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### **How to cite this paper**

If you make reference to this version of the manuscript, use the following information:

Pitts, J., Coleman, J., & Bonella, L. (2012). We built it, why didn't they come? An analysis of library awareness and usage in the Kansas State University distance learning community. Retrieved from <http://krex.ksu.edu>

### **Published version information**

#### **Citation:**

Pitts, J., Bonella, L., & Coleman, J. (2012). We built it, why didn't they come? An analysis of library awareness and usage in the Kansas State University distance learning community. In F. Baudino & C. Johnson (Eds.), *Brick and Click Libraries: An Academic Library Symposium, Northwest Missouri State University, Friday, October 26, 2012* (pp. 141-151). Maryville, MO: Northwest Missouri State University.

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# **We Built It, Why Didn't They Come?**

## **An Analysis of Library Awareness and Usage In the Kansas State University Distance Learning Community**

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### **Introduction**

The Association of College and Research Libraries' *Standards for Distance Learning Library Services* (2008) specifies that libraries should "regularly [survey] distance learning library users to monitor and assess both the appropriateness of their use of services and resources and the degree to which needs are being met and skills acquired." Although the standards do not define the term "regularly," their stated goal of ensuring that academic libraries meet the research and information needs of distance learners leaves little doubt that it is appropriate to conduct a survey whenever librarians charged with meeting the needs of distance learners are ignorant of those needs, as occurred at Kansas State University Libraries (KSUL) following a structural reorganization which took place in 2010.

In May 2011, KSUL's Instructional Design Librarian established a Distance Learning Team (hereafter referred to as *we*) comprised of representatives from KSUL's two largest public services departments: Faculty and Graduate Services (FGS) and Undergraduate and Community Services (UCS). Although we were anxious to begin improving services and marketing efforts, we decided to minimize the likelihood of solving non-existent problems by heeding the *Standards'* call for a user survey. This paper describes the survey's goals and items, presents key results (including the development of the survey instrument as an educational tool), outlines some of the changes we subsequently initiated to bolster services and marketing, and discusses our plans for future service improvements and assessments.

### **Background**

Kansas State University (K-State) is a land-grant university with annual enrollment of around 23,500 students. During the 2010-2011 academic year 6,480 students took at least one distance education class (Kansas State University 9). A substantial portion (35.5%) of those students took no in-person classes (Kansas State University 4). Many of the students who took distance courses were enrolled in one of the Division of Continuing Education's (DCE) distance programs. These include 9 Bachelor's degree completion programs, 5 Bachelor's minor programs, 22 Master's degree programs, 1 Ph.D. degree program, and 20 certificate programs.

KSUL provided few special services to distance learners prior to 2001. During the 1990s, the Division of Continuing Education used one of its own paraprofessionals to provide library services to distance learners. Other early distance learning services were described in a paper by Marcia Stockham and Beth Turtle, two librarians who focused part of their outreach on the distance student population. According to Stockham and Turtle (2004), when online resources

began to proliferate, librarians and representatives from DCE reviewed their respective services for distance students and implemented changes to better meet student needs. Those changes included “new Web pages, electronic reserves, remote authentication using EzProxy, promotion of services to students in DCE orientation packets, and a virtual reference service” (332). Stockham and Turtle also sent a web-based survey to students and faculty enrolled in or teaching distance courses during the 2003 spring semester. The goals of their survey were to assess awareness and use of library services, to discover which of those services were most valued, and to learn what additional services were desired.

Stockham and Turtle concluded from survey responses that knowledge of library services had not spread by word of mouth and that students were not actively seeking out information about what the Libraries could do for them. They recognized that simply building services was not enough; active promotion was needed as well. Consequently, KSUL sent distance faculty a list of FAQs (with answers) about library services and posted the document on a distance learner library webpage. Subject librarians began e-mailing distance faculty to offer instructional support and to request that they promote library services to their students. They also began e-mailing distance students to inform them of what resources and services the Libraries could provide. In addition, KSUL began offering interlibrary services to all students and began shipping library materials to distance patrons. Because K-State Libraries responded robustly to the needs of distance learners, the Division of Continuing Education chose to phase out its library facilitator position.

