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Do Off-Campus Students Still Use Document Delivery? : Current Trends

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Abstract

The tremendous increase in the availability of full text electronic resources has been particularly beneficial to distance education students who do not have easy access to print collections. However Western Michigan University (WMU) has been experiencing a decrease in requests for traditional document delivery of print based materials. This article presents a case study of WMU document delivery services for the distance education community. A survey was also conducted of libraries serving distance education programs to determine whether other institutions are also experiencing a decrease in usage of document delivery. Survey results show a more universal trend toward decreasing requests for delivery of print based articles; book requests are also decreasing but not at the same rate. The article concludes with some possible reasons for the decrease in usage of document delivery for distance education.

Introduction

In recent years, one of the ways libraries have attempted to serve the needs of distance education students is through licensing as much electronic information as possible. With this emphasis on licensing electronic journals and full text resources, is delivery of print based materials still a valuable service for off-campus students? This paper will attempt to investigate this question. Our interest in this topic developed from our experience with offering document delivery of print based materials to our off-campus students and faculty at Western Michigan University (WMU). For almost twenty years, WMU has provided document delivery services using a variety of delivery methods. We have sent out books as well as journal articles in response to requests from our distance education students and faculty.

Analyzing the statistics for this service over the last several years, we have noticed a decreasing number of overall requests for print based materials. We seek to determine if these trends are unique to our situation, our students and our programs, or whether these are broader trends being experienced by other libraries, which provide document delivery services to off-campus populations. This paper will present a case study of our experiences with document delivery at WMU. We also conducted a survey in fall 2007, to gather data concerning the usage patterns and related statistics at other institutions, which provide document delivery services to distance education communities. Finally, we present some possible reasons for these trends based upon our experiences, our survey respondents, and the related literature.

Literature Review

Providing library services to off-campus students can be challenging. However digital technology has removed many of the physical barriers and has allowed library services to reach students at a distance quickly and efficiently. Technological innovations have created an environment where students can take advantage of library resources through document delivery services without ever stepping inside the library doors. In addition, technology has also produced an environment where the availability of online resources has reduced the need for document delivery services. Liu and Yang (2004) state that for distance education students, the "principle of least effort" is in effect when locating information sources; students would rather choose items that are convenient rather than higher-quality resources that may require more time to receive.

Kelley and Orr (2003) reported similar results in their 2003 study, "the majority of students prefer the Web for ease of use, regardless of the quality of what they find" (p.185).

Essentially, the goal for many document delivery departments is to provide convenient services to off-campus patrons who cannot easily visit the library in person. As more libraries provide faster and efficient document delivery services, recent trends indicate the use of these services have decreased, regardless of how efficient services have become. At the University of Maryland University College, Kelly and Orr (2003) found that "students taking their courses online are more likely to use the library's databases and are using them more often than those students taking courses face-to-face" (p.186). Many off-campus students have become proficient users of the library's online resources. "This implies that academic libraries can meet their distance-education students' information needs by increasing online resources and services and making them readily available to their distance-education students through better and more accessible library information systems and more effective library instruction and promotion programs" (Liu and Yang, 2004, p.34). As students become proficient at locating information resources online either through the library's gateway or the World Wide Web, librarians have questioned whether they are locating the quality resources expected of their course of study. "Librarians need to continue to educate students about the advantages and limitations of the free Web and to work to increase the number of students using library databases to ensure a well-rounded information-literate student who is aware of and utilizes the best resources available, not just those that are quick and easy" (Kelly & Orr, 2003 p. 188).

These articles report that distance education students prefer what they can get with the least amount of effort and within the shortest possible time. So what are the implications for document delivery and does this continue to be a valuable service provided by the library? Even the fastest and most easy to use delivery systems are not likely to be able to deliver materials to students in less than a day. And considering that most libraries have greatly increased the number of electronic journals and other e-resources are these readily available materials superseding the need for delivery of print based resources?

Case Study

Western Michigan University is a student-centered research institution located in Kalamazoo, Michigan. The 25,000 students enrolled can choose from 141 undergraduate programs, 66 masters programs and 29 doctoral programs. Additionally, the university offers off-campus educational opportunities online, through compressed video or in person through the Extended University Programs department at the 8 branch campuses in the Western part of the state, located in Battle Creek, Benton Harbor-St. Joseph, Grand Rapids, Lansing, Muskegon, Holland, South Haven and Traverse City. WMU off-campus programs are primarily offered at the graduate level with approximately 90% of distance learners enrolled in masters or doctoral programs. In order to support the research needs of the off-campus community the WMU Libraries provides a document delivery service, as well as face-to-face instruction, web subject guides, electronic reserves, and other reference and research consultation services.

