# Fostering Library as a Place for Distance Students: Best Practices From Two Universities

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## Abstract:

The concept of library as a place is now in action in many academic libraries: from physical library spaces to Web presences. In the constantly growing market of online and distance learning, however, libraries must foster library as a place for students who may never set foot in the physical building. This article provides a profile of two universities serving two very different bodies of distance students as well as the challenges associated with these populations. These libraries work to provide services to distance students that cultivate the library as a place to go for learning, research, and support by focusing on six categories: access, environment, resources, instruction, availability at the point of need, and "being real." Tangible examples and best practices are provided throughout. This article is based on a presentation given at the 15th National Conference of the Association of College and Research Libraries in Philadelphia in March 2011.

**Keywords:** distance learning | distance students | online learning | distance education | virtual reference | librarianship

## Article:

### INTRODUCTION

As the number of higher education institutions entering the online and distance education marketplace continually increases, more libraries are looking for ways to best serve distance students. Libraries must adjust their resources and services to adequately serve these growing populations. Students in these classes and programs need the library just as much as those on campus, even if they never set foot in the physical building. Establishing an online presence that

distance students can recognize as "their library" is at the root of providing the equal services and resources mandated by the Association for College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Standards for Distance Learning Library Services (Association, 2008). Working toward fostering library as a place for distance students is essential.

This article focuses on two distinctly different institutions: Norwich University and The University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG). The number of distance students at both institutions is nearly equal, but UNCG has a much larger overall student body and is part of a larger university system. Further, the classification of students at each school reaches to both ends of the spectrum. Challenges libraries face providing services to distance students are described. Obstacles surrounding communication, geography, technology, and resources require adjustments to the types of services and resources offered regardless of institution type. By concentrating strategic planning in access, environment, resources, instruction, availability at the point of need, and "being real," each of these institutions fosters library as a place for their distance students.

## INSTITUTION BACKGROUNDS

Norwich University (NU) is a small, private military university located in Northfield, Vermont. The distance student population consists entirely of the online School of Graduate and Continuing Studies (SGCS), which offers nine master's degrees, a bachelor's completion degree, and one certificate. With roughly 1200 students currently enrolled, online students comprise about one-half of Norwich's total student population. SGCS operates in 11-week quarters with students completing degrees in 18 months. The degrees are diverse and include a Master of Business Administration, Diplomacy, Military History, and Nursing, among others. The Distance Learning Librarian, a position created in 2005, serves as liaison to the entire school. Co-author, Heidi Steiner, assumed the post in August 2009.

SGCS students come from around the globe, with many deployed overseas. Some students do not have reliable Internet connectivity, whether because they live in rural United States, developing countries, or on a submarine. The student profile varies considerably, including recent college graduates, working businesspeople, army personnel, and retirees. For the adult learners, the concept of an online library is often extremely foreign. Despite being entirely online, SGCS is committed to making their students feel a part of Norwich. As part of orientation students learn about Norwich's rich history. The learning management system is referred to as "campus," and programs are all capped by a one-week on-campus Residency. The library is well-supported by SGCS, which provides funding for two librarian positions as well as resources and services.

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) is a mid-size, state-funded public institution, with more than 17,500 students in 2010–2011, offering undergraduate- and graduate-level programs. There are less than 1000 students enrolled in completely online degree programs

but many others, such as students in the graduate programs of Nursing and Library Studies, do take some distance classes or a blend of distance studies with on-campus components like exams or labs. With decentralized online degree programs across campus, many academic departments offer some online classes or degree completion programs online. The first five-year plan for distance learning was created in 2003 and e-learning continues to grow, with a 118% increase in the 2010–2011 academic year. The same year, the Provost Online Support Committee was created to research and report potential plans for growth, revenue, and support for increased distance and online programs, also indicating that all new faculty would be required to teach an online class.

Demographics vary depending on the program. Some undergraduates, including on-campus students, take an online course or two, but many distance students are working adult students who need flexible offerings. Some of UNCG's students face similar challenges to their NU counterparts—serving in the military, studying abroad, or living in rural areas. In summer of 2008, the co-author, Beth Filar Williams, joined the UNCG Libraries as the Coordinator of Library Services for Distance Learning. Co-authors Filar-Williams and Steiner share the common goal of cultivating effective library support of distance students.