In the years following these improvements, KSUL has made additional changes to better meet the needs of distance learners. These changes include: dramatically expanded breadth and depth of electronic resources, significant reductions in interlibrary loan delivery time, implementation of an online chat service staffed during all of the reference and circulation desks’ hours of operation, implementation of LibGuides, creation of a searchable database of frequently asked questions, and authoring of blog posts and tweets to educate patrons about services. Unfortunately, even as KSUL increased capacity to meet the needs of distance learners, its librarians slowly stopped marketing to distance faculty and students. This was due in part to the 2010 reorganization, but more so because of the assumption that library services and resources for distance students were at that point known and utilized by distance students (we built it, and they are coming).

After the Libraries’ reorganization, many of the librarians who had been subject librarians for several years took new positions: some in the public services, but others in administration and the Scholarly Communication and Content Development departments. Librarians in the newly established UCS and FGS departments did not know what communications, if any, DCE was sending students and faculty. They also did not know if distance faculty were promoting library services or if distance students were using library services. Thus, the newly formed Distance Learning Team recognized the need to conduct a new user needs and awareness survey.

## **Literature Review**

Recently, the Institute of Education Science’s National Center for Educational Statistics reported that from the year 2000 to the year 2008, “the percentage of undergraduates enrolled in at least

one distance education class expanded from 8 percent to 20 percent, and the percentage enrolled in a distance education degree program increased from 2 percent to 4 percent” (Radford 3). Not surprisingly, several academic libraries have recently conducted surveys designed to learn the information needs and preferences of distance learners and faculty. Nearly all of the surveys (Hensley and Miller; Kvenild and Bowles-Terry; Shell, et al.; Tipton; Shaffer, Finkelstein, and Lyden; Jerabek, McMain, Hardenbrook, and Kordinak; and Cooper and Dempsey) revealed that this population is relatively unaware of many of the library services available. Several researchers reported startling statistics, such as only 25% of the off-campus students reporting that they had visited the libraries’ home page (Jerabek, McMain, Hardenbrook, and Kordinak). Many suggestions have been made to improve awareness and usage of library resources by the distance learning population and this paper is designed to add to that growing body of actionable possibilities.

### **Methods and Procedures**

We drafted several questions based on the surveys used by Stockham and Turtle and consulted with KSUL’s Service Quality Librarian and with Stockham and Turtle to combine similar questions, refine terminology, and create additional questions. Ultimately, we developed three separate surveys: a 10 question survey for distance undergraduate students, a 9 question survey for distance graduate students, and a 10 question survey for faculty and instructors teaching distance classes. After receiving IRB approval, we arranged for DCE staff to e-mail the appropriate survey to all individuals who had either taken or taught a distance course during the 2010-2011 academic year. We subdivided the undergraduate students and graduate students into two separate groups: those enrolled in distance degree programs and those enrolled in on-campus degree programs.

Both student surveys began with questions about demographics and academic status. After these initial questions, the student survey presented questions to ascertain the following information: (1) the number of distance courses they had completed requiring research for papers, reports or presentations; (2) the extent to which they used KSUL, other libraries, and free resources from the Internet; (3) whether they were aware of each of 13 library services/resources (see table 2) available to them; (4) whether they had used each of those 13 services/resources; (5) their level of satisfaction with KSUL services and resources for distance learners; (6) which three services/resources they perceive as most useful for their distance courses; and (7) whether they had any general comments to share. Each question also provided a box for submitting optional comments. The faculty survey was similar to the student survey in scope. However, rather than asking if faculty had used a service/resource, it asked whether they had suggested the service/resource to their students.

The response rates from the five groups who received the survey were all quite low (see table 1). Even though the data are not necessarily representative of the full population, we still received a significant number of surveys and found them useful for forming best guesses and for debunking potential assumptions about the population (e.g., they are all aware of our services).

