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Back Talk – Is Distance Education in Our Future?

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For college and university librarians, two important questions are, is distance education in our future and what will we do when the future settles down around us?

Distance education has already arrived in my family. My daughter-in-law who completed an undergraduate business administration degree last year, now works in a law firm but wants to continue her education. She is taking MBA courses via the Internet from the **University of Phoenix**, every residential college and university's nightmare. My wife, an elementary school teacher, is looking for a program via the Internet to help her certify in special education. They, and tens of thousands of men and women with jobs and personal responsibilities like the convenience of distance education programs.

The convenience factor is one of the chief arguments in favor of distance education, but lower costs and the increasing presence of the Internet in our lives provide further support for this change in the way people are educated. One commentator in a recent article noted that the average cost of educating a student employing distance education was \$3,500 per year while the average cost at a residential college was \$12,500. (J. S. Daniel, "Why Universities Need Technology Strategies," *Change*, 29, **ProQuest Direct** online). Universities, hard pressed for funds, are not going to pass up this new opportunity to reduce their costs and perhaps, by charging more than it actually costs to educate a distance education student, for additional revenues.

Furthermore, prospective students find the Internet a natural medium for additional education. Over 16,000 responses to a 1997 survey of those reading 127 newspapers published by the **New Century Network** revealed that 52% of the respondents spent less time watching broadcast TV, 48% less cable TV, 39% fewer long-distance phone calls, and 33% less time spent reading newspapers (S. Kirsner, "Non Readers More Likely to Buy Online," *Mediainfo*, September 6, 1997, **ProQuest Direct** online). For people using the Internet for news and entertainment, edu-

cation via the Net isn't a jump, it's a short step away.

Higher education pursues four basic functions and Internet-based distance learning does pretty well in all but one of them: Teaching is what colleges and universities are all about and in the Internet world, the teacher's role is not diminished but strengthened. Students who attend classes at their convenience still read what the teacher assigns, take tests constructed by the teacher, write papers approved and graded by the teacher, and ask questions and receive answers from the teacher. Students also talk and discuss things with classmates in chatrooms developed for each course. They can also take advantage of collections of text and multimedia materials established to supplement their textbooks and online reading assignments (See the *Romantic Circles* Webpage as an example (<http://www.inform.umd.edu/RC/rc.html>)).

Another major function of higher education is research. Research is largely a process of culling. The researcher looks at as much information as possible and culls everything that lacks value. They begin with their own books and journals, then move on to materials owned by their friends and colleagues — and indeed what is in the heads of other researchers. When it is working well, the Internet simply speeds up the process. If what you want is in the fulltext database, you get to find, skim, cull and then print what is valuable faster than is possible in our library settings where what is wanted is on the shelf 50 to at most 75 percent of the time. Furthermore, email greatly facilitates asking for help from others whether just down the hall or a continent away. For distance learning students who lack personal collections, friends with collections, friends with useful information in their heads, access to Internet databases and collections of supporting materials are vastly more useful than those locked safely in our library collections.

A third function is publishing or sharing the research findings of those involved in the higher educational enterprise. Again, the Internet triumphs. It can be used to provide the student with access to the prepublished and never-to-be published findings of their own teachers and their teacher's colleagues in a way that just isn't practical in the print environment. Of course the downside of Internet publishing is that the good, bad, and the ugly all get to publish whatever they want to share or expose to the world.

It is in the fourth function of higher education that the Internet is still found wanting: the retention and preservation

of research findings. Given the unstable nature of digital media, we still have a significant problem. But

for the distance education student, this is not a major issue. While the breadth and depth of material that the students access expands with each year they attend school, most of what they access is not unique and therefore not endangered.

Because of the increased convenience, reduced per-student training costs, equal or improved teaching opportunities, and enhanced researching and publishing factors associated with Internet-based distance education programs, distance education is in each of our futures. To get a clearer idea of what is happening, take a look at the articles on the **Western Governor's University** featured in the February 6, 1998 issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Twelve states and Guam are all banding together to provide distance education programs. Interestingly the **University of New Mexico** will serve as the anchor library for these students and will receive an estimated \$80,000 to \$100,000 for their services.

However, before Internet-based distance education can expand to the point that it becomes a major issue for all librarians, universities face a number of challenges and the time they will spend overcoming these obstacles will hopefully provide us all sufficient time to prepare for our new remote user community.

