Chapter 6

The Case of Teacher–Librarianship by Distance Learning at the University of Alberta, Canada

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The online distance education program, Teacher-Librarianship by Distance Learning, was developed and implemented in the Department of Elementary Education at the University of Alberta, Canada beginning in 1996. At the time, neither the university nor the department had the interest, funding or infrastructure required for such an undertaking, but these developed over time through a combination of careful planning and serendipity. The program's instructional team has utilized various approaches to establish, maintain and continue the program: a distance education theoretical framework, analysis of distance education research, one-time government incentive funding, and on-going policy relevant research and evidence-based practice. Current challenges facing the organization are program growth, new and emerging technologies, and maintaining flexibility. The solutions to these challenges include a cohort model for the majority of program delivery; a stand-alone course introducing new and emerging technologies as a launching pad for integration of these technologies; and graduate certificate programs for meeting the short term needs of teachers new to the field.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

The University of Alberta is a large research-intensive comprehensive university in Western Canada. The University was established in 1908 as the province's first university; today it has 17 faculties and over 37,000 students. The Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta was the first Faculty of Education in Canada, and it is home to two kinds of library education: an accredited MLIS (Master of Library and Information Stud-

ies) program for all types of librarians, offered by the School of Library and Information Studies, and a school library specific MEd program for teacher-librarians, offered by the Department of Elementary Education. The first MEd and MLIS students graduated from the two programs in the early 1970s but undergraduate courses in library education had been offered at the University since the 1950s. Both the School and the Department offered their programs in library education in a traditional on-site and face-to-face format, but occasionally also offered outreach courses in response to students living in other cities in Western Canada.

Because in the 1970s another university in the Province of Alberta, Athabasca University, was established with the mandate of providing distance learning in the province, initiatives for distance learning have been slow to appear at the University of Alberta. In the 1990s, the provincial government ministry responsible for post-secondary education began to show increased interest related to using technology for learning in the post-secondary sector. This interest, and the competitive funding that came along with it, opened the doors for University of Alberta faculty members interested in "distributed learning," that is, using technology to support and enhance traditional face-to-face delivery, but it also provided opportunities for faculty members interested in distance learning. The funding was available on a competitive project basis over a limited time: this meant that infrastructure and maintenance of the technology and curricula developed with the funding would have to find continuing funds from other sources.

SETTING THE STAGE

Through the 1990s, the admissions to the accredited MLIS program held steady at approximately forty students annually. The school library education programs in the Department of Elementary

Education did not fare as well. The numbers of students applying for the school library education programs (both the MEd route and the post-baccalaureate Diploma route) began to diminish in the early 1990s. There were a number of factors that combined to reduce the viability of what had always been a small niche program.

The initial impetus for developing an online program was the financial cutbacks of the 1990s in the K-12 education system in the Province of Alberta. Schools, when forced to cut their budgets, began to lay-off or re-assign non-classroom-based staff. Counsellors and teacher-librarians were particularly hard hit. The cutbacks exacerbated the impact of two other factors related to the number of positions for teacher-librarians: (1) a provincial school library policy that recommended but did not mandate particular types or levels of school library staffing, and (2) a school-based budgeting system that delegated staffing decisions to the individual school level. Together, these factors resulted in a rapid decline in the number of students seeking admission to programs in teacher-librarianship.

For me, as the faculty member responsible for school library education at the University of Alberta, the only viable option appeared to be to increase the pool of applicants and thus the number of students enrolled in the Diploma and MEd programs through some sort of distance education. However, the cutbacks to the post-secondary system and the declining student registrations in school library education meant that it was very difficult to make a case for the Faculty or Department to allocate the resources needed to develop distance education programs.

Another obstacle was the scarcity of personnel to do the development work for a distance education program. Course and program development is seen at the University of Alberta as a faculty responsibility primarily: faculty are 12-month employees whose workload is generally thought of as 40% teaching, 40% research, and 20% service or citizenship. Teaching involves supervision of graduate students and advisement of undergradu-

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