#### *Table 1*

Number of surveys sent to each targeted population, number received, and response rates

<b>Target Group</b>	<b>Population Size</b>	<b>Surveys Completed</b>	<b>Response Rate</b>
<b>Undergraduates enrolled in a distance learning degree program</b>	<b>2,104</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>4.7%</b>
<b>Undergraduates enrolled in an on-campus degree program</b>	<b>3,711</b>	<b>106</b>	<b>2.9%</b>
<b>Graduate students enrolled in a distance learning degree program</b>	<b>2,185</b>	<b>213</b>	<b>9.7%</b>
<b>Graduate students enrolled in an on-campus degree program</b>	<b>455</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>8.1%</b>
<b>Faculty and Instructors</b>	<b>338</b>	<b>89</b>	<b>26.3%</b>

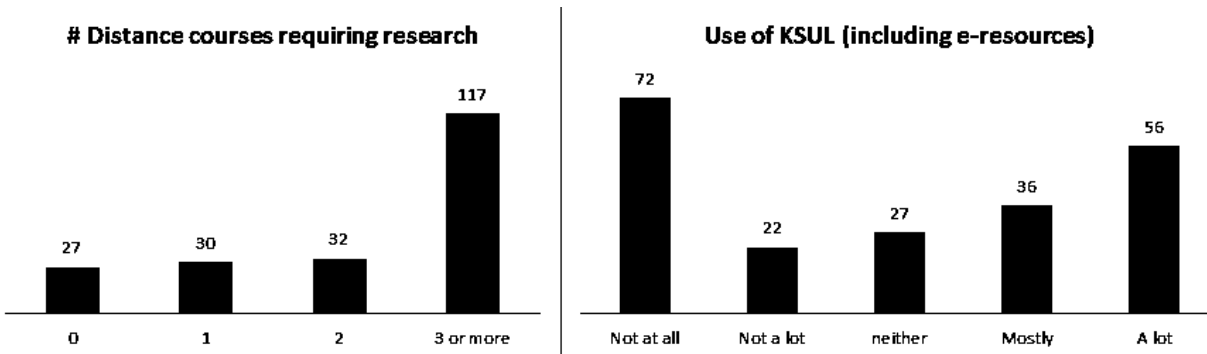
## **Findings**

The analysis of the Distance Education (DE) survey results revealed several themes. We include direct quotes from respondents to illustrate their knowledge and usage of the libraries as well as their responses to the survey instrument itself as a promotional tool. We emphasize results from off-campus graduate students and instructors since these two groups had the highest survey response rate.

### ***Research at a Distance***

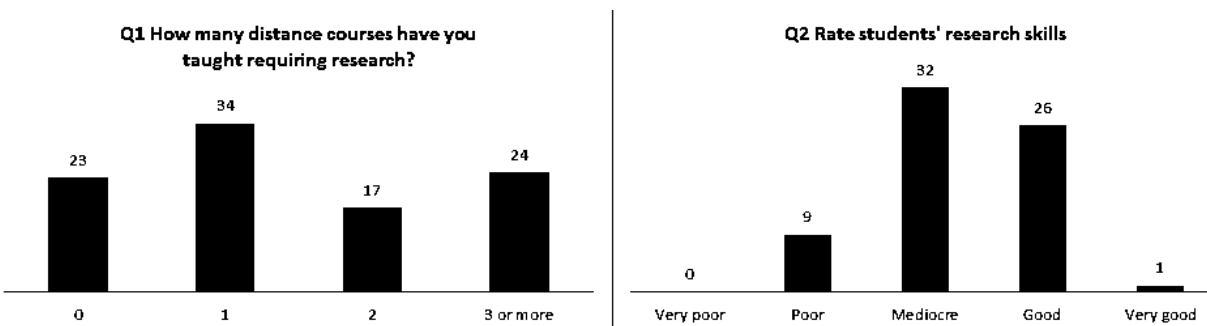
We collected data regarding student and instructor perceptions of research requirements in the courses they took or offered online for the previous academic year. An overwhelming majority of student respondents indicated they had taken three or more courses requiring research in the past two years. Unfortunately, their use of libraries and library services (including e-resources) did not coincide with their perceived research obligations as shown in Figure 1, which represents responses to two different questions: How many distance courses required research, and how often were libraries used in your research process on a one to five scale.

*Figure 1 [Required research vs. library usage for off campus graduate students]*



This is very likely due to an overall lack of awareness of library services and resources as discussed in the next section. The majority of distance instructors reported that they required research components in at least one of their DE courses, but more than half rated student research skills as *poor* or *mediocre* (Figure 2). This indicates a disconnect between instructor expectations and student information literacy levels.

