Cornell University Library Distance Learning Final Report

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Executive Report

The CUL Distance Learning Task Force was appointed in 1999 to support Cornell's first library-intensive distance learning course, to report on the findings of this prototype, and to make policy recommendations to the Library Management Team. This report is a description of our work.

In summary, we experienced fewer participants, higher dropout and far less demand for library services than expected. Although we learned several lessons from this experiment, surveying one course cannot offer a complete picture of the future impact that distance learning will have on the Cornell Library.

Description of the course

The Cornell University Entrepreneurship Certificate Program was a 14-week distance-learning course offered to members outside the Cornell community. The course was scheduled to run from March to August 1999, but was extended to Oct 15, to accommodate late assignments. Composed of five separate modules covering feasibility studies, marketing strategies, accounting, financial planning, and human resources, the course was delivered by a combination of media: CD-ROM, Web documents, and email.

The program was directed by Marge Hubbert, taught and supported by Deborah Streeter, Bob Milligan,

Marge Hubbert, Debra Perosio, and Katherine Stettler. This course represents the first attempt by the Cornell University Library to provide a full array of library access and services to a distance-learning course.

Description of the participants

Three individuals participated in the prototype course. This number was exceedingly lower than the expected 10-20 students, and consequentially the course debut was extended several months to encourage further enrollment. The participants were: Candice, employed at a national banking company, Jeff, employed at an engineering company, and Jennifer, an entrepreneur from Taiwan. Jennifer posed some unique challenges for us, since we needed to contend with her location and the global time difference.

Library Accomplishments

Long Distance Calling Cards

Since the Cornell proxy server was not an option when this course was being developed, we opted to use long distance calling cards as a temporary solution. We purchased two AT&T calling cards for Candice and Jeff. These cards were set to only call the CIT modem pool, and could not be used for any other purposes. We agreed that providing a long distance calling card to Jennifer in Taiwan was too costly[1], so we decided to give her personalized services instead, which included librarian-mediated database searching and electronic document delivery.

High-speed network accounts with CIT

We also purchased one-year subscriptions to CIT's high-speed network. The free public option at the time provided only 2400 baud access to the network and was nearly always busy. In order for participants to efficiently gain access to library resources, we agreed to purchase the subscription-based 56K access.

Reference assistance and document delivery

In addition to providing access to library resources to these distance learners, we provided reference services and document delivery of articles. Of the three students, only Jennifer took advantage of these services.

Administration

Philip Davis, chair of the Distance Learning Task Force was the key contact for the planning and implementation of the library component of this class. Support for this course was accomplished within

the allotted budget, which was provided to us by CUL and the Office of Distance Learning.

Lessons Learned

Since this course had three participants, it cannot be used to make sweeping generalizations about distance learners, or their experiences. However, other distance education courses have experienced the same phenomenon – lower than expected enrollment, and high dropout rate. A recent study by the Institute for Higher Education Policy reports a dropout rate of 32 percent for online classes, compared to just 4 percent for residential classes[2].

A continuing education course is not a top priority for full-time employees, who need to balance work, school, and possibly family life. Jeff, a new father, expressed several times that he found this course difficult to complete along with his new family responsibilities. Continuing education becomes even less important when an employer pays for the course, as was the case with Candice who dropped out soon after her first assignment.

In contrast to the library's presence on Cornell's Ithaca campus, the library does not have the same visibility in the eyes of distance learners as it does with residential learners. The library was out of sight, and perhaps out of mind for the participants for whom interaction with the library (if any) consisted of selected resources in the Library Gateway and e-mail correspondence with a reference librarian.

Convenience and ease may have been a high consideration in the research behavior of the students. According to Professor Streeter, the student's research assignments were predominantly composed of generic web resources rather than scholarly materials. Based on a log of calling card activity, only one student made an attempt to connect to CIT's modem pool, amounting to a charge of 64 cents.

From this course, we were unable to derive a financial model for supporting distance learners. The technological model (from long distance calling cards to IP proxy server) had changed during this experiment, and will continue to change in the foreseeable future. As well, the low completion rate for this course prevented us from deriving a generalizable service support model. Continual monitoring of other distance learning experiences may help us derive these models.

Discussion

The Cornell University Entrepreneurship Certificate Program was a non-credit class offered exclusively to those outside of the Cornell community. There are, however several faculty members providing online credit courses to Cornell students as well as non-credit options to those outside of the Cornell community. Most of these courses specialize in niche subjects and benefit from the added enrollment from a larger audience. Examples include: *Kosher & Halai Food Regulations*, taught by Joe Regenstein (FOOD 250) in the Dept. of Food Science, *The How, When and Why of Grafting* (Hort 401) by Ken Mudge in the Dept. of Floriculture & Ornamental Horticulture, and a new course on *Canine Genetics*

offered by John Pollak in the Dept. of Animal Science.

It should be stressed that the *Entrepreneurship Certificate Program* has been the only distance learning initiative that has included a significant library research component. Other courses to date have not relied on literature research, but have stressed prepackaged content and prescribed readings. If the library is interested in becoming part of the distance learning experience, it will need to convince faculty developing these courses to include literature research as a component of their syllabus. This should be easier as CUL's growing collection of electronic journals and prototype electronic book project may make literature research for distance learners more feasible.

Recommendations

1. The library should continue to provide resources and services to distance learners.
2. Cornell's proxy server should be used to provide access to registered Cornell University members.
3. Access to electronic resources should abide by CUL's licensing agreements.
4. Document delivery of print journal articles should be done on a cost-recovery basis[3]. Since the library does not provide free document delivery to residential students, the library should not subsidize access to its print collection for those who choose to learn off campus.
5. To facilitate the use of research materials outside of the library, CUL should continue to actively pursue subscriptions to electronic resources.
6. The Library should take a proactive role in promoting its services to faculty developing distance-learning courses.
7. The Library should appoint a standing distance-learning committee with representation from all functional library units. This standing committee should be responsible for tracking developments at Cornell (i.e. *e*Cornell) and abroad.

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[1]Taiwan to US: $8.88 for first minute plus $2.02 for subsequent minutes.
[2]Associated Press 04/07/99
[3]The standard rate for document delivery (Olin, Mann, ILR, Hotel) is $15/document, with additional charges for fax, international, rush, and long documents.

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