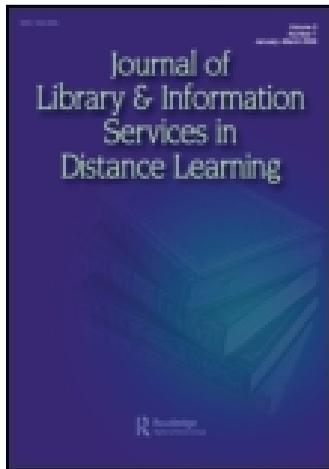


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Learning from Distance Faculty: A Faculty Needs Assessment at the University of Wyoming

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Distance educators have special library needs. This article discusses the results of a library needs assessment of distance instructors at the University of Wyoming. Access to resources, use of library instructional services, barriers to distance library use, and perceived gaps in service are all addressed. Follow-up actions, based on survey results, are also discussed.

KEYWORDS *Needs assessment, faculty, distance education*

PURPOSE

Over 20% of students at the University of Wyoming take their courses from a distance via the Outreach School. In 2008–2009, over three thousand students took courses online, in intensive weekend sessions, at remote campuses, and via audio or video up-links. The Outreach School offers nine undergraduate degree programs and eleven graduate degree programs for distance students.¹ The UW Libraries have established a long-standing partnership with the Outreach School and librarians strive to provide reference and instruction services to all distance learners. Based on the Libraries' history of serving a large number of distance learners, the authors decided to conduct a formal assessment of how well the Libraries meet the needs of distance educators at UW. Through this needs assessment, the University Libraries hoped to determine:

- which library services are most used by distance faculty
- what barriers prevent faculty from using library resources and services

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- where and how instructors expect that distance students learn library and research skills
- how distance faculty and students access required readings for their courses
- what services instructors feel are missing from the library's offerings
- and actions that might be taken to fill the library needs of distance instructors.

BACKGROUND

The University of Wyoming is the only four-year public university in the state. The school is a land-grant institution, with the main campus located in Laramie. The university also maintains the UW/Casper College center, nine Outreach regional centers across the state (most on community college campuses), and Cooperative Extension Service centers in each county and on the Wind River Indian Reservation. Outreach and distance learning form a vital part of the university's mission.

Total enrollment at the university was 13,106 for the 2008–2009 school year, with 3,065 of those students enrolled through Outreach distance programs.² The population of the state is about 525,000 and the two largest cities, Cheyenne and Casper, each have only about 50,000 residents. The small towns in the state are far apart from each other, and many places in Wyoming feel extremely remote.

The UW Libraries, in accordance with the ACRL Access Entitlement Principle,³ are committed to meeting the information and research needs of all students and instructors, regardless of their location. All enrolled students and paid faculty and staff have access to all library services and to the materials in online and print collections at UW. Knowing that over 20% of the student body is located off-campus, the Libraries favor electronic publishing over print whenever possible. Distance learners can access electronic articles and books via a simple proxy server log in. When electronic materials are not available, all distance students and instructors can use the Request It service for interlibrary loan and document delivery. Books from Laramie or from other institutions are mailed to patrons' homes at no cost, and articles are scanned and delivered as PDFs, again with no charge.

In planning this survey to assess needs of distance faculty, the authors chose to survey instructors rather than students because the questions regarded Outreach School programs and outcomes as a whole, rather than individual students' experiences. The Outreach School surveys its students regularly and includes questions about library experiences, which the School then shares with the library. The aim of this survey was to gain additional feedback about distance library services without over-surveying the student population. The Outreach School was extremely helpful to the authors in

distributing the survey to instructors and then assisting in the dissemination of survey results.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In reviewing the professional literature on assessing distance library programs, it is clear that most assessment occurs with student populations. Literature searches uncover a gap in the literature regarding the assessment of the library needs of distance faculty, with just a few published assessments conducted with the distance faculty population.

A formal needs assessment of distance faculty was initiated at the University of Nebraska Medical Center by Shaffer, Finkelstein, Woelfl and Lyden.⁴ They utilized focus groups and developed a survey instrument to aid in formulating a distance library services plan. The authors of this study used the survey instrument developed by Shaffer et al. as a starting point for the University of Wyoming needs assessment survey.