Figure 2 [Instructor research requirements and perceptions]



### Awareness and Usage

Although we expected a high number of respondents to be unaware of the Libraries' services and resources available to remote users, we were surprised by the percentages revealed through the survey. Table 2 below reflects the percentage of respondents within each academic status who indicated they **were not aware** of the service listed.

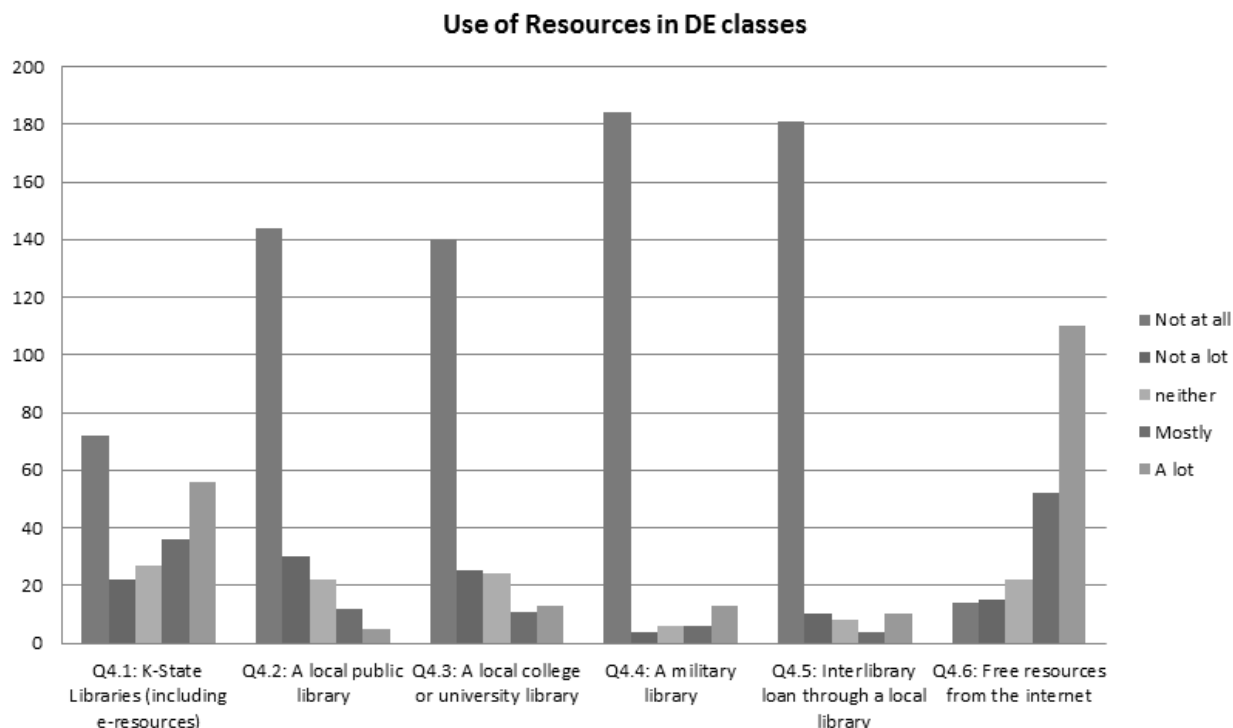
Table 2 [Awareness of KSUL services and resources]