In September 1992, the University Libraries introduced document delivery services via fax or regular mail to off-campus patrons. Despite the fact that this was a free service and requests were mailed or faxed within 24 to 48 hours, students did not take advantage of this opportunity to the extent that was expected likely due to the time constraints of receiving materials. Students continued to rely upon their local libraries to meet their needs. The following year e-mail requests were downloaded through the OCLC review file to provide an alternative request format for patrons. As technology in this area continued to change, the University Libraries implemented the interlibrary loan management software program Clio and a web-based form to manage document delivery requests in September 2002. The University Libraries experienced steady increases in the number of requests received during these years, however it was after April 2003, and the implementation of the ILLiad and Electronic Document Delivery software that the University Libraries experienced a significant increase in requests from off-campus patrons. Use of these systems greatly increased the convenience of making requests as well as receiving articles.

In the digital environment, document delivery has become a convenient and relatively quick service for distance learners. Furthermore, sending books to off-campus patrons through the United Parcel Service (UPS) provided faster turnaround times for physical material. According to the statistics found in

Table 1, document delivery materials were supplied at an all time high of 2562 and 2641 in the 2003-2004 and 2004-2005 academic years, respectively. Since that time, WMU has seen a steady and significant decrease in the number of requests received from distance learners.

Technological innovations through software management programs and digital desktop delivery greatly minimized the time barriers of providing materials off-campus. However, our experiences indicate that the increasingly digital environment has also created patrons who are more self-sufficient in locating resources either through the library Web page or the Internet for themselves. Although there have been considerable changes in the number of requests received, it should also be noted that in the past two years the number of requests received through document delivery may have begun to stabilize.

During this same period, fiscal years 2002-2003 through 2006-2007, the University Libraries have also been acquiring access to a significant number of electronic resources; purchasing 3804 serial titles and 60,060 electronic books. Table 2 details the numbers of e-resources added during the five year period studied.

In addition to the individual electronic journal subscriptions, WMU patrons also have access to 19, 969 full text titles through aggregated databases. This tremendous increase in availability of e-resources is likely an important factor in the decreasing number of requests for document delivery. However, as shown in Table 1 article requests have mirrored the changes in the total number of requests received, while book totals have remained fairly stable, despite the significant number of e-books acquired. When attempting to encourage off-campus students to utilize the electronic book resources, many patrons indicated their preference for receiving the hard copy through the mail.

These statistics and experiences also need to be considered in light of the trends in enrollment in recent years. Western Michigan University has experienced a decrease in off-campus enrollment during the same time period. In 2002, there were 3,295 students enrolled in off-campus programs. For the 2005-2006 academic year there were 2,920 students enrolled, a slight increase from the previous year. (See Table 3). Lower enrollments in WMU off-campus programs may also be a contributing factor to the reduced number of requests received through document delivery. Learning at a distance has been a recent trend in higher education and in many cases academic institutions are experiencing increasing enrollments in off-campus programs; WMU is not the norm. Other factors that may also contribute to the changes may be the types of programs offered at the University, the WMU Libraries' information literacy initiatives, and the promotion/marketing of the services available to off-campus students.

Survey Method

We were interested in investigating whether our experience with decreasing use of document delivery services despite improvements in speed and ease of use of the software and delivery was typical or was an anomaly. Therefore we decided to develop a survey that we could use to gather information from other libraries that offer this service to off-campus students and faculty. A web based survey with thirteen questions was developed and administered through the online survey tool Surveymonkey.com. (See the Appendix for the text of the survey questions). We were aware that it might be difficult to complete all the questions on our survey since we were asking for statistics concerning document delivery, enrollment figures for distance education programs, electronic journal subscriptions, and information in several other areas. Particularly in larger institutions one staff member may not have ready access to all of this information. We attempted to solicit respondents who would be able to answer our questions and have access to the relevant statistics. We sent announcements about the survey to two electronic distribution lists, OFFCAMP, as well as ILL-L. Through these electronic distribution lists we hoped to recruit staff members working specifically in distance education, as well as staff members in interlibrary loan departments who may be involved in document delivery services. The survey ran for approximately three weeks in November 2007. During this time we collected 18 responses. The survey did not require respondents to answer every single question, and some of the 18 people who completed the survey did leave some answers blank, so for some questions we have a smaller set of responses.