The needs assessment approach to planning for distance library services is outlined effectively by Jerabek, McMMain and Van Roekel.⁵ Their methods can be applied equally well to conducting a needs assessment of students or faculty in a university setting. McMMain and Jerabek moved forward in their assessment goals in 2004 with a guide to developing questions for assessing library services to distance programs. They remind readers that, "When surveying participants in off-campus learning programs one must define what specific library services supportive of those programs should be the focal point of the questions."⁶ They also caution only to ask questions "some action can be taken on or about," which proved a valuable guiding principle in creating a survey instrument.⁷

METHODS

The authors initiated this needs assessment by conducting phone interviews with a few distance educators, using the survey instrument designed by Shaffer et al. as a starting point.⁸ The primary purpose of the phone interviews was to determine library services used and barriers perceived by UW distance faculty. Librarians selected phone interviewees from a small pool of faculty whom the distance librarian had identified as involved in distance education. The instruction and assessment librarian, who had not met these faculty members or worked with them previously, conducted the phone interviews, allowing participants to speak freely to a stranger.

Upon completing the phone interviews, the authors combined what they learned with the Shaffer instrument to design a nine-question electronic survey. The survey included a combination of open-ended questions

regarding perceived problems or gaps in library services, along with structured multiple choice questions about instructor use of library resources and barriers to use. (See Appendix: "Assessment of library needs of outreach faculty at University of Wyoming.")

With the cooperation and participation of the Outreach School and approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), the survey was electronically distributed to all instructors teaching a course through the Outreach School in spring 2010. A reminder email followed two weeks later, leading to an increase in the number of total respondents. Both survey emails were sent directly from an Outreach School instructional designer rather than from the librarians. Of the 195 instructors who received the survey, 69 responded for a 35% response rate. Responses came from 33 different departments, and the authors regarded responses as representative of University of Wyoming distance educators as a whole.

RESULTS

Access to Resources for Distance Faculty

The survey distributed to distance educators asked how their students access required readings for their courses, what library services they use, and whether students are required to use library services or resources in their courses (see Tables 1, 2 and 3). The responses to these questions informed the authors about instructors' awareness of the library resources available to them and their interest in using such resources. Reviewing the results of the

TABLE 1 How Students Access Required Readings

	Number of responses	Response percent
Textbooks purchased by students	50	86%
Course packs purchased by students	7	12%
Electronic reserves	10	17%
Electronic journal access or document delivery through the library (not reserves)	26	45%
Electronic readings uploaded to the online course (via eCollege)	38	66%
Figuring out how to get the materials is part of the student's self-education	6	10%
Freely available Internet resources (not through the library)	28	48%
There are no required readings for my class(es)	0	0%
Other, please specify	5	9%
	Total respondents: 58	

Percentages do not equal 100% because survey respondents were allowed to select multiple answers.

TABLE 2 Library Services Used for Distance Classes

	Number of responses	Response percent
Class visit from a librarian—video or audio	6	13%
Class visit from a librarian—online discussion boards	1	2%
Request It (Interlibrary loan)	32	68%
Electronic course reserves	16	34%
Podcasts demonstrating library resources	1	2%
Handout prepared by a librarian	7	15%
Emails from a librarian	17	36%
Other, please specify	17	36%
Total respondents: 47		

Percentages do not equal 100% because survey respondents were allowed to select multiple answers.

survey shows that distance instructors have widely divergent perceptions of what resources are available to them.

Many respondents indicated a strong knowledge of library services, mentioning librarians or specific services by name. Some noted positive responses to the library, such as: “Students report being surprised and genuinely pleased at the availability of library resources, ease of use, and accessibility and helpfulness of reference librarians.”

Not all of the respondents were aware that they even had access to the UW Libraries, however. More than one indicated that they were not using library services at all, including statements like “To my knowledge I have no access to library services. If I do I would probably use them.”