Awareness		
Q#	Question	% NOT aware
Q1	K-State Libraries has web-based help pages, including a page specifically for distance learners	Faculty: 67% (66 of 98) Undergraduates, off campus: 55% (59 of 108) Graduate students, off campus: 44% (102 of 232)
Q2	There is a course in your K-State Online organizer called "Research Help at K-State Libraries"	Faculty: 43% Undergraduates, off campus: 20% Graduate students, off campus: 24%
Q3	The K-State Online course "Research Help @ K-State Libraries" has a page specifically for distance students	Faculty: 69% Undergraduates, off campus: 60% Graduate students, off campus: 44%
Q4	K-State Libraries can deliver its print materials (books, maps, journals) and physical media items (videos, music cds) to distance learners	Faculty: 41% Undergraduates, off campus: 68% Graduate students, off campus: 54%
Q5	If a distance learner needs a resource (book, article, video, cd, map, etc.) that K-State Libraries do not own, K-State Libraries will attempt to find it and deliver it	Faculty: 24% Undergraduates, off campus: 61% Graduate students, off campus: 45%
Q6	Distance learners can access K-State Libraries' databases from off campus using any computer connected to the Internet	Faculty: 3% Undergraduates, off campus: 26% Graduate students, off campus: 16%
Q7	Distance learners have access to full-text online journals (e-journals) through K-State Libraries	Faculty: 8% Undergraduates, off campus: 35% Graduate students, off campus: 19%
Q8	Distance learners can access K-State Libraries' e-books	Faculty: 28% Undergraduates, off campus: 56% Graduate students, off campus: 42%
Q9	Distance learners can access K-State Libraries' web-based subject and course guides	Faculty: 38% Undergraduates, off campus: 54% Graduate students, off campus: 49%
Q10	Distance learners can obtain immediate help from a librarian through online chat, telephone or email during K-State Libraries' service hours	Faculty: 21% Undergraduates, off campus: 42% Graduate students, off campus: 31%
Q11	Distance learners can arrange consultations with librarians for in-depth research assistance	Faculty: 39% Undergraduates, off campus: 58% Graduate students, off campus: 56%
Q12	Distance learners can use the online tool RefWorks to keep track of resources and automatically generate references cited lists	Faculty: 38% Undergraduates, off campus: 57% Graduate students, off campus: 52%
Q13	K-State Libraries has links to web-based citation guides	Faculty: 41% Undergraduates, off campus: 52% Graduate students, off campus: 50%

An alarming number of students at both the graduate and undergraduate level expressed little to no awareness or usage of any library resources or services. The vast majority of distance students indicated they rarely used library resources, and instead favored "free resources from the

internet” to conduct their research. Although some students indicated they use KSUL resources, most indicated they never used any library resources at K-State or their local libraries. The graph in Figure 3 indicates library usage among graduate students located off-campus.

*Figure 3 [Use of resources in DE classes for off-campus graduate students]*



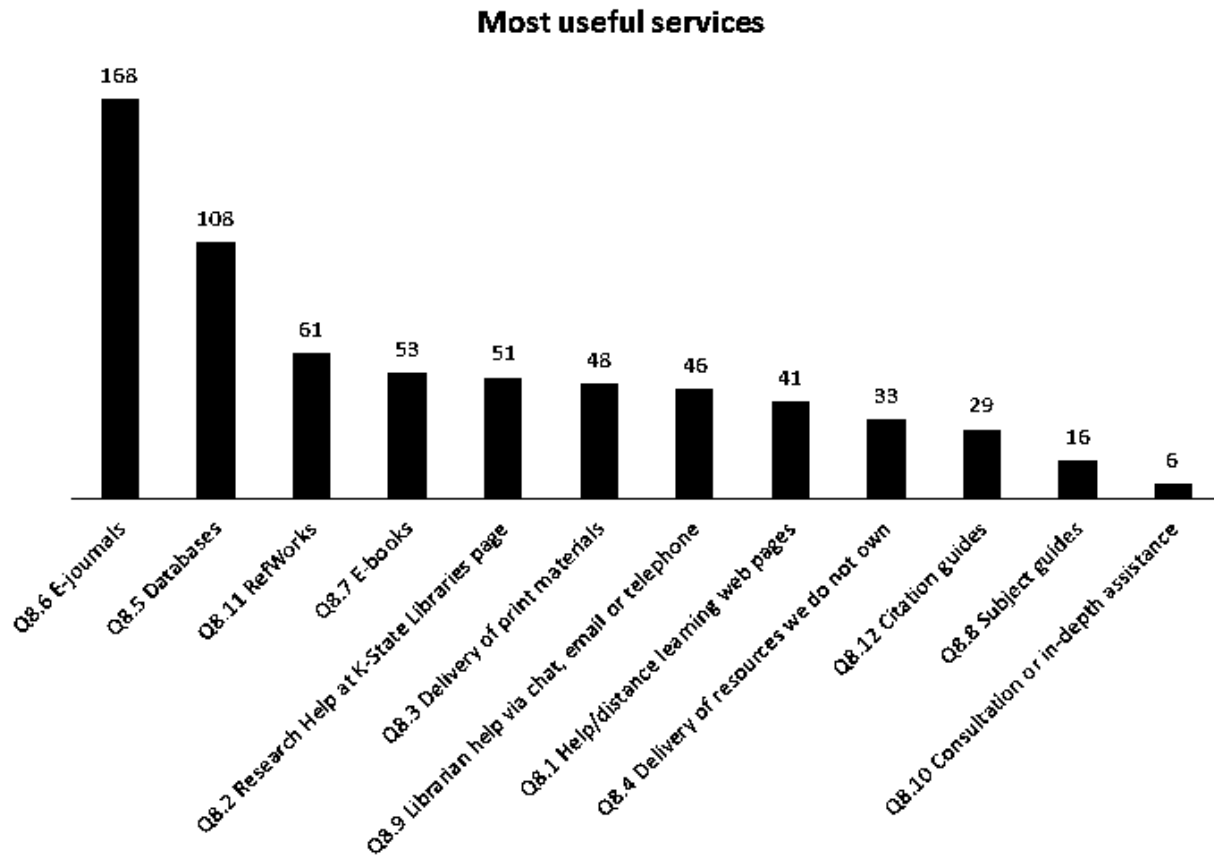
Comments on the survey suggested that instructors’ lack of awareness and KSUL’s insufficient promotion of DE services were the main sources of the less-than-desirable knowledge and usage.