Survey Results

Our 18 respondents represented a variety of types of institutions. Five respondents (28%) categorized themselves as being large institutions with over 25,000 FTE students. Another six respondents (33%) categorized themselves as falling into the medium size category with between 10,000 and 25,000 total FTE. Another five respondents (28%) categorized themselves as a small college or university with fewer than 10,000 total FTE. The remaining respondents included one community college, and one medical library within a large university.

The survey asked respondents to provide statistical information on their electronic journal subscriptions and e-book titles for the past five years as well as document delivery statistics for books and articles. We were interested in investigating whether or not there was a broader correlation between rate of increase in availability of e-resources and usage patterns of document delivery. In addition our survey asked about efforts to market off-campus library services, as well as initiatives in information literacy for off-campus populations. Our interest in these two areas was to try to determine if there were correlations between marketing and instruction efforts, and level of usage of document delivery services. Do libraries that are heavily involved in marketing services and instructing distance education students have users that request more materials?

We were also interested in the situation with regard to enrollments at our surveyed institutions. Theoretically if there are more students enrolled in distance learning programs use of services offered to them should be increasing as well. Results from the survey show that over the past five years enrollments in distance education programs for our responding institutions either held steady or increased. On average our responding institutions had an enrollment of just over 11,000 FTE in 2002, to over 14,800 students in 2007. These results are consistent with the national increase in enrollments in distance education programs in higher education.

One striking result of the survey is the tremendous increase in both the number of electronic journal subscriptions as well as electronic books libraries have made available over the past five years. Our survey asked respondents to tell us the number of electronic journal subscriptions they had in 2002 and the number they subscribe to in 2007. On average, responding institutions had 11,084 electronic journal titles in 2002, and 21,381 subscriptions to e-journals in 2007. This represents an average increase of over 93% in five years. (See Table 4). Some institutions with a smaller number of subscriptions overall reported doubling or tripling their number of e-journal subscriptions.

Increase in numbers of e-books reported was even more dramatic. Six of our responding institutions reported that they had 100 or fewer e-book titles in 2002. While in 2007 most of our responding institutions had e-book collections in the tens of thousands. In 2002, the average number of e-book titles held by our responding institutions was 11,631, while in 2007 the average number of e-books held was 61,836. This represents more than a 500% increase in e-books available to the students of these institutions.

Another area we were particularly interested in was the experience of other institutions with regard to the ratio of article to book requests. Our data show that all institutions deliver a much larger number of scanned or copied articles, than they do books. The ratio of article to book requests varied from an average of 1.89 in 2002-2003, to 2.43 in 2006-2007. The highest ratio of articles to books occurred in 2003-2004 when there were over four times more article requests than requests for books.

Of the 18 survey responses, 14 libraries were able to supply us with document delivery statistics for all of the most recent five years. Looking at averages of these figures article requests hit a definite peak in fiscal year 2003-2004, and have been on a decline since that time (See Table 5). This is surprisingly consistent with our statistics at WMU, which peaked at approximately the same time before beginning a fairly steady decline. Our experience in this regard was not unique then.

While article requests have varied quite a bit over the survey period, book requests have surprisingly stayed nearly steady. (See Table 6). As with the experience of article requests, this result also mirrors our experience at WMU. One reason this was surprising to us was because of the reported large

increase in the number of e-books available. Since article requests have gone down at the same time that electronic journal subscriptions has increased, one would have expected the same situation with regard to electronic books. As mentioned above, our survey showed that during the five-year period studied our responding institutions increased e-book titles by more than 500%. With this huge increase in the availability of electronic books it would seem that students would have less need for delivery of physical books, but this does not appear to be the case. Perhaps the particular books students need and request for their courses and research must not be the kinds of books that libraries are making available in an e-book format. Or perhaps as we have experienced at WMU, regardless of whether or not a book is available in an e-book format some students and faculty will prefer to wait for a physical copy. Additionally, with further technological advancements in e-books in the coming years, institutions may experience a similar decrease in requests for books as has been occurring with journal article requests.

One survey respondent also commented, "we discourage sending books to patrons through the mail. We have, but we try to get the DE students to use a library closer to where they live" (November 19, 2007). Some libraries that reported very low numbers of requests for books may be similarly discouraging requests for physical books.