## CHALLENGES

Rooted in communication, geography, technology, and resources, the challenges libraries confront in serving distance students are often different from those faced by their on-campus counterparts. Awareness of these challenges is imperative to fostering library as a place for distance students as they inform and evaluate current and future services and resources.

Communication is often labor intensive in the virtual environment. Conducting a reference interview, diagnosing technical problems, and answering questions over chat or e-mail take longer than they typically do in-person. Without visual cues, it can be difficult to make a personal connection with students and to determine whether they are receiving the information they need. Virtual communication can be exhausting for both parties.

Geography may also be problematic, especially when students are globally dispersed and in varying time zones. Trying to build a synchronous schedule of reference and instructional services that works for everyone is impossible. Building an asynchronous array of instructional materials is laborious and no matter how valiant the effort, one can never predict all needs.

Technology is ominous, as nearly all students are likely to have technical issues at some point. With communication difficulties and geographical barriers already in play, it is even harder to diagnose issues involving firewalls, software, hardware, browser compatibility, missing scripts, or basic user error. Librarians, tech savvy or not, may lack the necessary knowledge and ability to help students to the fullest.

Resources represent a slowly closing divide with the presence of full-text databases, e-books, and electronic reference collections. However, electronic journals and e-books cannot always fill the void when students are working on a topic better served by print resources. Interlibrary loan for books is difficult to facilitate and virtual collections will always be stronger in some areas than others. While in some instances books can be shipped to students or obtained at a local library, these solutions are not always possible due to location, cost, or time.

Despite these challenges, patrons have high expectations. Further, professional standards require services for distance students equal those of their on-campus counterparts. The ACRL Standards for Distance Learning Library Services state: "[l]ibrary services offered to the distance learning community must be designed to meet a wide range of informational, instructional, and user needs, and should provide some form of direct user access to library personnel" (Association, 2008).

## FOSTERING LIBRARY AS A PLACE

Even though NU and UNCG are very different universities with their own unique distance student populations, they face similar challenges. Regardless of the vastly different sizes of the institutions, both libraries work tirelessly to fulfill the *ACRL Standards for Distance Learning Library Services* and to cultivate the library as a place.

## ACCESS

Without access to library resources and services, all other efforts are for naught. Both NU and UNCG employ EZProxy to facilitate remote access to subscription-based resources. At NU, the setup is particularly unique. Within each classroom of Angel, the learning management system is a Library Tab. When students click on the Tab, Ticket Authentication occurs, passing them through EZProxy to the library website. This method provides single login access to the entire "campus" for online students. At UNCG, the setup is more typical, and students simply login to the campus network to access library resources.

## ENVIRONMENT

Providing an online environment designed specifically for distance students is a huge piece of fostering library as a place. NU features a customized library website, which opens upon clicking the Library Tab. The menu offers program-specific landing pages designed to be one-stop-shops. Each page has a catalog search box, options for getting help, interlibrary loan information, and customized lists of databases, research guides, and Web resources specific to each program. The site is Drupal-based, facilitating easy page customization and maintenance.

UNCG hosts a Distance Education Services page off the library's homepage. The goal is to answer key questions distance students often have, provide information, and offer resources such as tutorials, research help, troubleshooting tips, and key campus links. This Web page also

provides support for faculty, offering them ideas on how the library can help them better reach their distance students.

## RESOURCES

Shifting to electronic resources allows all students access, regardless of geographic location. For distance students specifically, e-resources facilitate instant access. NU and UNCG both experienced considerable growth in e-resources over the past 10 years. UNCG currently offers 370 databases and 31,000 full-text e-journals, providing 88% of its journals electronically. For a small library, NU boasts 110 databases and 50,000 full-text e-journals, strongly supported financially by SGCS. NU librarians constantly look out for relevant databases and regularly evaluate current subscriptions to ensure funding is maximized.

E-books proved a focal point at both libraries recently. In February 2011, NU launched Ebook Library (EBL). Using the short-term loan model, students can preview more than 120,000 e-books for five minutes and initiate weeklong rentals. EBL allows for controlled printing as well as downloads for offline reading. EBL rounds out NU's e-book availability, which also includes ebrary's Academic Complete and niche collections through Knovel and CRCnetBASE. Although most e-books are included in the library catalog, UNCG Libraries maintain a separate e-book Web page with a custom e-book search box, browsable list of subscription-based and free e-books vendors, and troubleshooting information on using e-books. As of summer 2011, UNCG subscribed to more than three dozen e-books packages and offered more than 330,000 e-books.

