

Clearing a Pathway to Success: Online Graduate Students and Promoting Library Resources

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Abstract:

Distance education is a trend in American higher education that is growing rapidly. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, as of fall 2014, almost 6 million higher education students are enrolled in any distance education course, including almost 1 million graduate students. The National Center for Education Statistics also shows that about 33 percent of graduate students in the United States are involved with online courses and distance education in some form, with 25 percent of graduate students enrolled in fully online programs.¹ Though there are now more distance graduate students in higher education, there has long been a trend of distance students feeling isolated from campus. Dropout rates are higher in distance education courses, and students feel isolated due to a lack of physical contact with instructors.²

Keywords: distance education | graduate students | academic libraries | library resources | digital communication

Chapter:

*****Note: Full text of document below.**



CHAPTER 2

CLEARING A PATHWAY TO SUCCESS

Online Graduate Students and Promoting Library Resources

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Introduction

Distance education is a trend in American higher education that is growing rapidly. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, as of fall 2014, almost 6 million higher education students are enrolled in any distance education course, including almost 1 million graduate students. The National Center for Education Statistics also shows that about 33 percent of graduate students in the United States are involved with online courses and distance education in some form, with 25 percent of graduate students enrolled in fully online programs.¹ Though there are now more distance graduate students in higher education, there has long been a trend of distance students feeling isolated from campus. Dropout rates are higher in distance education courses, and students feel isolated due to a lack of physical contact with instructors.²

Graduate students come with their own issues in terms of completing online programs. Graduate students need a higher level of research support than undergraduates, due to dissertations and publishing. Studies show that graduate students fantasize that online programs and dissertations would be better if they had access to a physical campus, and they feel isolated due to the imagined experience that they are missing while taking courses online.³

Are librarians doing enough to battle these feelings of isolation with online graduate students? Distance and graduate students do not always think of libraries and librarians as a solution to their isolation and providers of online services. Though libraries can be ignored within distance education programs, it's important for graduate student research, writing, and teaching for libraries to collaborate and communicate across campus to support services and resources for distance students.⁴

Role of the Library

To better reach out to distance and online students, many higher education universities and college libraries are hiring distance education or online librarians. Distance students' satisfaction and feelings of isolation are heavily dependent on the quality of the interactions and communication the instructor provides in the course.⁵ We can assume that if distance students want more interaction and communication from online instructors, they want the same from their librarians to more effectively use online resources and conduct research.

Though there are many challenges with working with online graduate students, the University of North Carolina Greensboro (UNCG) University Libraries and Appalachian State University (ASU) Libraries have created programs and services to reach out and connect to online and distance graduate students:

- teaching online synchronous and asynchronous sessions
- creating online videos, tutorials, and modules for research and scholarship assistance
- consultations and webinars (one-on-one or group) through synchronous learning management systems such as Zoom, Google Hangouts, and WebEx
- developing online tutorials and LibGuides
- embedding in AsU Learn (Appalachian online learning management system) and Canvas (UNCG online learning management system)
- collaborating across campus with instructional technologists, faculty, and distance education departments

Many libraries provide standard services to virtual graduate students, such as interlibrary loan and book delivery to distance students. But libraries need to work harder to create set virtual spaces for graduate students, as well as reaching out to them through an online environment. This chapter will cover specific strategies and web tools that UNCG's Online Learning Librarian and ASU's Non-traditional Librarian use in library programs and services to assist with the research and work of distance graduate students.

UNCG

The University at North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) is one of the seventeen campuses in the University of North Carolina system. Located in Greensboro, UNCG currently enrolls over 19,000 students, with approximately 3,600 graduate students. UNCG “offers doctoral degrees in 26 areas of study, 55 Master’s degrees, 2 specialists in education degrees, and more than 50 graduate certificate programs.”⁶

Graduate programs at UNCG are offered face-to-face, online, and hybrid. Some graduate programs are run through UNCG Online, which partners with academic units to help build and design online programs. Not all online programs have to run through UNCG Online, but currently UNCG Online has built and supports eleven master’s degrees and fourteen graduate certificates, an EdS specialist degree, and an EdD degree in kinesiology.⁷

The UNCG University Libraries provide online support to all online programs, whether they are fully online, hybrid (with a mix of both fully online and in-class students), or simply be a traditional program which has some online components. The UNCG Online Learning Librarian coordinates online library services to all online students through instruction online tutorial creation and management, collaboration with other departments, and more. The Online Learning Librarian works within the Research, Outreach, and Instruction (ROI) department, which manages the library academic liaisons, instruction, research, outreach, and reference services.⁸