Our survey also asked about technology used and turnaround times for document delivery. We wanted to investigate whether institutions that had a more automated process, or faster turnaround times also had heavier usage. That also did not appear to be the case. Fourteen of our eighteen respondents reported that they provided electronic delivery of journal articles and book chapters. While eleven of the respondents also said that they had an automated system of some sort that transferred citation data from a record in a database into a request form for document delivery, thus making it unnecessary for patrons to have to type in any part of the citation for their request. Seven institutions reported that their turnaround time was 24 hours or less. Another three reported a turnaround time of two days or less. We were unable to find a correlation between turnaround times or level of automation with usage of document delivery.

Respondents of our survey were asked to share what they are doing with regard to marketing and promoting their services to distance education students; we also asked about information literacy initiatives. We wondered if institutions that put more effort into promoting their services to students would have higher usage of these services. Our data did not show a correlation in these areas however. What or how much marketing libraries are doing does not seem to have a significant effect on the numbers of requests coming in. Similarly, information literacy efforts do not seem to make a significant impact on the use of document delivery. Institutions that reported they were engaged in a variety of information literacy initiatives were still experiencing the same trends with regard to an overall decrease in requests.

We did not ask survey respondents to provide us with statistics regarding reference or e-reference questions from distance learners. However, one respondent commented, "we've noticed over the past several years that the number of items we've supplied to students has steadily dropped, but that the number of students who have contacted us has steadily risen! Our reasoning is that most students are finding what they need through our full text options, but since there are more distance students more of them are coming to us for those few items they can't find online themselves" (November 27, 2007).

Interpretation / Discussion

It seems clear from our data that while document delivery remains a service that distance education students use, it has indeed become less heavily used by them over the past few years. Overall, the number of distance education students has increased during this time, but there is no corresponding increase in use of document delivery services. In addition, through automation and workflow improvements document delivery has gotten increasingly more convenient and fast; however, none of this has resulted in an increase in use of these services. And while many libraries report being heavily involved in marketing and instruction, these efforts do not appear to result in more users making use of document delivery services. Based on our experience and our survey data we believe there are several reasons for this trend:

1. The tremendous increase in availability of electronic journals. Our data shows that our responding institutions have made great strides in increasing the number of full text journals available to their

students electronically. Libraries have subscribed to many more journal titles, and are licensing many more journal titles through aggregator services and other packages. At the same time as libraries are paying for this electronic access on behalf of their communities there has also been a huge increase in journal articles and other resources publicly available over the Internet. There simply are more books and articles available in full text electronically that users can access themselves.

2. Distance learners may feel that what you can get yourself is better than what you have to ask for someone else to get for you. Many students are becoming more self sufficient and prefer to get their research materials on their own as opposed to having to ask for help.

3. As the literature shows, many students today feel that what they are finding on the Web is "good enough" for their purposes. While the best quality resource for a paper or research project may be something that does not exist electronically, a student is likely to think that something they find themselves either on the web or in a library database in full text will serve the purpose and not look any farther.

4. It is likely that some portion of distance education students and faculty are simply not aware of the availability of document delivery services. Marketing library services to distance education students is an ongoing challenge. Libraries often put forth great efforts to make distance learners aware of all the services that are available to them; however, despite best efforts we often hear from students late in their program or even after they have graduated reporting that they were not aware of document delivery or other library services.

5. It also seems likely that some students and faculty may be aware of document delivery services available to them, but may not know how to make requests or use the service. Again, despite our best efforts at making these services accessible and easy to use some patrons are either intimidated by the technology or just do not know how to use them.

6. Instructors teaching in a distance education environment are becoming more comfortable and savvy with courseware and other technology used today for distributed learning. It may be that instructors are putting outside reading materials (book chapters, journal articles, etc.) directly into the course site on the Web, rather than requiring students to get these materials on their own. Similarly instructors may be making more use of e-reserve systems offered by libraries in place of the students having to access books and articles needed for the class themselves.

Conclusions and Further Research

The experience at the Western Michigan University Libraries with regard to decreasing use of document delivery services appears to be the norm rather than the exception. Despite tremendous improvements in the technology to electronically deliver print based materials and the ease of requesting and receiving these materials, there has been no corresponding increase in requests. Many of the institutions responding to our survey echoed our own experience at WMU: document delivery services are still used, but the use of these services has been on a steady decline over the past few years. Requests for journal articles show a particularly steep decline while book requests have experienced only a moderate drop. Reasons for these trends are varied and include user behavior as well as increased access to books and journal articles directly through the web.

