Introduction

With the increasing popularity of distance education in recent years, the role of academic libraries in the distance learning process needs to be researched and evaluated in order to ensure effective information provision and delivery of library supportive services to distance learners. Similar to their campus-based counterparts, distance education learners need adequate library services. Ideally, the provision of library resources and access for on-campus students and distance learners would be equal. There have been a variety of articles written in the last few years that examine the efforts being made by academic libraries to fulfill the information needs of distance education students in their respective institutions. Although significant strides have been made, there is room for improvement through adequate planning, financing, as well as through collaboration between librarians and instructors who design and implement distance education courses.

For the research project this term, I am planning to study distance learners and their perceptions of higher education provided in a distance delivery format, including the library service and support needs specific to this segment of students, the distance learners' expectations of library service support, the online resources currently available to distance learners, and the implications for library services to enhance this non-traditional learning environment.

Literature Review

In his article entitled Academic Librarians and Distance Education: Challenges and Opportunities, Gandhi Smiti (2003) reviews the literature and provides an overview of distance learning services offered by academic libraries. The author explores the impact of distance learning and accreditation requirements on the work and roles of academic librarians. Changes in the roles of librarians serving distance learners and educators are discussed. The focus is on examining the additional responsibilities, opportunities and challenges encountered by academic librarians in serving distance learners. The author explores a vast variety of aspects of information provision and supportive services available for distance learners. Smiti discusses various case studies and provides a comprehensive
literature review. In his conclusion, the author provides a series of recommendations for information providers and librarians.

The article written by John Niemi, Barbara Ehrhard, and Lynn Neeley (1998), entitled *Off-Campus Library Support for Distance Adult Learners* is a study that explored distance education methods and library supportive services. The authors survey the literature and examine various case studies. The information needs and preferences of diverse groups of adult learners are discussed. The authors did not produce new knowledge and the article is a bit dated at this point, but their literature review and examination of case studies related to distance education are interesting and informative.

In *The Provision of Library and Information Services to Distance Learners: The Open University of Tanzania*, written by Jangawe Msuya and Farijala Maro (2002), the authors present their findings of research conducted on the provision of information services to distance learners by the Open University of Tanzania (OUT). The objective of the research was to discover how OUT provides information services to its distance learners and the extent to which these services meet the needs of the learners. The study was done in an effort to find ways to improve information provision at the university. 190 respondents were involved in the survey. The authors found a variety of problems with information provision to distance learners and offer recommendations to improve services. The authors surveyed OUT staff and students from two regions in Tanzania, including the capital city, Dar es Salaam. The authors surveyed both rural and urban inhabitants. Four main techniques of data collection were used in this study, including questionnaires, interviews, observations and documentary sources. Different sets of questionnaires were developed for different groups of respondents. They included a combination of open-ended and closed questions. The intent of the questionnaires was to reveal the availability and adequacy, or otherwise, of information provision and supportive services to OUT distance learners.

In his article, *Challenges in the Provision of Library Services in Distance Education: A Case Study of Selected Universities in Kenya*, Joseph Kavulya (2004) examines the efforts being made by Kenyan university libraries to fulfill the information needs of the distance
education students in their respective institutions. The author concludes that although efforts have been made, there is room for improvement through adequate planning, increased financing and through increased collaboration between librarians and instructors. Kavulya studied all four universities in Kenya that offer distance learning programs and collected qualitative data based on individual interviews with university staff, including librarians, and students. The author also comprehensively explored the literature in the field. The data gathered from the various institutions were analyzed, compared and contrasted by the author. Kavulya concludes with concrete recommendations for the universities and librarians.

Both of these latter two articles have provided me with an international perspective on distance education and information provision, as well as ideas for appropriate research methodology and data collection methods for this type of study.

Methodology

In this study, I plan to utilize four primary techniques of data collection, including a questionnaire, focus groups, analysis of scholarly publications in this area of study, as well as individual interviews with librarians and users. Different sets of questionnaires will be developed for different groups of respondents (i.e. librarians and users). The surveys will include a combination of closed and open-ended questions. Hopefully, the questionnaires will reveal the availability and adequacy (or otherwise) of information provision and other support services to distance learners. Based on the literature review, these are the types of data collection methods that are best suited for this type of study.

This will be a form of descriptive action research, meaning that it is designed to lead to the improvement of information provision and library supportive services, with direct application to online courses and academic libraries. Hopefully, this study will contribute to the improved design and implementation of distance education courses.

The data collected will be both quantitative and qualitative. The closed questions in the questionnaire will produce quantitative data, while the open-ended questions will provide qualitative data for
The population sample will include both academic librarians and library users. I am planning to survey 400 distance learners, particularly undergraduate and graduate students enrolled at Drexel University’s iSchool. Hopefully, I will be able to ascertain a list of distance learners from the university. There would be some privacy issues to consider. Perhaps the school could generate an anonymous list of email addresses. Then I could assign unique identifiers to them and generate a simple random sample to select students for the survey. Ideally, I would be able to survey an equal number of male and female students, as well as rural and urban students. The questionnaires will be delivered to both students and librarians via their campus email accounts. Hopefully, non-responses will be minimal. Although, I understand that some students do not respond to all of the online surveys in their email inbox.

I would also like to set up a focus group session at the iSchool for both distance learners and librarians. I want to bring together these individuals in a group setting to have conversations regarding library service and equal access. The focus groups would provide invaluable qualitative data for analysis and interpretation.

Individual interviews with academic librarians who serve distance learners at both universities would be ideal to generate qualitative data that would provide useful insight into library services and information resources available to distance learners.

I will also look at the most recent literature available in the field.

Conclusion

The ever-increasing growth of distance learning programs at colleges and universities has implications for providing library services to distance students. Academic libraries are trying to meet the accreditation requirements for providing equivalent library resources and services to on-campus students and distance learners. For distance learners who may seldom or never visit the library physically, the online library is their only option. Hence, the online versions of academic libraries need to be equally as adequate and user-friendly as the physical space.
As a distance learner who has participated in multiple online educational courses at various universities, I am interested in learning more about the perceptions of library service and information provision to distance learners at Drexel University’s iSchool. I am also looking forward to learning about this issue from the perspective of academic librarians who currently serve this ever-increasing population of library users and students.

References