Appalachian State University (ASU)

Appalachian State University (ASU) is one of the seventeen campuses in the University of North Carolina system. Located in Boone, North Carolina, ASU currently enrolls 18,811 students; approximately 1,794 are graduate students.⁹ The Cratis D. Williams School of Graduate Studies offers over sixty graduate degrees and certificate programs. Of the graduate degrees and certificates offered, only seventeen are offered completely online, whereas the rest are classified as on-campus or hybrid.¹⁰

The Office of Distance Education offers and supports sixteen of the graduate programs. At ASU, many of the department-specific online courses and classified distance education courses are separate, as not all online degrees and certificates are offered through the Office of Distance Education. Several on-campus departments offer online and hybrid courses for their on-campus students. Individual departments that offer online options are not required to classify their courses as distance education, and as a result, there is overlap with

“online” campus students and online distance education students. The services and resources provided at ASU’s Belk Library and Information Commons is suited to accommodate all populations.

The Belk Library and Information Commons provides full-time online support and resources for all online graduate students regardless of their distance education or on-campus classifications. Out of the 123 faculty librarians, professional staff and student workers in service, there is one designated liaison, the Non-traditional Student Librarian, for the Office of Distance Education. However, in the culture at the Belk Library and Information Commons, everyone serves all students, so online graduate students can expect help from numerous sources, specifically the liaison librarians assigned to the various academic departments. As the liaison to nontraditional students, the current librarian acknowledged the need to expand online resources and services to accommodate the growing online, on-campus, and hybrid population.

Accessing Students

When librarians are contacting graduate students, email is crucial and challenging. To successfully reach out to graduate students using email, it’s important to collaborate and form close relationships with faculty, staff, and academic departments. At ASU, direct email is not possible; librarians must rely on their relationships with people within the departments who have access to student emails to help get the word out about library programming. Librarians at ASU work under a liaison model. The Non-traditional Student Librarian’s liaison areas are the Office of Distance Education, Office of Transfer Services, and the Student Veteran Resource Center. While applying the same process and theory as with academic departments, supporting the needs of support services departments is very different and has its own unique challenges. The Non-traditional Student Librarian serves on many university committees, such as the Transfer Student Team and the Distance Education Task Force. This librarian also provides reference hours at the Student Veteran Resource Center. These opportunities provide different ways to meet and work with students and the staff members who support them directly. One of the positive benefits is that the members of the committees will reach out through their email and social media lists to alert students about upcoming online workshops and events or about requesting one-on-one research help. Additional means of reaching out to online graduate students include Facebook, Twitter, university support Google Group email lists, the university calendar, and AppSync. AppSync is a student-based initiative that connects individuals to over 450 student clubs, organizations, and programs on campus.¹¹ The system resembles Facebook in

the ease of viewing and posting messages and provides separate portals, pages, events, and a university calendar.

The UNCG University Libraries also work through a liaison model, meaning that liaison librarians work closely with UNCG academic programs.¹² Many liaisons other than the Online Learning Librarian work with online graduate programs and courses; therefore, it is key for the Online Learning Librarian to maintain relationships with all librarians and online instructors. Beyond working effectively with librarians and teachers, it's important for the Online Learning Librarian to work closely with university administration and staff members. Some examples include registrar's offices, assessment departments, the instructional technologist, and information technology. Librarians should strive to work outside of the library to get lists of names, send out emails and surveys, and promote programs.

Surveys can be crucial tools for libraries in determining the needs of online graduate students, and when creating and executing a survey, it's important to collaborate with other departments to administer and assess the results of the survey. In fall 2017, UNCG University Libraries sent out a survey through email about online library services and resources to all UNCG students taking an online course and distance students. This survey was a collaboration between many different librarians and departments, including the registrar's office, academic units, and assessment offices. Of the 22 percent of graduate students who responded, many recommended "better advertising" of online resources, but also stated they learned more about online library services by taking the survey.¹³ Since the survey data exposes that online graduate students feel isolated from the library and want more promotion of services, the Online Learning Librarian can now better work across campus with other librarians, faculty, and administration to provide library outreach.

Connecting in Virtual Space

Other means of working with online graduate students include utilizing virtual space to conduct meetings, consultation, and classes through a virtual synchronous learning management system (SLMS). SLMS also comes with challenges. Many graduate students do not come into programs with experience in technology, especially attending and conducting virtual meetings. Librarians are busy and often not equipped to lead trainings on these different tools. The best way for librarians to meet these challenges is knowing the university SLMS, as well as free alternatives to use with students.

