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Amy D. Coughenour
Concordia University – Portland, acoughenour@cu-portland.edu

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Peeling Apart the Layers: Library Services to Online Education Consortia

Amy D. Coughenour, Concordia University – Portland

Abstract

Universities and colleges have been forming online education consortia as one of many methods to better serve their students while reigning in the rising costs of higher education. While libraries' responses to these consortia vary, there are trends in the methods and standards being used. This paper reviews some of the literature published about library services in online education consortia, evaluates a selection of interstate and intrastate online education consortia, and provides information about the beginning stages of a library service model in a new online education consortium—Concordia Online Education. Because Concordia Online Education is new, the library services across the partner schools are not yet fully defined, nor are they an official part of the consortial agreement. By taking into account the information from the literature and the websites, we've been able to begin a foundation to frame our collaboration with partner schools and develop recommendations for how to move forward.

Higher education has been tackling the conundrum of educating more students with less funding by forming online education consortia. These consortia lower many of their operating costs due to shared sourcing, along with the use of technology. Libraries' responses to online education consortia vary depending on available resources and services. In all cases, libraries strive to meet the "access entitlement principle" from the *Standards for Distance Learning Library Services*:

Every student, faculty member, administrator, staff member, or any other member of an institution of higher education, is entitled to the library services and resources of that institution, including direct communication with the appropriate library personnel, regardless of where enrolled or where located in affiliation with the institution. (Association of College & Research Libraries, 2008)

What Are Online Education Consortia?

The phrase *online education consortia* often comes with different meanings for different stakeholders. To some, such consortia are collaborative groups that share best practices and training opportunities, and for others, they are shared service entities. In *State U Online*, Fishman (2013) breaks down the types of online education consortia into five "steps" based on services provided to students: 1) "clearinghouse," 2) "shared contracts," 3) "shared student services,"

4) "shared and articulated credentials," and 5) "shared credentials beyond state borders" (p. 9). These steps take a consortium from:

- A base level of providing a gateway to courses taught by institutions in the consortium.
- To a second level of pooling funds to share costs of licensing and contracts.
- To a third level of sharing point-of-contact support services, such as advising, etc.
- To a fourth level of providing a method for "easy transfer of credit among institutions and shared credentialing."
- Finally, to a fifth level, where the institutions in the consortium provide the resources and services from the previous steps "and allow students to move freely beyond state borders" (Fishman, 2013, p. 9).

When reviewing the literature about online education consortia and examining the websites of a selection of interstate and intrastate consortia, these "steps" work well as definitions to determine the service levels provided by each consortium. The "steps" also provide a lens for viewing libraries' roles within the consortia. For example, a consortium at the base level has little to no evidence of library involvement in a centralized capacity. Whereas, a consortium at the third level of "shared student services" may

potentially have more collaboration between the libraries at the participating institutions.

Libraries Roles in Online Education: From Individual Institutions to Consortia

In *Standards for Distance Learning Library Services*, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL, 2008) provides in-depth recommendations and best practices for how libraries should serve distance learning students and online education programs. Such services “must be equivalent to those provided for students and faculty in traditional campus settings” (ACRL, 2008). The ACRL (2008) goes on to specify the importance of “direct human access” for online students and faculty, emphasizing the need for librarians to be actively involved “through instruction, interaction, and intervention . . . in the provision of library services and in facilitating successful use of library resources.”

At the same time, libraries don’t provide these online services in a vacuum. We provide better services when we collaborate with other departments who serve online students, such as teaching faculty, instructional designers, and student services. The ACRL (2008) recognizes this need for collaboration in its recommendation to “involve library and other personnel in all stages of the detailed analysis of planning, developing, evaluating, and adding or changing of the distance learning programs.” The ACRL goes on to recommend that librarians become active “in the curriculum development process and in course planning for distance learning” while also communicating with faculty, administration, and related community members.

These standards are also applicable to libraries’ roles in online education consortia because the ACRL (2008) places the responsibility of library service provision on the institution that enrolls students “in its courses, unless an equitable agreement for otherwise providing these materials has been made.” Many libraries in online education consortia follow this model of the “home institution . . . provid[ing] access to library resources,” such as the Web-based

Information Science Education (WISE) consortium (Montague and Pluzhenskaia, 2007, p. 38).