Another growing area for UNCG is the addition of streaming film and digital video databases. The libraries maintain a multimedia resources Web page and reach out to distance faculty to educate them about how to incorporate these resources into classes. With a recent subscription to Swank's Digital Campus, the Libraries now offer popular films as a streaming resource. Faculty embed the films within a course in the campus content management system (CMS) and are able to build lessons around the films, creating a more interactive asynchronous experience.

Despite the ever-increasing catalog of e-resources, sometimes the resources are not enough. At both NU and UNCG, items from the print collection can be requested and sent anywhere. NU pays for outgoing shipping, while UNCG also covers a prepaid return label. Both offer interlibrary loan for articles only. The inability to support interlibrary loan of books is due to staffing and funding limitations and short ILL lending times, although on occasion with a unique item and gracious ILL lender, UNCG makes exceptions to the rule. In fall 2010, NU streamlined article interlibrary loan and document delivery with the implementation of ILLiad, which UNCG also utilizes. Going a step beyond, UNCG offers reciprocal borrowing agreements throughout the state.

## INSTRUCTION

Instructing students asynchronously or synchronously is a challenge, but providing a combination of the two is an ideal approach. Both NU and UNCG offer a variety of asynchronous instructional options through research and course guides as well as HMTL and video tutorials. UNCG has more than 300 subject, course-specific, and general topic LibGuides (http://uncg.libguides.com/). In addition, there are more than 40 tutorials from general "how-to" themes such as "how to find the full text of a book" or "how to renew my items" as well as subject-specific ones like "finding primary sources in the social sciences" or "finding court cases for nursing students."

A favorite asynchronous instruction venue at NU is the library section of new online student orientation: an introduction to library services and resources through an eight-part, chaptered video tutorial (an HTML alternative is also available) and research exercises specific to each program. The orientation gets students into the library and acclimated with popular resources for their program. In fall 2010, UNCG Libraries released the database driven, 10 module tutorial called *Path: Lighting your way from research to writing* (http://library.uncg.edu/tutorials/) containing screencasts, video tutorials, interactive exercises and quizzes reaching more than 30,000 distinct visits the first semester. Each module introduces a concept with learning objectives and a video clip, which weaves a narrative storyline using student actors. Anyone can take Path's pre- and postassessments to determine which modules to complete, but only UNCG students can login to save their progress and access the e-mail function to send module completion status to an instructor.

For synchronous options, librarians at both institutions have their own Elluminate Live! virtual rooms and take advantage of its recording capabilities so students may watch at their convenience. UNCG Libraries offer online workshops, such as *Introduction to Creative Commons* and *Endnote Web Basics*, as well as general and discipline specific library orientations. NU holds a series of "Live Library Sessions" each quarter. These are voluntary, but do require preregistration through EventBrite (www.eventbrite.com), which is used to manage sessions, set up registration pages, and e-mail attendees. Starting in late 2011, "Live Library Sessions" will be required by two of SGCS's most research intensive programs. - Several UNCG librarians teach online sessions for various courses such as business, library and information studies, and education, while some embed in the Blackboard courses to assist students asynchronously through threaded discussions or by posting announcements. UNCG's business librarian often offers virtual office hours from his home on weekends, providing students opportunities at their time of need. For the few physically off-campus classes, such as classes in the nursing program, the nursing liaison librarian drives to an off-campus location to teach an instruction session or offer consultations.

## AVAILABILITY AT THE POINT OF NEED

Just in time teaching (JiTT) is the concept of offering instruction and assessing it at the time or point of need, as students learn concepts when they need it (Acronym Finder, 2011). This

method is easier to apply in synchronous classes than it is when working with distance students in asynchronously. Utilizing methods that reach students when they need help is critical to supporting distance students effectively and fostering library as a place.

Thoughtfully placed IM chat widgets are a best practice at both NU and UNCG, who each use the "by-librarians-for-librarians" chat service LibraryH3lp (http://libraryh3lp.blogspot.com/). In Angel, NU's chat widgets are linked in places students are most likely to have questions, like their Assignment List. Beyond Angel, there is a widget on each program's library homepage and all EBSCO databases. UNCG Libraries also places their Ask Us! chat widget on every possible page, including embedding the widget into most key database vendor pages so students can get help at their point of need.