These challenges include the political problems associated with one institution encroaching upon the territory of another institution; problems related to having the student's degree recognized as legitimate; the creation of expensive electronic campus infrastructures that will serve as the base from which to launch the remote services; the requirement that students purchase expensive computers, modems, and printers; the development of sophisticated curriculum packages by ill-prepared and often technology-challenged faculty members; an academic culture that does recognize the legitimacy of publishing on the network and which underrecognizes the value of any kind of teaching; faculty fears that their labors will be repackaged and sold to thousands of students at a time instead of the typical 30 to 50 students

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Boxed Facts excerpted from Nat Bodian's The Joy of Publishing, available from Open Horizons Publishing Co., PO Box 205, Fairfield, Iowa 52656 at \$29.95.

Drinking From The Firehose from page 81

These are original illustrations Anna Belle created, they are NOT clip art. A colleague's institution has been threatened by legal action when a publisher discovered they were listed on the acquisitions department's Web page on the Library's "Caveat emptor" list. (Don't put such lists out publicly!)

It looks like chat lists and bulletin boards are being mounted on the Web these days. This makes me think it's time to abandon the comfortable but dull ASCII-formatted ACQNET issues for something colorful and Web-based. Also, Web sites now have sound and video clips in them. I looked at a university library Web site recently that showed their new library building being built in a series of pictures that flash across the scene continuously. That was pretty impressive.

So, where will we go next? I have no predictions today, but in my preparation for this column, I jotted down a few topics to devote to future columns. I invite readers of *ATG* who wish to do a guest column to consider these topics:

1. Collaborative software, "eyeball" cameras, videoconferencing
2. Internet banking and credit cards used on the Web
3. PDA's like Apple's Newton, which apparently is the latest electronic toy -- even our library director has one!
4. Gambling on the Web
5. Web TV -- is it going to happen?
6. Anything else that comes along you think librarians need to know about, especially those working in acquisitions and collection development. Please contact me if you would like to prognosticate.

Finally, I guess Windows '98 will be out soon so we can see how that works out. Have a Happy New Year!

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which they normally teach; the need for Internet training so that students can successfully carry out research assignments (it isn't enough to simply point them in the direction of an Internet browser); and the purchase and licensing of electronic content that was previously purchased for a geographically landlocked student body.

So the answer to the first question, is distance education in our future, is "yes" but not necessarily tomorrow. The answer to the second question, what will we do when the future settles down around us, is more difficult but I imagine that we will begin to hear more and more as time goes on. Perhaps we can arrange for a distance education and libraries panel at the next **Charleston Conference**.

On The Street from page 76

the course of the year we asked you about these topics.

- Online Acquisitions
- Book Vendors and Services to Libraries
- Outsourcing
- Paper versus Electronic Access, and
- The Role of Book Reviews in Collection Development.

As it happens, Paper versus Electronic Access was the most popular concern, but only slightly ahead of the role of Book Reviews in Collection Development. We surveyed *Against the Grain* readers early in 1997 to assess how librarians use book reviews and if they were used, which reviews were the most used and/or highly respected.

Maybe it was the season of the year, the temperature, the time for budget reviews, holidays, or the rise and fall of the stock market, but whatever it was, librarians were more apt to respond to surveys conducted in the months between February and July rather than between September and January. I refer to these months because we got more participation during the second semester of the school year than in the first semester.

We have to complete our surveys several weeks before the report is published in *Against the Grain*, and if 1997 is any indicator, more librarians are apt to let us know how they feel during the first half of the year, rather than the second. Is it something in the water?

Of course, subject matter has to enter into it too, as well as the workload participants face when we ask for input. The ques-

tion is, what will be the top issues for 1998 and will we be asking the right questions? Here's where readers can help. Let us know what is bugging you, as an individual, an academic institution staff member, and/or a professional librarian. And ... what are the concerns for the institution itself during the coming year? You can reach me at sefennessy@worldnet.att.net.

Before you know it we can have a report on how your colleagues feel about the issues concerning the library community. Do you want to know how other librarians are handling certain issues? We can develop appropriate questions if we know your interests.

In summary, you folks have responded best in terms of numbers of survey participants for the April, June, and September issues. The number of responding librarians tails off for the November and December/January issues and picks up again for the April issue. Perhaps it's a combination of subject matter, holidays, and the weather?

Whatever it is, when you receive a call from one of us, **Anne Jennings, Linda Albright, Kathy Miraglia**, or yours truly, **Eamon Fennessy**, we do not bite, are really pleasant; we do wait for the light to turn green before going through traffic intersections, and we do want to let your fellow librarians know how you feel on the issues.

Thanks for answering our surveys so that other colleagues can know how you feel. We look forward to your continued cooperation and to more pertinent and better surveys in the future. We cannot do it without you.

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