### *Student Perceptions of Value*

On a more optimistic note, many of the students who indicated they did use KSUL resources found their experience to be highly valuable to their education. Several comments encouraged our efforts to help other distance students realize that the same opportunities exist for them, for example: “I am very pleased with the libraries – I simply could not pursue my degree without the fabulous support! Thank you very much!” and “Thank you – without your library services, I would not be able to get the same quality of education. You made a huge difference for me in getting the information that I’ve needed.” But the survey probed deeper to determine exactly which library services and resources proved most valuable for students (Figure 4).

*Figure 4 [Most useful services selected by off-campus graduate students, n=213]*





Although all of the services and resources we listed were marked as among the three most useful services by at least some of the students, we felt there was a disconnect between some of the resources identified as most useful and the overall awareness of those services in the off-campus graduate population. For example, Refworks, our citation management tool, was listed as a top three most useful resource, yet was one of the resources distance graduate students were most unaware of on average.

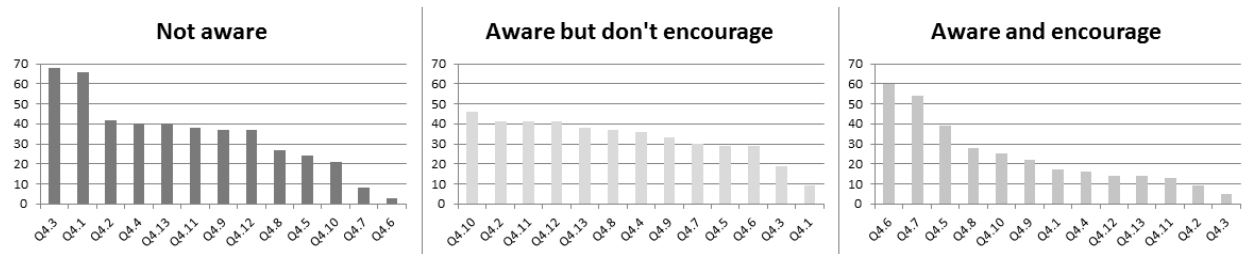
This notion was further cemented in comments such as, “It would have been a great help if someone in the Distance Program had told me about the Library – and how to use it – at the beginning!” and “I was not even aware of the services offered to distance education students by the K-State library” and “I really wish I knew that I could get books delivered.” The disconnect further supports the need for better promotion of library resources to this population.

