

# The library's role in distance education

## Survey results from ACRL's *2000 Academic Library Trends and Statistics*

by Hugh Thompson

### Background

In 1998, ACRL instituted the *Academic Library Trends and Statistics*, an annual survey that attempts to capture data from all institutions of higher learning in the United States and Canada. The survey instrument is based on the Association of Research Libraries form, but it also includes a survey of current trends that changes each year. For example, in 1999 data was collected on faculty status for academic librarians, in 2000 the survey looked at distance learning, and for 2001 it will cover information literacy.

The *2000 Academic Library Trends and Statistics* saw another significant increase in participation over the previous year. Out of a sample of 3,069 institutions, a total of 1,678 responded, representing a 54.7 percent response rate, or an increase of 22.7 percent over the previous year. As was done previously, the institutions reporting were separated according to their Carnegie classifications of associate of arts, baccalaureate, master's degree-granting, and doctoral degree-granting. (Note: The 2000 data was grouped according to the previous designations, but for 2001 will reflect the revised terminology.) The results are published in both print and electronic form.

### Trends questions

One of the most rapidly expanding sectors in higher education today is distance learning,

whether it is K-12, higher education, or certificate programs. In addition to providing courses "at a distance" to students who are separated by a large physical distance from the institution, coursework is being offered at the local level to students who are physically proximate but who want to manage their time by using "distributed" courses that are primarily virtual.

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to creating a complex and comprehensive set of distributed learning offerings lies in meeting the information needs of students in an electronic medium. While many campuses have defined initial approaches to offering courses over the Internet, few, if any, have defined a scalable and viable strategy for making information resources available to these distant learners.<sup>1</sup>

How are academic libraries responding to the growth in distance learning and its corresponding demand for library services that are compatible with this model? To capture data measuring the impact and the responses of academic libraries to these challenges, the trends section of the 2000 survey looked at how institutions are providing library services for distance learning.

The survey was in two parts. The first part covered demographics and details of how academic libraries administer their programs. The second part asked for data on methods of de-

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livery for three key services: reference, materials, and library instruction. There was some variance in the data reported by different institutions according to their Carnegie classification, reflecting their different educational missions. The results support the notion that distance learning is becoming an important part of higher education and that increasingly there will be technical and budgetary implications for academic libraries.

### Findings

Associate of arts institutions overwhelmingly reported participating in distance learning activities at 90.3 percent, whereas other categories, though less involved, still show significant activity, with bachelor's institutions at 50.6 percent, master's at 76.1 percent, and doctoral-granting at 83.2 percent.

The total number of students involved at each institution is still relatively low, however, with the majority of institutions in all four categories reporting that the number of FTE students in distance education programs is in the 0–499 range. At well over 90 percent of institutions in all categories, distance learning library services are part of the main library rather than administered as a separate unit. As might be expected, library staff participation in the overall distance learning experience is restricted to library support ser-

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vices and does not tend to include direct involvement in development of course content, with around 90 percent of all institutions reporting only somewhat or no involvement of staff in this area.

To introduce students to library services for distance learners, academic libraries employ a variety of methods with 40 to 50 percent of all institutions using orientation sessions within the university or the library. Less frequently used are information literacy instruction programs (averaging 11%) and classroom visits (averaging 8%). All other methods account for 33 to 43 percent of those reported. Perhaps reflecting that these programs are still at an early stage of development, 90 to 95 percent

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of all institutions stated that they do not have a separate budget item for the delivery of library services to distance learners.

The survey asked about delivery methods for three types of services: reference, materials, and instruction. The findings are that institutions are using a mix of newer technology and more traditional methods of delivery. For reference service, libraries rely most heavily on e-mail (averaging 86%) and the telephone (averaging 81%). Somewhat unexpected is the number reporting face-to-face methods of reference service delivery. An average of up to 57 percent of baccalaureate, master's, and doctoral-granting institutions reported using this method, while as many as 71 percent of associate of arts institutions use direct contact for reference services. This perhaps reflects the character of their learning programs as *distributed* learning rather than *distance* learning in the sense that students may not be in a traditional classroom, but neither are they at such a large distance from the institution that they are unable to physically have access to its services. Delivery of materials, which may often be in physical form as well as in electronic form, is distributed more equally across a wider range of methods, such as e-mail (46%), face-to-face (55%), fax-on-demand (51%), interactive Web pages (34%), and courier (45%).

Library instruction is still largely offered by more traditional methods, although more recent technology is being employed as well. Almost 78 percent of libraries reported using face-to-face methods of delivering library instruction, with e-mail (41%), interactive Web pages (41%), and telephone (32%) usage also showing significant use. The high percentage of face-to-face methodology might be explained if instruction is delivered most often in orientation sessions on site before the beginning of courses.

Among the broad conclusions that may be drawn are that academic libraries will need to cope with potentially explosive growth in distributed learning as an educational model and, although many are already involved in providing library services to these students, the methods used seem to be a mix of traditional and newer technology.

As the distributed learning trend grows, libraries will need to continue to explore and "push the envelope" to keep pace with the new paradigm of information delivery.

#### Note

1. Diana G. Oblinger, Carole A. Barone, and Brian L. Hawkins, *Distributed Education and Its Challenges: An Overview* (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 2001). ■

## There's still time to submit a proposal for the ACRL 11th National Conference

ACRL's 11th National Conference, "Learning to Make a Difference," will emphasize the need for academic and research librarians to anticipate and prepare for transformations in the profession and will encourage innovative ways to create and implement change. The conference will be held in Charlotte, North Carolina, April 10–13, 2003.

ACRL seeks the best ideas of our profession and invites proposal submissions for contributed papers, panel sessions, workshops, poster sessions, preconferences, and roundtable discussions. The full text of the Call for Participation is available at the ACRL National Conference Web site at <http://www.ala.org/acrl/charlotte/program/>

[cfp.html](http://www.ala.org/acrl/charlotte/program/cfp.html). The call also appears as an insert in the November 2001 issue of *C&RL News*.

Proposals and the completed program proposal form should be sent to the appropriate committee cochair listed in the call. Deadlines for proposal submissions are as follows:

- Contributed papers, panel sessions, workshops, and preconferences: May 31, 2002

- Poster sessions: November 4, 2002

- Roundtable discussions: January 7, 2003

Helpful hints about preparing successful program proposals are online at <http://www.ala.org/acrl/confmar02.html>. Questions? Contact (800) 545-2433, ext. 2519; e-mail: [acrl@ala.org](mailto:acrl@ala.org).