Responses indicate that 68% of distance instructors have used interlibrary loan and document delivery (Table 1). Additional comments show that this is perceived as a valuable and efficient service. These statements mesh with data collected by the Libraries regarding increasing interlibrary loan use statistics at UW and they also fit with improvements to UW document delivery in recent years. In the 2007–08 year, UW Libraries streamlined document delivery and made it available to all UW-enrolled students and faculty. The improved service, along with an uptick in enrollment, resulted in an over 40% increase in interlibrary loan requests from Outreach patrons from 2007 to the present.

TABLE 3 Students Required to Use Library Services or Resources

	Number of responses	Response percent
Yes	33	57%
No	25	43%
Total respondents: 58		

Survey results indicated that an underutilized service for distance instructors is the electronic reserves system (Table 2). While UW Libraries appear to be meeting the needs of instructors for interlibrary loan and document delivery, there are reserves needs that are going unmet. The reserves issue is tied to another finding from survey results, that many instructors are either leery about or ignorant of copyright issues related to course readings. Only 17% of respondents are using electronic reserves, while 66% indicate that they are placing articles directly in the online course management system (Table 1). This practice occurs despite strong support from the Outreach School and their instructional designers for using library reserves. It is possible that the copyright restrictions associated with library reserves are related to their low usage: 23% of respondents listed “copyright clearance” as a barrier to using library resources (Table 6).

Use of Library Instructional Services in Distance Courses

The survey asked where distance students learn their library and research skills. The authors were interested in learning how many distance instructors know that library instruction is available, how many make use of it, and how many are interested in using library instruction. Out of the respondents to this question, 16% report that they have an in-class orientation to the library by a librarian, and 22% report that they teach library skills to their students (Table 4).

The distance librarian is currently embedded in approximately eight online classes each semester and provides support to an additional five audio/video/intensive courses each semester, as well as providing on-campus library instruction. This is a full instruction load, and success does not

TABLE 4 Where Distance Students Learn Library/Research Skills

	Number of responses	Response percent
In-class orientation by library faculty	9	16%
I teach library skills to my students	13	22%
I believe that students at this level already have the skills they need	24	41%
I believe students will ask a librarian for help if needed	15	26%
I direct students to contact a librarian for help	27	47%
Students don't need special library skills for my classes	12	21%
Other, please specify	8	14%
	Total respondents: 58	

Percentages do not equal 100% because survey respondents were allowed to select multiple answers.

TABLE 5 Willing to Give Class Time for Library Faculty to Teach Students Library Skills

	Number of responses	Response percent
Yes	42	75%
No	14	25%
Total respondents: 56		

necessarily mean increasing the number of sessions taught. Rather than simply waiting for requests from Outreach instructors, the distance librarian regularly reviews the Outreach course schedule and catalog, identifies research-intensive courses, and then contacts the instructors of those courses to offer library support. This proactive tactic ensures that classes that particularly need research help are offered it. Via the needs assessment survey, the authors learned that 75% of survey respondents are willing to give class time for a librarian to teach students library skills, which is borne out by the very positive responses the distance librarian receives to her targeted library instruction emails (Table 5).

Nearly half of survey respondents (47%) report that they direct students to contact a librarian for help and another 26% of respondents believe students will ask a librarian for help if needed. Students can contact a librarian via email, text message, instant messaging, and phone—all modes of communication readily available to distance students. The majority of reference questions at the UW reference desk are still asked in person, but in spring 2009 25% of reference questions were received via phone, email, or instant message. In addition, the distance librarian conducts about 30 individual reference consultations per semester with students who contact her directly for in-depth point of need assistance.

The one response to this question (“Where do your students learn library or research skills?”) that gives librarians cause for concern is the 41% of responding instructors who say, “I believe that students at this level already have the skills they need.” Based on reference questions received at the library and studies reported in the library literature, librarians know that in many cases students do not have the research skills they need, whether they are first-year students or graduate students. Some instructors assume that students know more about the research process than they actually do, and other instructors are unconcerned with students’ ability to use library resources. One response to the survey from a distance instructor reads: “Most [students] have figured it out, the rest use Google Scholar.” While Google Scholar is a useful tool, students may be missing out on other important research tools if it is the only resource they use.

