Expanding Desktop Libraries

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INTRODUCTION

Virtual libraries, no longer a novelty, reflect the expectations of students in distance learning environments. The phenomenal growth of the Internet and public reliance on it as a primary information resource impacts library services to students learning at a distance. Major trends such as telecommuting and the changing profile of traditional college students have fueled the demand for distance education. Distance learning has become an attractive alternative especially for working adults, military servicepersons, and rural residents (Hanson, 2001). The proliferation of distance learning opportunities both within traditional universities, corporate training centers, virtual or online institutions, and other learning collaborations has had considerable implications for the provision of library services to distance students; indeed, it has been argued that distance learning without access to electronic information resources and services is simply impossible (Faulhaber, 1996). Concurrent with the emergence of the virtual university has been the rise of the virtual library. This essay defines the virtual library and situates it within the context of contemporary electronic learning and student expectations.

BACKGROUND

Definition of the Digital Library

In the broader historical sense the term *virtual library* became trendy in the mid-1990s, but never captured professional use in a formal sense to connote an operational definition as did the phrase *digital library*. Then, the terms digital library, electronic library, and virtual library often were used interchangeably. Critically, the term *digital library* arose and evolved within the broad library community beginning in the late 1960s. During that period, many physically-based academic libraries initiated innovative long-term projects to facilitate access to their continually expanding hard-copy collections. These programs integrated emerging information technologies with traditional printed materials, thus making libraries among the first integrated users of alternative media such as microforms, audiotapes and other sound recordings, and electronic files—all predecessors of today's online commercial database systems and aggregated digitalized collections (Pacifici, 1997). Today, by most measures, the term digital library when used in this broader sense has won the day in terms of common use; perhaps, in part, because of the belief on the part of many information professionals that the word *virtual* was so vague. *Virtual library*, however, is increasingly the term of popular choice when one refers to the aggregated digital learning resources *and* librarian-assisted services that support the curricula offered by totally online or *virtual universities*. In residential institutions, the term off-campus library primarily refers to virtual access to resources and services or a satellite library location. Increasingly, librarians who support distance learning as found in more traditional and residential universities will also employ the term virtual library when referring to the amalgamation of resources and services that they provide their students at a distance even if that distance is across campus in a dormitory or a coffee bar.

While there are no limits on the size, content or relative value of data afforded students by a virtual library, its definition is always shaped by the pedagogical needs and expectations of its parent learning community. Today the term virtual library is nearly always associated with those library support services offered to students and faculty in the distance delivery and online learning environment. The expectations of students and faculty include access to librarians and to full text journal articles, books, and reference tools available from computer desktops anytime, anyplace.

MAIN FOCUS: THE DESKTOP LIBRARY: CRITICAL ELEMENT IN TODAY'S DISTANCE LEARNING

The term distance learning as employed here follows the scope and definition as found in the Association of College and Research Libraries' *Guidelines for Distance Learning Library Services* (ACRL, 2000). Distance learning refers to any program of instruction in which students and instructor are not simultaneously present in a single on-ground classroom on the campus of a college or university. It also applies even when students and the instructor are present together in a classroom, if that classroom is located at a learning center or on a branch campus or at any other facility which is geographically removed from the main campus, and which exists expressly to bring higher education to students away from the main campus. The *Guidelines for Distance Learning Library Services* make clear that students engaged with distance learning communities are fundamentally entitled to library services and resources equivalent to those provided to students and faculty at traditional campuses. Electronic library services are increasingly available to online students and offer the full range of resources from hard copies of books to full text copies of articles. Distance learning students need to have communication access to librarians fluent in electronic information delivery, who are informed about resources local to the students learning environment, and who can provide specialized assistance with discipline-specific databases.

Online programs exist at the associates and bachelors degree levels, but many are characterized by and known for their often extensive graduate programs at the masters and doctoral levels. Others are increasingly well-regarded for their online workplace certification and licensure programs. All of the leading virtual universities gained recognition within the broader higher learning community through the attainment of regional accreditation. Online graduate education increasingly has become mainstream and subject to less of the criticism earlier voiced by more traditional universities (Garten, 2001).

Students and faculty associated with these higher learning providers expect that most learning resources they require will be provided online and in full-text format. Prior to the development of the fully articulated virtual library, most students studying in remote locations simply accepted the reality that they would likely need to travel to a nearby academic or public library to fulfill their course-related information needs (Barnard, 1999). Today, students and the faculty who teach them believe that online course assignments, even those requiring more in-depth research on the graduate level, can be met more efficiently via full-text databases and document delivery services offered by virtual universities or traditional universities having major distance learning programs.

A fundamental shift in the minds of many graduate students (particularly professional working adults) relative to the importance of the library in their academic and workplace credentialing (Garten, 2001) emphasizes desktop access to resources and services. Most librarians embrace the importance of a well-conceived and robust virtual library to quality support of distance learning. These same librarians are cognizant of the expectations students hold relative to what a library should be and how it should serve them in the online learning environment.

An important element in preparing the distance learner for using a virtual library involves providing online videos and podcasts describing research strategies and guides to specific databases or tools. Student researchers may not even be aware of their lack of research skills (Neely, 2002). Adult learners and digital natives believe that their online skills are more than sufficient. They know how to collect news, order online, and use their favorite search engine. They ask, "What more do I need to know?" Less aware of the academic world of scholarly journals, research methods, educational repositories, deep-web resources and electronic databases, the uninitiated need assistance in learning about peer-reviewed articles, literature reviews, electronic databases, and Boolean logic.

Good practice for the establishment of a virtual library today always assumes that virtually extended information services will:

- Provide content and imposes a structure to present that content to patrons.
- Offer search capabilities of databases and catalogs with integrated searching across databases
- Grant access to full-text documents and electronic books.
- Provide tutorials for database use and information literacy.

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