

Stefanie Buck

# A distance education librarian becomes a distance education student

## Switching roles

**T**here are many benefits to being a distance education student while working as a distance education librarian. Through this experience, I feel I have gained a better understanding of the issues that distance education students face and how the library can help them.

After working for three years as a distance education librarian, I made the decision to get another master's degree and chose a program on the opposite coast from where I was living. While my program was a more practical one and did not require much library use, being a distance education student gave me a valuable perspective on the issues they face and how it impacts libraries and librarians.

So what did I learn?

### Marketing and more marketing

Don't assume students are reading their university e-mail regularly. Honestly, I'd let a month or so go by before I read my e-mail from my department. Not that I recommend this practice, but not being on the campus and it not being my primary e-mail account, it was not on my mind. Yes, I could have forwarded it, but I didn't want it to get mixed up with all my other personal or work e-mails. E-mail is generally a good way to contact distance students, but don't expect that they will have read it or respond to it right away.

Distance education librarians often comment about how frustrating it is to get the word out. I don't think my library ever contacted me. Although, given the above statement, it's possible they did and I just never saw it. I don't think any of my instruc-

tors ever mentioned it. This being a practical degree, they may not have felt the need, but it certainly would have been useful to know the resource existed. I don't recall seeing anything about the library in my information packets, and you would think I would notice that, wouldn't you? It was probably there; I just wasn't paying attention at the time.

As a librarian, market smart. Make it short and make it frequent enough to get the word out. More importantly, like on-campus instruction, try to time it to when the students really need it. An e-mail at the beginning of the quarter is great but by the time they get around to doing the research, its ancient history.

Make an extra effort to incorporate your message into other venues, such as a newsletter that comes out from the distance education office and especially through the instructors. When you do send out an e-mail, keep it short and simple and not dependent on a timely response or action from the recipient.

### Get them the resources they need

It's okay for students to use their local resources. As a new distance education librarian, I was often frustrated by students telling me that they use the local university, community college, or public library. I wanted them to use our library because it's their library, too. I wanted them to know that. I

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wanted them to see how much the library cares about them. Did I use the library at the institution where I was studying? Nope. Why would I? I'm near a library where I have access to what I need. Granted, I know how to work the system, but it really was more convenient for me. Convenience and timeliness are very important to distance education students. We have to respect that.

As a librarian, I never discouraged students from using local resources, but I did alert them to the fact that the local community college or public library does not purchase materials that support their curriculum and may not have the scholarly resources their instructors want them to use. I also contacted the local libraries regularly so that they knew they could refer a distance education student to me.

### **Make it easy**

Make it as easy as possible to get access to your library. At my institution, I had to register each semester and verify that I was enrolled in a class before I could get an account number that let me access the databases and get interlibrary loan services. I'm sure there must have been a good technical reason for this, but after one semester, I couldn't be bothered. I did not like having to justify getting library access every semester. If I had not had to go through the process, I might have explored the library a bit more, but I didn't because I had easier access elsewhere. Working with our circulation department and interlibrary loan department was essential to making things as smooth as possible for the students. Fortunately for me, our system was already quite seamless, but that is not the case at all institutions.

Finally, make your experiences help you connect to your students. I found that telling my students that I, too, was a distance student at another institution, impressed them and connected them to me. I could share some of their stories or frustrations about Blackboard or WebCT or how hard it was sometimes to get the work done while working full-time. In fact, as both a distance

education librarian and a distance student, I got to know Blackboard/Web CT from both sides. My experience came in handy at the reference desk when students had questions about how to access something on their Blackboard or why the system was not working.

If you are a distance librarian, this is an experience you should not miss. Even just taking on online class offered at your institution can provide you with a perspective that you have not had before. Even though I am no longer a distance education librarian, those students are still on my mind. I have a newfound respect for the students who are working full-time, have families, and are going to school in a far-off or even not so far-off place. I can understand better the disconnect they feel, despite all of our efforts to make them part of the university. I can relate; and for a distance education librarian, I can't think of a more valuable skill. ♪

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*("Ten steps ..." continued from page 33)*

accomplishment and order if you are happily employed, and it will give your online identity a boost of professionalism. It doesn't cost anything, it is easy to create, and updating it is a breeze. So, what are you waiting for?

### **Notes**

1. PCMAG.com. Definition of online identity, [www.pcmag.com/encyclopedia\\_term/0,2542,t=online+identity&i=60604,00.asp](http://www.pcmag.com/encyclopedia_term/0,2542,t=online+identity&i=60604,00.asp) (accessed December 9, 2010).
2. CareerBuilder.com. "Forty-five Percent of Employers Use Social Networking Sites to Research Job Candidates, CareerBuilder Survey Finds," June 2009, [shar.es/myyhJ](http://shar.es/myyhJ) (accessed December 9, 2010).
3. BNET Business Dictionary. Business Definition for personal brand, [dictionary.bnet.com/definition/personal+brand.html](http://dictionary.bnet.com/definition/personal+brand.html) (accessed December 9, 2010).
4. During my research, I tested several other tools, but these three were the clear winners and had all of my required and desired features. ♪