TABLE 6 Barriers to Using Library Services or Resources

	Number of responses	Response percent
Copyright clearance	11	23%
Lack of online materials (e.g., textbooks, journal articles)	4	9%
Library does not provide materials my students need	3	6%
I had not considered using the library for support	17	36%
Procedures to use the library are too complicated for students	1	2%
Procedures to use the library are too complicated for me	3	6%
I am not aware of library services to support Outreach education	13	28%
My students lack the technological skills or equipment to use the library effectively from a distance	5	11%
My students have access to a community college library	3	6%
Other, please specify	12	26%
	Total respondents: 47	

Percentages do not equal 100% because survey respondents were allowed to select multiple answers.

Barriers to Distance Library Use

Some barriers that the authors thought might be issues for distance instructors seem to be non-problematic. Fewer than 10% of respondents reported these barriers:

- a lack of online materials
- the library does not provide materials students need
- the procedures for using the library are too complicated
- students lack the technological skills or equipment to use the library effectively from a distance.

It was encouraging to learn that instructors feel that the library has the materials needed by their students and procedures for using the library are manageable (Table 6).

The two most common barriers to using library services or resources reported in the survey were: “I had not considered using the library for support” (36%) and “I am not aware of library services to support Outreach education” (28%). One instructor commented, “I don’t have any idea what is available.” Clearly, a major barrier to using the library is not knowing what is available, or even if an instructor has access to the library. In a meeting reporting the results of this needs assessment survey to Outreach School academic coordinators, the Associate Dean of the Outreach School asked

specifically about adjunct instructors and what access to library resources they have. When preparing the survey, the authors had not considered special cases such as adjunct instructors from Casper College or professional preceptors throughout the state. These classes of instructors may not attend new faculty orientation, where library services are introduced, and they may assume that they do not have access to library services. In some cases, if adjunct instructors only occasionally teach for the University of Wyoming, they may find that their access to library resources is available during those teaching semesters and disappears when they are not actively teaching for a semester. One of the surveyed instructors reported “I have another full time job, so time is short.”

Suggestions for Library Services

In response to the open-ended question “Are there services not currently offered by the UW Libraries that could facilitate your distance teaching?”, distance instructors identified the following:

- “electronic coursepacks that included works that are only available by ILL”
- “intro to information literacy (podcast or vodcast)”
- “if the video system could be improved. . . easier to find the film and easier to get it fast”
- “some sort of session where students can interact with a librarian to learn about resources”
- “a classlive orientation”
- “a space where students could create their own podcasts/ vodcasts, audio recordings, videos, and store them on a university server to share with the class”
- “a service like Netflix for library users”
- “easier ways to place permanent links on ejournals accessed through the library”
- “I would like to have the readings for my first week or two on reserve”
- “I would like to have a librarian teach for an hour of my course”
- “I would like an ability to directly link to an article”

Most of these responses fall into two main categories of service at the UW Libraries: electronic access to proprietary content (including electronic reserves, permalinks to articles, and access to copyrighted video content), and information literacy instruction. As reported above, the distance librarian works with the Outreach School class schedule each semester to target courses for library instruction. If there is a perceived need for additional class visits or embedded presence from a librarian, time and instruction loads will need to be evaluated carefully. The suggestion to create podcasts and

vodcasts for distance courses as an alternative to live instruction was a welcome one, as the distance librarian has means to create vodcasts and distribute them widely to classes either in the online course shell or via the Library à la Carte library guides online.

The issue of accessing proprietary content for distance courses has a more nuanced set of solutions. Currently the UW Libraries provide electronic reserves for distance courses and promote use of reserves as an alternative to mailing coursepacks to students or to placing copyrighted material in an online course. The Libraries can also help create permalinks for articles within most of the subscription databases. The answers to the survey question about “services not currently offered” reveal at least some distance instructors would like to utilize these services but are unaware of them. The issue becomes one of marketing rather than service for much electronic access.