Technology specifications vary by university; therefore, in this study we looked at a small comparison of both free and costly systems. Table 2.1 is a col-

lection of the popular web conferencing systems that range from free and open-source to expensive and designed for corporations and academic institutions. The cost will vary depending on the licensing package required. Table 2.1 displays the cost per month for one license, so it is not indicative of the actual cost of an institutional subscription. Additionally, based on a quick search of the system's marketing website, table 2.1 displays a small sample of notable institutions that use the system. All displayed systems provide the very basic services such as fixed number of attendees in each virtual room, webcams, and chat options. The more expensive the system, the more features are offered, such as preregistration with contact information; automated, edited follow-up emails to include links to evaluations and surveys; and more recording options.

Table 2.1

Web Conferencing Systems Review

Brand	Features	Cost (varies)	Contact	Clients
Adobe Connect	Audio/video conferencing, analytics, breakout rooms, chat, recording, screen sharing, whiteboard	\$130 a month	http://www.adobe.com/products/adobeconnect.html	University of Arizona University of Maine System Penn State
GoToWebinar	Audio/video conferencing, analytics, automatic emails, chat, polls, recording	\$89 a month	https://www.gotomeeting.com/webinar/pricing	Valencia College Houston Community College
Google Hangouts	Audio/video conferencing, chat	Free	https://hangouts.google.com/	Open to all
Skype	Audio/video conferencing	Free	https://www.skype.com/en/	Open to all
Webex	Audio/video conferencing, recording, screen sharing, whiteboard	\$39 per month	https://www.webex.com/pricing/index.html	UNCG Wake Forest University

Brand	Features	Cost (varies)	Contact	Clients
Zoom	Audio/video conferencing, analytics, automatic emails, chat, polls, recording	Free to \$19.99 a month	https://zoom.us/pricing	Appalachian State University Texas A & M University New York Institute of Technology

Before purchasing, conduct a needs assessment to determine what type of system would best suit individual qualifications. When reviewing systems at ASU, the following features were identified for use: twenty-four-hour tech support, a strong connection (areas in western North Carolina range from high-speed to dial-up to no available internet access), recording and archival options, automated follow-up emails for surveys and evaluations, preregistration, breakout rooms, chat options, and webcams. Once the features were determined, we contacted three companies and requested free trials for further evaluation. We shared access with a small sample of faculty and staff to request their feedback on the usability and ease of each system. After a year, our system was chosen, and we began a series of training opportunities for all faculty, students, and staff.

If budgets are an issue, consider purchasing a single subscription for the department. A single subscription simply means one individual is the administrator and can create webinars and online research consultations. At ASU, the Non-traditional Librarian offered webinars and research consultations using one subscription of GoToMeeting for over a year until the institution purchased educational licenses for all faculty, staff, and students. The year subscription provided ample data and analytics that were useful for the committee who later purchased the institutional web conferencing systems and aided in justifying the cost from the yearly library budget.

Webinars

Webinars are a great tool for connecting to online and distance graduate students. Web conferencing tools have been available for faculty, staff, and students for over ten years at ASU. The Zoom web conferencing system is primarily used for virtual meetings, professional development workshops, and classrooms, and all faculty, staff, and students have access to it through assigned personal accounts. Zoom also has the capability to integrate seamlessly within ASU's official learning man-

agement system, AsULearn. UNCG Information Technology Services (ITS) chose the web conferencing program Webex to replace Blackboard Collaborate in spring 2016. Webex has two centers: Training Center, which is used more by instructors for teaching, and Meeting Center, which is used more for meetings and consultations. Webex works within the UNCG LMS Canvas, and all students at UNCG have access to use Webex Meeting Center as virtual meeting space, as well as Google Hangouts (UNCG is a Google for Education school).¹⁴

The UNCG Online Learning Librarian created two campus-wide Webex webinar series in fall 2017. The first series, “Research and Applications,” was hosted by UNCG librarians for UNCG instructors, staff, and students. These webinars are about library resources and services (open education resources, databases, and citation management). This series reprised one performed by the Distance Learning Librarian five years prior. The second series was a collaboration with the UNCG University Teaching and Learning Center (UTLC) on “Online Learning and Innovation” for UNCG faculty and instructors (including teaching assistants). It is the first campus-wide webinar initiative at UNCG and is hosted by UNCG Instructional Technology Consultants (ITCs), librarians, and instructors. Graduate students could attend both webinar series, since many graduate students (face-to-face and online) are also classified as instructors, graduate assistants, and teaching assistants at UNCG. In both webinar series, the sessions are thirty minutes long, participants interact with the hosts, and the session is recorded. These series were advertised through various campus newsletters, email campaigns, and websites. Recordings are hosted through the library and UTLC YouTube channels. The most popular topic in the UNCG University Libraries “Research and Applications” series was “Zotero: Citation Management.” The “Online Learning and Innovation” series had higher attendance, with “Creating Effective Online Discussions” the most popular topic of the series. A follow-up survey was sent to all webinar participants, with the responses indicating satisfaction with all the webinars. The survey also showed that participants found out about the two series in a variety of ways, such as through emails and Listservs, as well as on the UNCG workshop webpage.¹⁵