NU and UNCG both put research guides and video tutorials at the point of need. The Get Help box on each NU program's library homepage is fed appropriate tutorials and guides, database tutorials are listed with the database link, and tutorials are linked in some Angel classrooms to support particularly troublesome assignments. UNCG lists all tutorials on the Research Tutorials web page and embeds in other locations such as course guides. To better reach students at their point of need, UNCG Libraries recently created a "Not Finding it" dropdown widget placed on various library web pages. Tagging and placing each in the new tutorials database and building associations with relevant library webpage URLs, the widget dynamically generates and displays relevant tutorials as well as other library web pages and our Ask Us Chat in a down drop box. UNCG library programmers are designing ways to capture clicks and usage of various pages and tutorials, and are implementing a star rating through the widget to push more relevant, patron-driven items to the top of the list.

Another unique app built by UNCG Libraries is a customized Web portal of resources accessible to authenticated students through the Library Resources Tab within the campus Blackboard CMS or on their mobile devices. The portal pushes resources like the chat widget, tutorials, and databases according to the student's major as well as course-specific resources. Since almost all courses are in Blackboard, having resources pushed into students' academic environment allows true point–of-need placement. With mobile access growing, allowing students direct and easy access to the app through their mobile devices creates a wider reaching method for supporting distance students (Kellam, Cox, and Winkler, 2009).

**BEING REAL**

In an online environment, creating personal connections and being real to students creates community. Striving to find methods for being real to those at a distance, both universities engage in methods to personalize themselves and their library. An excellent overall best practice, especially in writing, is making a contentious effort to come across as a real person. Keying in on students' emotional side is an excellent approach to interacting with distance students. People are guided by emotions and feelings rather than just facts. Using a welcoming, positive tone,

especially online when "being real" is most difficult, will achieve far better relations than just simply stating factual information. Getting in the habit of treating virtual students just as you would one standing before you is an essential first step. The Distance Learning Librarian at NU often looks for ways to personify being real and began offering synchronous, appointment-based Virtual Research Consultations (VRCs) in fall 2010. VRCs are intended for more complicated research questions or those who need more visuals and live contact. The Librarian uses a public Tungle.me calendar ([www.tungle.me](www.tungle.me)) synced with her Outlook calendar for scheduling and holds the appointments in an Elluminate vRoom, which is free for a moderator and up to two other participants. Another initiative at NU to promote being real is the use of screen sharing software during chat reference interactions, namely the service called join.me ([http://join.me](http://join.me)).

With marketing in mind, UNCG Libraries created a podcast blog in 2008 called Irma Minerva's Audio Magazine, a multimedia, online newsletter highlighting library events like game night, resources or how-to's, services information, and interviews with various people in an attempt to make the library seem more real ([http://iminervapodcast.blogspot.com/](http://iminervapodcast.blogspot.com/)). In 2010, to showcase the library as real, with approachable people, here to help, the *Ask Us @ UNCG* video was released ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lNsJLioWj-U](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lNsJLioWj-U)).This video brings a face to the library and is also informative. Many personal video messages from librarians greeting students are found on the library's YouTube channel and embedded in course guides and librarian web pages. Finding ways to go the distance to personalize the online experience helps create a better relationship with students. In personalized marketing, there is also something to be said for branding. This can be as simple as consistent colors and fonts or more ambitious like Irma Minerva at UNCG Libraries, who, besides podcasting, also welcomes students to tutorials, answers chats, and has her own Facebook page and YouTube channel. Irma creates a genuine experience for virtual students.

A final way that NU takes advantage of the chance to be real is librarian presence in Angel. A librarian account is enrolled in every course as a Course Mentor and the Angel mail utility can be used for marketing. Marketing messages lead to students writing to ask both simple and extensive research questions. In addition to visibility on the each course's roster, this lets students see that librarians are available to them right in their classroom. Maintaining this visibility and personality is low maintenance (unlike typical embedding) and high impact.

**CONCLUSION**

By focusing on the needs of students at distance and maximizing options in the six categories discussed, NU and UNCG are fostering library as a place for distance students. The authors believe that readers who explore the categories presented will find among them some ideas that will help them implement ways to effectively foster at their own institutions the "library as a place" for their online students.

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