Interstate Online Education Consortia

When evaluating the websites of several interstate online education consortia, only one out of eight consortia listed information about library services on its website. The Great Plains Interactive Distance Education Alliance (Great Plains IDEA, 2012) states that “students will have access to the online library system of their home institution. Students may receive access to library resources at the teaching institution if the instructor expects students to utilize such resources.”

Adams and Cassner (2010) surveyed libraries in the Great Plains IDEA consortium to determine types and levels of services provided by each library. Their survey found that most of the consortial libraries provided reference services with some type of communication, usually via email or an ask-a-librarian service (Adams & Cassner, 2010, pp. 420-421). At the same time, Adams and Cassner found a disconnection in the libraries’ awareness of the Great Plains IDEA consortium as it related to online education programs occurring on their campuses. “Unfamiliarity may be partly due to the complexity of large academic organizations. The name of the consortial program may differ from the name of the administrative home department that offers courses” (Adams & Cassner, 2010, p. 423).

Because the other interstate online education consortia did not list library services on their websites, it is difficult to know what the expectations are for library services in relation to online courses offered within the consortia. Further research would be needed to reach out to the libraries at the participating institutions with a survey or other research instrument.

Intrastate Online Education Consortia

When evaluating the websites of several intrastate online education consortia, six out of eleven consortia listed information about library services on their websites. Of those six consortia, two provide links to statewide library databases,

one provides a link to a statewide reference service, one provides a link to a statewide library catalog, and four provide links to individual libraries. (However, one of the consortia has working links to less than half of the individual libraries.)

These access points to individual libraries correlate with the ACRL's (2008) recommendation for "originating institutions" to provide library services for their own students. While reviewing the progression of a distance education library services task force in Indiana, Haynes and Mannan (2006) highlight the focus of using the collaborative nature of an online education consortium "to facilitate and enhance what individual institutions would do. It was seen as a multi-layered, networked approach" (p. 206). Thus, the libraries focus their service provision on their own users while reaching out to other libraries in the consortium for resources, assistance, and best practices.

At the same time, some of the online consortia are beginning to branch out into Fishman's (2013) "shared contracts" and "shared student services" models by providing access to statewide databases and a statewide reference service, respectively. However, it is unknown if the online education consortia played a role in the statewide databases and statewide reference service, or if those shared services would have been in place, regardless.

Traditionally, intrastate online education consortia have often had a geographic advantage in that the participating institutions are closer to each other. This benefits distance learners who reside in the state because there are more opportunities to physically visit participating libraries if needed (Subramanian, 2003, p. 40). As more students enroll in online courses cross-country, more research will be needed to determine whether this advantage will continue.

Challenges and Opportunities

There are challenges and opportunities whenever groups of people work together. Adding distance to the mix because of the nature of online education consortia can either magnify or obscure

some of these situations. Several common challenges and opportunities that appear in the literature are: communication, institutional cultures and expectations, and staffing ability.

While lack of communication can cause complications, strong communication skills can increase collaboration and benefit everyone involved in the consortium. Adams and Cassner (2010) state that "open communication has been essential to shared curriculum development and local institutional practice. . . . Including distance librarians in meetings with Great Plains IDEA faculty and administrative staff could be beneficial" (p. 423). Kayler and Pival (2004) echo the benefits of communication as a method of preventing problems from "escalat[ing] and undermin[ing] the project" (p. 209). Montague and Pluzhenskaia (2007) echoed these views from the perspective of "coordination between schools" (p. 38).

Montague and Pluzhenskaia (2007) also brought up the need to discover other institutions' "cultures and expectations" when collaborating in an online education consortium (p. 38). Devlin, Burich, Stockham, Summey, and Turtle (2006) repeated the idea of "institutional cultures" affecting decisions as related to the development of a memorandum of understanding (pp. 155, 161-162). "Each institution wants to maintain its own culture and identity, and each wants to take advantage of the benefits of working together" (Devlin et al., 2006, p. 162). While there are many procedures and skills that we share as librarians, it helps to keep in mind that institutions develop their own cultures, which then proceed to make their way into library services and policies.

Finally, having the ability to staff online education library services can be both a challenge and an asset. Devlin et al. (2006) note the ability for individual libraries to "determine [their] own staffing and scheduling needs, training requirements, and . . . technical configurations" (p. 162). For libraries that have enough librarians, this works well. However, Ferguson, Fowler, Hanley, and Schafer (2002) point out the challenge of not having enough staff to fully implement the UMass Digital Library project. Without funding for additional personnel, the

future of the project was uncertain (Ferguson et al., 2002, p. 331), and as of the submission of this article, it appears that the UMass Digital Library project either changed into something else or did not make it further than their “proof of concept.”