When discussing access to videos, on the other hand, there is a definite question of service. Campus instructors regularly show video in class, but off-campus instructors are considered out of the bounds of fair use when they place copyrighted video content in an online course. The Libraries will mail DVDs to distance students for individual use via interlibrary loan procedures, but for an entire class to watch the same video online, there has been no perfect solution.

DISCUSSION AND ACTIONS

To deal with the major barriers and needs identified in the needs assessment survey, the authors have taken several steps to increase distance instructor awareness of library services and resources and to bridge any gaps in service.

First, a targeted letter and “Ask Us” cards promoting reference, electronic reserves, and interlibrary loan were sent to Outreach regional centers around Wyoming. The academic coordinators at these nine sites often have more contact with adjunct and distance faculty who live in their area than do librarians on the main UW campus, and they work in-person with distance students who need help with assignments. The letter outlined the Libraries’ hope that the academic coordinators will help spread the word to their regional patron populations about what library services are available.

The authors then met with the Outreach School’s academic coordinators at their annual meeting on the Laramie campus to share results from the survey and talk about strategies for working with instructors. At this meeting, the coordinators offered explanations regarding some of the needs assessment findings. They confirmed that many adjuncts are confused about access to library services, and that some distance instructors teach (or have taught) at multiple universities online and do not assume they have library access at UW. The coordinators were pleased to learn more about electronic reserves

options as well, as they did not have much information about that service. Overall, the coordinators expressed satisfaction with the UW Libraries and a willingness to help bring more instructors and students to the library's distance services. One Outreach coordinator commented that the library services for distance faculty are already so excellent, he was surprised and pleased to see that the Libraries are still working to improve.

After speaking with the academic coordinators and learning of the confusion associated with library access for adjunct professors, the authors are contemplating a follow-up survey and/or focus groups with adjunct instructors. This population was not one specifically considered in the original survey and the instrument did not ask respondents to identify themselves as regular faculty or adjuncts. Learning the needs of this even-more distant group of distance faculty is a priority for future study. While the Libraries do not technically view the adjuncts as different from any other faculty members, the needs assessment and follow-up revealed that adjuncts might need more marketing and P.R. efforts from the library than do the faculty who are regularly on campus or take part in ongoing orientations and professional development at UW.

Community college libraries are sometimes the most physically accessible libraries for University of Wyoming's distance students and working closely with community college librarians is an important part of the UW Libraries' long term goals. Following the needs assessment, the authors decided to reach out even more to individual community college librarians for collaborative projects and to better share information about services. The distance learning librarian participates in the annual orientation for UW students at Casper College, and her future goals include more personal visits and on-site UW orientations at the other community colleges. The authors of this study also proposed a new "Library Instruction" interest group during a recent restructuring of the state library association as a way to share insights and collaborations with community college librarians across the state.

While the results of the needs assessment survey demonstrate that few distance instructors are utilizing library instruction, this outcome does not necessarily indicate that all distance courses require either synchronous instruction or asynchronous discussion with a librarian. As noted above, the distance librarian primarily targets research-intensive courses for library instruction and embedded presence. For many non-research intensive courses taught from a distance, options such as tailored library guides or customized tutorials can be an appropriate delivery method for library instruction. Given current staffing levels and instruction loads at the UW Libraries, non-intensive options are being investigated for these distance courses. The discussion of how to prioritize library instruction for distance learners is building at UW as additional degree programs and courses come online and the number of off-campus students continues to grow.

Some of the outcomes of the survey mesh well with current goals of the Outreach School. The school has invited copyright speakers to speak to distance faculty and seeks to create more expertise about how best to share materials with students online while not breaking the law or stressing Outreach server capacity. They are actively seeking solutions for licensing video in online classes and collaborating with the library on reserves solutions. The issue of access to copyrighted video content for distance courses was a known issue in the Libraries before the survey, but after seeing it appear repeatedly in the survey results, the distance librarian and the electronic reserves specialist have actively teamed with the Outreach School to test solutions for streaming licensed video content behind the Libraries' proxy server.

