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Diving into distance learning librarianship

Tips and advice for new and seasoned professionals

Distance education is not new. The ACRL Distance Learning Section was formed more than 30 years ago, for example, but online learning is now growing rapidly. From 2002 to 2008, undergraduates enrolled in at least one distance education course rose from 8% to 20%.[1] In turn, more librarians are connecting with online students and faculty, often without truly knowing where to start in a strategic, meaningful way. This article, based on our panel presentation at the 2012 ALA Annual Conference, contains tips and advice for new distance learning librarians, presented in four categories: Create a relay team, Be brave and dive in!, Plunge into the deep, and Swim with the current. These tips can also serve as a good refresher for seasoned distance learning librarians.

Create a relay team

When first starting as a distance education librarian, one of the first things to do is stop and listen. Listen to what is going on at your institution, in your library, and with your peers. Arming yourself with lots of research is an excellent way to listen. Learn from others' mistakes and what others did successfully. Become very familiar with the ACRL Standards for Distance Learning Library Services.[2] When you are asked for your professional opinion on distance education, you will be well equipped by knowing what is done and expected elsewhere.

Upon listening to what is happening with your peers, you can focus on what is going on at your college or university. What are the goals and plans for distance education? How can your library assist in these plans? Meeting with your library's administration at the very beginning will ensure everyone is on the same page. Once this step is completed, see if you can put all of these pieces together and create an environmental scan so you are acquainted with internal and external factors, stakeholders, strategic plans, etc. The more you know before you dive in, the better off you will be.

After listening, building relationships will be crucial. Meet with stakeholders to start creating your relay team; these will vary by institution. They might be university administration, library administration, centers for teaching and learning, centers for distance education, program coordinators, and/or course developers. Meet with people outside the library so they can begin placing a name and face with their new advocate. Never underestimate the power of casual conversations with people across campus. Conversations inside the library are also imperative, as you never know what vitally important silos of information others might have. Conversing

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