Concordia Online Education: Developing Library Services

Concordia Online Education is an interstate online education consortium in its early stages of shared services provision. At the moment, it consists of three partner schools: Concordia University-Portland, Concordia College – New York, and Concordia University, Nebraska. As of the submission of this article, the library services are not part of a contract or memorandum of agreement between the schools. However, the library at Concordia University – Portland has been supporting our online students and faculty for several years.

We decided to review the literature about library services for online education consortia, along with an evaluation of the websites of both interstate and intrastate versions of such consortia. Our goals were to develop a broad perspective of best practices, trends, and common challenges and opportunities faced by libraries in these consortia.

We found that the services we offer to our students fall in line with best practices: interactive individual reference via phone, chat, text, email, and the learning management system (LMS); on-demand instruction via tutorials, videos, and a frequently asked questions site; and embedded librarians in the LMS. We have also taken care to keep track of student enrollment numbers to make sure we have a sufficient number of distance education librarians on staff to serve the online students and faculty. Another aspect of library staffing that we discovered was the need for additional interlibrary loan staff. While we have full-text article databases, the increase in online student enrollment has brought with it an increase in interlibrary loan requests.

Even though the library is not formally or officially part of the agreement in Concordia Online Education, we are invited to operations meetings, which provides us with updates from other participating departments. We have also started the process of developing guidelines for online library services at participating schools in the consortium. We compiled statistics to form a foundation of recommendations for best practices in regard to access, instruction, and the learning management system. For access, we looked at the need for students and faculty to be able to contact librarians, access electronic resources, and locate a library website. For instruction, we laid out the different models: individual, on-demand, research guides, and FAQs. For the learning management system, we proposed both links to resources and the ability of distance education librarians to be embedded in courses and provide advice in the development of curriculum.

We have also been reaching out to the libraries at the partner schools to share information and provide encouragement. While we’re currently working in a model of each institutional library serving its own students and faculty, we remain open to the possibility of a more centralized service. The collaboration between the libraries is still in its early stages, though.

Conclusion: Plans for the Future

While we have performed research into how library services perform in online education consortia, these services are constantly changing. We continue to explore new ways to leverage our strengths to better serve our students and faculty. We try to use a combination of different opportunities: new collaborative partnerships, taking advantage of technology where possible, and keeping our eyes open for innovative educational resources and services.

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Appendix

Online Resources

List of Interstate Online Education Consortia

- Alliance for Cooperative Course Exchange in the Plant Sciences (ACCEPTS)
<http://www.accepts.uark.edu/index.html>
- Great Plains Interactive Distance Education Alliance (Great Plains IDEA)
<http://www.gpidea.org/>
- Nursing Education Xchange (NEXus)
<http://www.winnexus.org/>
- Natural Resources Distance Learning Consortium (NRDLC)
<http://nrdlc.usu.edu/>
- National Universities Degree Consortium (NUDC)
<http://www.nudc.org/>
- University Engineering Alliance (UEA)
<http://www.universityengineeringalliance.org/>
- Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education Internet Course Exchange (WICHE ICE)
<http://wiche.edu/ice>
- Web-based Information Science Education (WISE)
<http://www.wiseeducation.org/>

List of Intrastate Online Education Consortia

- University of California Online (UC Online)
<http://www.uconline.edu/>
- Cal State Online
<http://calstateonline.net/>
- Florida Virtual Campus
<https://www.flvc.org/home>
- Georgia's College Core-Curriculum Online (eCore)
<https://ecore.usg.edu/>
- Indiana College Network (ICN)
<http://www.icn.org/>
- Iowa Community College Online Consortium (ICCO)
<http://www.iowacconline.org/>
- Louisiana Online
<http://louisianaonline.org/>
- Open SUNY (The State University of New York)
<http://open.suny.edu/>
- Oregon Community College Distance Learning Association (OCCDLA)
<http://occdla.net/>

- University of Texas Online Consortium (UTOC)
<http://utcoursesonline.org/index.html>
- Wyoming Course Locator & Support Services (WyCLASS)
<http://wyclass.wy.edu/>