Based on this data, both webinar series are useful when promoting resources to UNCG online graduate students, but the series that was a collaboration between the UTLC and UNCG University Libraries was better attended. This shows that moving forward, librarians should collaborate across campus and beyond to better advertise and provide library resources to online graduate students. Learning from the veteran example of ASU’s Non-traditional Student Librarian, UNCG Libraries can work with the graduate school, writing center, transfer students, veterans, and more to create and advertise different webinar series. This could lead the way to webinar series geared toward online and distance graduate students research needs.

In 2015, the Non-traditional Student Librarian created and implemented a series of online webinars focused on research strategies and awareness of services and resources offered by the library. Offered at the beginning and midway through each semester, the webinars were available to all online and on-campus faculty, students, and staff during business hours as well as some nights and weekends. The goal behind offering a variety of times was to reach distance education students who are not typically available during regular business hours. Recorded and archived on the Belk Library and Information Commons site and YouTube Channel, the webinars are available to all who have internet access.¹⁶

There were several developments behind the creation of the series. The most important was the Non-traditional Student Librarian's desire to provide an orientation for incoming online distance education students. In previous years, the former Distance Education Librarian was invited to participate in orientations offered by the Office of Distance Education. In 2013, the Office of Distance Education began a restructuring process, and invitations to participate in orientations dwindled or were not offered. A solution to this issue was to create a series of library-based webinars to reach out to the students directly and to be offered at multiple times (and recorded and archived) for new students entering the program. With guidance and assistance from program directors at the Office of Distance Education, the series was developed and marketed across campus. The series included a built-in evaluation that was sent to all who registered. The evaluation asked for requests of topics for future seminars as well as requests for subject-specific webinars for online graduate students. An analysis of the evaluations focused on the responses from those attendees who self-identified as online graduate students. As a result, popular webinars such as "Ebooks Training," "Introduction to Mango Language Learning Database," "How to Request Resources through Interlibrary Loan," "Finding Resources in Education Databases," and "Finding Sources in Google Scholar" were offered.

As part of the online webinar and orientation scripts, the Non-traditional Librarian displays a brief orientation on how online graduate students can access and use Zoom to create a recordable study space and sessions with fellow classmates. Using Zoom to provide virtual space for online graduate students was a surprising and unexpected development. As state earlier, online students often experience feelings of isolation. Such feelings can often contribute to low online student retention and graduate rates. Using Zoom provides a virtual space where ASU's online students can meet and collaborate on their own time. Zoom's capabilities of providing recordings, breakout rooms, audio and visual communication, and screen sharing act like a physical study space where students may work collaboratively. Zoom provides an accessible alternative, as all student enrolled have their own personal meeting room to share.

Reference and Consultations

Web conferencing tools do not only provide a platform for webinars and orientations; they can also help librarians provide more personalized and interactive service to online graduate students through chat and consultations. At ASU, using library chat with Zoom has changed the way reference is performed at the front desk. Chat boxes were placed on the library website, including within the databases, for easy reference access. While chats were monitored by ASU librarians during business hours, the chat feature continued to be available after hours, when the chats were monitored by librarians throughout the state, who volunteered through NCKnows.¹⁷ Although chats are extremely useful, they can limit the more intensive reference questions. For example, sometimes patrons have technical issues on their computers while accessing online library resources; Zoom allows ASU librarians to easily share a personal meeting room with the online patron, which opens the patron's computer for screen sharing. Then the issue or problem can be solved quickly because librarians can see the student's screen.

In addition to providing reference help in graduate students' time of need, librarians at ASU also offer one-on-one research consultations per request through the Research Advisory Program (RAP). RAPs are designed to help students plan a research strategy, find relevant materials, evaluate sources, and actively participate in the research process.¹⁸ Students request RAPs through an online form that requires a description of the project and the research question as well as the format in which the student can meet. Options for meetings include face-to-face, phone, web conferencing, and in the AETZone (a virtual online community created by the College of Education). UNCG virtual consultations with online graduate students have also found success meeting asynchronously through Google Docs. When creating the Google Doc, a librarian can create notes on search strategies, link to LibGuides and resources, and communicate and follow up with the student through the comments. The librarian can also make the student an editor of the Google Doc so that the student can add research topics and questions. Having these documents after the consultations can provide librarians information for assessment and improving outreach for consultations and services to specific departments. Graduate students need more time dedicated to their dissertations and advanced research needs; virtual web conferencing and online tools can provide librarians a method of providing better service and attention to online graduate students.