An interesting follow up to this research would be to determine if the decrease in journal article requests is more focused on undergraduates, or lower level students, or if graduate students and faculty are finding less use for document delivery as well. It may be that undergraduates are more likely to prefer the instant gratification of a full text article and not pursue any print based materials, while graduate students and faculty may be more likely to use document delivery to get more specialized or focused materials for their needs. Also, we have speculated that a major reason for the decreasing use of document delivery services is the concept of materials found easily in full text on the Internet being "good enough" for students, and distance education students in particular. In order to determine if this is in fact the case a citation analysis study could be done; has the nature of sources used by distance learners in fact changed over the past few years? Finally, it would be interesting to survey distance learners themselves to get a better sense of their perceptions of document delivery and why they do or do not use it.

References

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Appendix

Trends in Document Delivery for Distance Education

Survey Questions

Please answer the following questions about document delivery operations for your distance learning community. The purpose of this survey is to investigate trends in document delivery. We appreciate your participation in this survey.

1. Please select the description that best fits your institution.

    o   Community college
    o   4-year college (undergrad programs only)
    o   Small college or university with graduate programs (under 10,000 FTE total)
    o   Medium sized college or university with graduate programs (10,000-25,000 FTE total)
    o   Large college or university with graduate programs (over 25,000 FTE total)
    o   Other (please specify)

2. Approximately how many students are enrolled in your distance education programs currently, and how many were enrolled in the 2002/2003 academic year?

    o   Current enrollment:
    o   Enrollment figure for 2002/2003:

3. Approximately how many electronic journal subscriptions does your library have currently, and how many subscriptions did you have in 2002/2003?

    o   Number of current electronic journal subscriptions
    o   Number of electronic journal subscriptions in 2002/2003

4. Approximately how many e-book titles does your library have currently, and how many did you have in 2002/2003?

    o   Number of current e-book titles:
    o   Number of e-book titles in 2002/2003

5. Please select the three departments with the highest enrollments in your distance education programs:

    o   Allied Health   o   Mathematics / Statistics
    o   Art / Fine Arts   o   Music
    o   Biology   o   Nursing
    o   Business   o   Other Life Sciences
    o   Chemistry   o   Physics
    o   Computer Science   o   Political Science
    o   Education   o   Psychology
    o   Engineering   o   Social Sciences
    o   Humanities   o   Social Work
    o   Law / Legal Studies   o   Womens Studies
    o   Library / Information Science   o   Other (please specify)

6. Which of the following do you offer to your distance education community as part of your information literacy program. (Please select all options that apply).

    o   Face to face instruction in off-campus location
    o   Embedded librarian service in courseware
    o   Web based subject guides

- o Screencasts
- o Tutorials
- o Web conferencing
- o Other (please specify)

7. Which marketing activities are you using or have you used to make your distance education community aware of library resources offered to them? (Please select all options that apply).

- o Newsletters (paper or electronic)
- o E-mails to students
- o E-mails to faculty
- o Web pages
- o Posters in off-campus sites
- o Print ads in student publications
- o Orientation sessions
- o Other (please specify)

8. Please provide statistics for the number of book and article requests you have filled for your distance learning community through document delivery for the following years:

- o Book requests filled 2006-2007
- o Book requests filled 2005-2006
- o Book requests filled 2004-2005
- o Book requests filled 2003-2004
- o Book requests filled 2002-2003

- o Article requests filled 2006-2007
- o Article requests filled 2005-2006
- o Article requests filled 2004-2005
- o Article requests filled 2003-2004
- o Article requests filled 2002-2003

9. Do you offer electronic document delivery of journal articles and/or book chapters?

- o Yes
- o No
- o Comments:

10. Do you have an automated system in place that transfers citation information from a database into a request form for document delivery? (i.e. SFX or similar product)

- o Yes
- o No
- o Comments

11. What is your approximate turnaround time for delivery of articles and books for distance learning students?

- o Article delivery:
- o Book delivery:

12. Comments? Please comment on any relevant issues regarding the document delivery and/or interlibrary loan services you provide to your distance education students and faculty.

13. (Optional) If you would be willing to be contacted for follow-up to this survey, please leave your name and e-mail address.

      o   Name
      o   E-mail