The UW Libraries and the Outreach School hope this unified message regarding copyright and reserves will raise awareness with distance educators at UW of the issues inherent to sharing content online and the library options available. The state of Wyoming recently conducted a large-scale task force on distance education throughout the state, and as a result created a new Center for Excellence and Innovation in Distance Learning and Technology. The University of Wyoming expects to see more developments and strategies related to distance faculty needs come forth from the Center in future years.

One final result of the distance faculty needs assessment was increased public awareness of library services. Many respondents indicated that they were unaware of some library services, and would now investigate them further. The survey only featured existing services, as recommended by McMain and Jerabek,⁹ so any services that appealed to respondents are readily available. In the process of taking the survey and learning the results, the Outreach School's faculty, adjunct instructors, instructional designers, and academic coordinators all gained more information about what services the library currently offers, and to whom. The increased awareness and goodwill with the distance learning program was a considerable benefit of conducting a needs assessment.

CONCLUSION

This survey of distance faculty offered few surprises. Rather, it confirmed that instructors who teach from a distance are not familiar with many library services, and librarians who serve the Outreach School need to make extra marketing efforts to that population. Additionally, the survey gave the authors an opportunity to find out what distance faculty members need, as they provided answers to the question, "Are there services not currently offered by the UW Libraries that could facilitate your distance teaching?" Although some of the services suggested are currently available, there is an impetus to make those services more findable and usable now that the need has been verified.

Sharing information with the Outreach School and with community college librarians throughout the state is one important step towards breaking down barriers to library use. Developing future services based on documented user needs is a vital move towards an evidence-based practice of librarianship.

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APPENDIX

Assessment of Library Needs of Outreach Faculty at University of Wyoming
Distance Library Services Survey*

- 1) For which department(s) do you teach?
- 2) Which of the following library services have you used for your distance courses? (Please mark all that apply)
 - a. Class visit from a librarian—video or audio
 - b. Class visit from a librarian—online discussion boards
 - c. Request It (Inter-library loan)
 - d. Electronic Course Reserves
 - e. Podcasts demonstrating library resources
 - f. Handout prepared by a librarian

- g. Emails from a librarian
 - h. Other, please specify
- 3) What are some barriers that limit your use of the library's services or resources in your distance courses? (Please mark all that apply)
- a. Copyright clearance
 - b. Lack of online materials (e.g., textbooks, journal articles)
 - c. Library does not provide materials my students need
 - d. I had not considered using the library for support
 - e. Procedures to use the library are too complicated for students
 - f. Procedures to use the library are too complicated for me
 - g. I am not aware of library services to support Outreach education
 - h. My students lack the technological skills or equipment to use the library effectively from a distance
 - i. My students have access to a community college library
 - j. Other (please explain)_____
- 4) Do you require your distance students to use library services or resources?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
- 5) Where do you expect your distance students to get their library skills? (Mark all that apply)
- a. In-class orientation by library faculty
 - b. I teach library skills to my students
 - c. I believe that students at this level already have the skills they need
 - d. I believe students will ask a librarian for help if needed
 - e. I direct students to contact a librarian for help
 - f. Students don't need special library skills for my classes
 - g. Other, please specify
- 6) Are you willing to give class time for library faculty to teach your students library skills?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
- 7) How do you expect your students to access their required readings? (Mark all that apply)
- a. Textbooks purchased by students
 - b. Course packs purchased by students
 - c. Print materials purchased by students (textbooks, course packs, etc.)
 - d. Electronic reserves
 - e. Electronic journal access or document delivery through the library (not reserves)
 - f. Electronic readings uploaded to the online course (via ecollege)
 - g. Figuring out how to get the materials is part of the student's self-education

- h. Freely available Internet resources (not through the library)
 - i. There are no required readings for my class(es)
 - j. Other, please specify
- 8) What do you hear from your distance students about the ease or difficulty of finding and using library resources?
- 9) Are there services not currently offered by the UW Libraries that could facilitate your distance teaching? Please elaborate.

*survey instrument adapted from Shaffer, J., Finkelstein, K., Woelfl, N., and Lyden, E. 2004. A Systematic Approach to Assessing the Needs of Distance Faculty. *Journal of Library Administration* 41(3/4): 413-428.