

Chapter 31

Information Literacy Support for Online Students in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

As online education grows, so does the need for institutional support for online students. Information literacy support is one support that is infrequently addressed. Though students are familiar with the Internet, they often do not have the information literacy skills necessary for research. A collaborative effort involving program faculty and librarians was undertaken to address the information literacy needs of students in an online doctoral program. This chapter provides an overview of the first step of this project – an assessment of incoming students' information literacy skills. The results of the assessment indicate a need for comprehensive instruction to familiarize students with online library resources at the university, access to relevant scholarly databases, quality assessment of such resources, and the use of bibliographic management software. Recommendations are made for higher education institutions and online programs wishing to integrate information literacy support for incoming students.

INTRODUCTION

Online education in the United States has seen unprecedented growth in recent years. Over six million students took an online course in the fall 2010 semester, compared to 5.6 million in the fall 2009 semester (Allen & Seaman, 2010;

2011). This growth has led to calls, initiatives, and research on the quality of distance education and support for online students (Meyer, 2002). Online students do not live near campus, study online for convenience and access, often work full-time or have other commitments, and therefore do not always feel that they are part of an institution. However, online students' perception of connectedness to an institution plays an important

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-4458-8.ch031

role in student completion of online courses and student satisfaction in an online program (Cain & Lockee, 2002; Tait & Mills, 2003). It is thus important to provide online students with various forms of support at the institutional, program, and course level in order to provide them with a quality online learning experience and make them feel connected to an institution and to their program (Distance Education Training Council, 2012). Although institutions of higher education often do an excellent job of on-campus student services, online student services is an area that does not always get sufficient attention (Husmann & Miller, 2001; Levy & Beaulieu, 2003; Levy, 2003; McLendon & Cronk, 1999; Peters, 1998).

Institutions of higher education often create parallel service structures to those provided for on-campus students when investing in student services for online students. Needs are identified once online programs have come into being and feedback from online students is received (Blimling & Whitt, 1999). This approach has been criticized by some who advocate for one set of services for all learners in order to use resources more efficiently and provide a more comprehensive set of services (Floyd & Casey-Powell, 2004; Meyers & Ostash, 2004; Rinear, 2003). Nevertheless, the provision of services specially targeted at online students enables administrators and educators to fulfill the specific needs of online students and sometimes even the needs of a certain group or demographic of online students in a program (Connick, 2001). This chapter presents one such initiative - the collaboration between librarians and faculty in an online doctoral program to provide library services to a group of online students. While many online programs focus on providing administrative, technical, and instructional support, information literacy support – providing students with the skills to leverage existing online resources, evaluate them, and use them appropriately in their education, is largely ignored. These skills are taken for granted in incoming students and often viewed as the students' responsibility.

At the same time, online students are expected to produce assignments of the same quality as on-campus students. Given the ubiquity of technology and the Internet in our academic and daily environments today, information literacy skills can be critical to online students' successful fulfillment of academic expectations. Furthermore, the lack of access to information literacy support can lead to frustration and sometimes to higher student drop-out rates (Lee, 2000).

BACKGROUND

Information Literacy Support in Distance Education

Librarians at institutions of higher education have reached out to distance learners to provide instruction and support for some time now (Barnhart & Stanfield, 2011; Bottorff & Todd, 2012; Hines, 2008; Viggiano, 2004; York & Vance, 2009). Research and reports about library support for off-campus or distant learners describe the means of communication or technologies used by librarians as well as the format of the instruction. Library support for off-campus learners was earlier provided in person, with librarians traveling to the students at distant locations (Arnold, Sias, & Zhang, 2002). More recently, new technologies have made it possible for librarians to use real-time communication to interact with students at a distance (Barnhart & Stanfield, 2011; Henner, 2002; Lietzau & Mann, 2009). Students can also access resources that are available on a CD or online, using videos, screen captures, Web links, and online pathfinders that have been created by librarians. Online pathfinders, for instance, provide students with a guide to the recommended resources available at their institution in a particular subject area (Harrington, 2007). These online pathfinders are useful for students new to an institution or discipline, as they are able to introduce students to resources that might be useful for their studies. To provide

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