strong support from the Library, has taken a strategic approach in planning its distance learning program. The formation of the "Vision" Committee that authored a vision statement, the establishment of a distance learning administrative unit with a council to assist and advise it and council committees that are developing recommendations for defined areas in distance learning are developments that reflect careful planning and determined action. When completed, the committee reports will include the results of such activities as environmental analyses, making strategic choices, and setting and prioritizing goals.

REFERENCES

California State Post-secondary Education Commission. (1997, February). *Coming of Information Age in California Higher Education*. Sacramento: California State Post-secondary Education Commission. ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 405 768, microfiche.

Edwards, J. (1998, February 17). Western Governors University Begins Pilot Phase. [online]. Available: HTTP: <http://www.westgov.org/smart/vu/pilotrelease.html>.

Lifelong Learning Trends: a Profile of Continuing Higher Education (5th ed.). (1998). Washington, D.C.: University Continuing Education Association.

Mason, Jon. (1996, July 7-10). *Determining the Scope of online Delivery at a Traditional Research-based University*. In *Learning Technologies: Prospects and Pathways. Selected papers from EdTech '96 Biennial Conference of the Australian Society for Educational Technology* (pp.

77-81). Melbourne, Australia: Society for Educational Technology, University of Melbourne.
ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 396 731, microfiche.

Moore, Michael G. and Greg Kearsley. (1996). "Administration, Management and Policy." In
Distance Education: A Systems View (pp. 172-196). Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing.

National Center for Education Statistics. (1997). *Distance Education in Higher Education* (NCES
98-062). Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.

National Center for Education Statistics. (1998). *Distance Education in Higher Education
Institutions: Incidence, Audiences, and Plans to Expand* (NCES 98-132). Washington, D.C.: U.S.
Government Printing Office.

Pohjonen, Juha. (1997, December). "New Learning Environments as a Strategic Choice."
European Journal of Education, 32, 369-377.

Runfang, Wei. (1997, May). *China's Radio and TV Universities and the British Open University:
a Comparative Perspective. ZIPP Papiere 104*. Hagen, Germany: Fern University, Institute for
Research into Distance Education. ERIC Document Reproduction Service ED 407 601,
microfiche.

Sloan, Bernie. (n.d.). Library Support for Distance Learning. Graduate School of Library and
Information Science. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. [online]. Available HTTP:
<http://www.lis.uiuc.edu/~sloan/libdist.htm>.

Snyder, Carolyn A. and others, comps. (1996, July). *Role of Libraries in Distance Education. SPEC Kit 216*. Washington, D.C.: Association of Research Libraries. ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 398 930, microfiche.

The SUNY Learning Network. (n.d.). [online]. Available HTTP:
<http://sln1.esc.edu/admin/sln/original.nsf>.

Texas Tech University. Telecommunications Infrastructure Fund/Distance Learning Vision Committee. (1997, May). "A Vision for Distance Learning at Texas Tech University." Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University.

University of Maryland. System Administration, Adelphi. (1995, October). *Toward a State of Learning (Achieving the Vision III). Strategic Planning for the University of Maryland System*. ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 405 765, microfiche.

Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications. (1998 October 9). [online]. Available HTTP: <http://www.wiche.edu/telecom/telecom.htm>.