Instruction and Tutorials

To battle online graduate student isolation, it's important for librarians to teach and embed into their classes and research as much as possible. UNCG ROI librarians teach at the graduate level, depending on their liaison areas. In spring 2017, there were 277 instruction sessions recorded in UNCG's LibAnalytics (used to track library statistics). This data includes thirty-two sessions taught at the graduate level (or about 12%). Out of the thirty-two graduate sessions, seven were taught online (or about 22%). According to these analytics, three orientations were provided to online graduate students, two of these being to an online program. These numbers have increased since 2016.¹⁹ Like our UNCG colleagues, ASU librarians also teach at the graduate level based on their assigned liaison areas. Although our online program is considerably smaller than UNCG's, we did notice an increase in our online instruction requests from the previous year. Since spring 2017, 11 out of 414 undergraduate- and graduate-level instruction courses taught were online.

Though instruction in online graduate courses is on the rise, it's important for librarians to embed in courses to have a high impact and interaction with graduate students. There are no statistics available to see how many librarians at UNCG and ASU are embedded in courses, but all liaison librarians are involved within the LMS for their departments to promote resources, teach, and interact with students. At UNCG, library liaisons are embedded in Canvas, the UNCG learning management system (LMS), by request of the professors. Likewise, at ASU, librarians are assigned by request of professors within AsULearn. This means that certain departments and instructors like department librarians to be embedded in online courses, while others choose one-shot instruction. Though there are no statistics to show how many courses these librarians are embedded in, UNCG and ASU librarian liaisons are heavily integrated with online graduate courses and programs within the LMS.

The Online Learning Librarian has integrated UNCG librarians in a variety of ways within the UNCG online LMS, Canvas. In summer 2017, she worked with UNCG Information Technology Services (ITS) in order to create a role in Canvas for librarians. This enables librarians to become enrolled in a Canvas course to make announcements, participate in discussions, and create content to assist students with their research, while students do not mistake them for instructors of the course. The Online Learning Librarian also created trainings to help instruction librarians feel more comfortable with Canvas. The Online Learning Librarian not only meets one-on-one with librarians for Canvas tutorials, but also provides monthly group instructional technology trainings that cover Canvas, Google Apps, Webex (UNCG virtual meeting tool), online polling, interactive video, and other instructional technology training topics. These

trainings enable librarians at UNCG to be more seamlessly integrated with online courses, making online graduate students more likely to contact them for help with online resources and research.

Another way to become more embedded and involved in online graduate courses is creating and supporting online content for LibGuides, courses, and instruction. Coming from a variety of backgrounds, online graduate students need virtual tutorials on databases, research methods, gray literature, and literature reviews. The Online Learning Librarian created an inventory of online learning objects used by UNCG liaison librarians in their instruction, LibGuides, and Canvas. These digital objects were consolidated into one LibGuide for them to be more effectively monitored, used, and shared by liaisons.²⁰ With this inventory, the Online Learning Librarian can better determine what tutorials need to be created in the future, as well as the tutorials that are used the most by online students. Moving forward, UNCG librarians can now fill out a form when they create a digital object or find a new tutorial to use. This guide will help UNCG librarians better communicate about learning objects being made and used in their courses. The guide will also serve as an up-to-date inventory of learning objects. Going beyond course LibGuides is also useful to reach out to online graduate students; UNCG University Libraries have created and helped create LibGuides on distance education, streaming media, e-books, online programs, open education resources, copyright, instructional technology, and webinars across campus.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, it is critical for librarians to combat online graduate student isolation through different methods of interaction. The most important method is figuring out the most realistic and efficient means of accessing online student population. If email is not effective or not an option, create a liaison program with both academic and support services departments. Often a working relationship with individuals opens doors to communication. Additionally, online graduate students and departments use social media and email as means of communication within cohorts and with fellow students. Ask to join department groups and Listservs as opposed to creating library-specific accounts and email groups. Also, connect through virtual space by getting embedded in online courses; creating a series of webinars; using web conferencing systems for study space, consultations, and intensive research questions; and taking advantage of promoting LibGuides and how-to video tutorials. Online students do not have to be isolated. An online learning community is simple to create, and it benefits everyone.

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