### ***Faculty Perceptions and Promotion***

Perhaps the most surprising finding from the survey was the number of distance teaching faculty who were unaware of what library resources were available to remote students. This was especially surprising given that many of these same faculty teach on-campus courses as well. While we found that many faculty were not aware of certain library resources or their availability

to distance students, many more were aware of the resources, but never encouraged their students to take advantage of them (Figure 5).

*Figure 5 [Faculty promotion, n=89]*



Faculty and the online course management system are often the only links distance students have to a university and the services and resources provided therein. While we can't force distance faculty to be library champions for their students, we can help them to understand what is available and provide them data (such as that gleaned from this survey), regarding student need and desire to be provided with library information. In fact, many faculty indicated the same in the comments (e.g., "More advertisement of services") and even provided some creative ideas for doing so, such as wording for syllabus inserts.

The student and faculty comments calling for more and better promotion of library services and resources, combined with the general lack of awareness and usage/encouragement, pointed to a definitive need for a concerted and multi-faceted promotional campaign to the distance population and illustrate the reason why "we built it and they didn't come."

### *Survey Instrument as Educational Tool*

Although all three surveys were designed to be informative, we were pleasantly surprised by the number of respondents who praised the survey instrument as an educational tool in and of itself; an aspect also noted by Stockham and Turtle. Many students indicated in the comments sections that though they didn't know about particular services and resources prior to the survey, the knowledge gained from the survey would lead to further exploration and use. One student commented, "This survey turns out to be a great education tool regarding services available through the library. I look forward to investigating these resources further." The faculty responded similarly. One faculty member even phoned the Instructional Design Librarian to proclaim that while she generally hates surveys, she found this one informative and requested a meeting for further collaboration in her course.

### **Taking Action**

Based on our survey results, it was clear that we needed to make our Libraries' services to distance learners more prominent and to advertise them better. To do so, we have implemented a number of initiatives. We began by revamping our Distance Education web page, replacing outdated information and updating the layout. In conjunction with this improvement, we edited our Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) list, tagging a number of posts with a "distance

education” tag and ensuring that distance education students were considered in as many questions as possible. For example, the answer about how to make an appointment with a librarian now specifically notes that distance students can use our form to make a phone or e-mail appointment. We added one final FAQ that consolidates all the information about distance student services (“Distance Students: What Library Services are Available to Them”). We also implemented a toll-free number to make it easier for distance students to contact the help desk. This number will be included in all promotional materials targeted at the distance population.

We used a number of different opportunities to promote our services. Our Communications and Marketing Department does “theme weeks” on our Twitter feed, and we arranged to have a week for Distance Education services. We also created two handouts highlighting our services – one for distance education students, and one for faculty. Both handouts were created in a very concise, bullet-point format to allow for quick reading. These handouts will be distributed to all distance education students and faculty in their welcome materials.

To enhance our external promotion of our services, we collaborated with DCE and the Graduate School. Members of our team met with representatives from both, and we reviewed the very outdated information about the Libraries that was present on their websites and provided new text for them to include. DCE encouraged us to create an article for their quarterly newsletter and to provide content for them to post in their social media (Facebook) feeds.

We were also able to take advantage of two important ways of becoming involved with our online course management software, K-State Online (KSOL). First, we had a “librarian” role created within online classes in KSOL, allowing librarians to be embedded in the class. The special librarian role, which does not allow librarians to view grades or other confidential information, alleviated concerns that some faculty members had about assigning an “instructor” role to librarians. We were also invited to contribute to a course called E-Learning Best Practices in KSOL. The course, created by our Information Technology Assistance Center (iTAC) is used by Distance Education teaching faculty and by the iTAC instructional designers to help faculty create online courses. We included videos, handouts, and information about library resources in this course.

### **Ideas for the Future**

While we have already taken steps to improve promotion and marketing of library services and resources to distance faculty, instructors, and students, there is much more that can and should be done to ensure equitable provisioning of services to these populations. We are convinced that the most effective and expedient way to boost students’ awareness and use of library services is to collaborate with the advisors and coordinators of each distance learning program. As Kvenild and Bowles-Terry noted, these individuals have knowledge of the distance learning curriculum and are gateways to the attention of both faculty and students. They can also help identify faculty who would be receptive to working intensively with librarians to provide meaningful research experiences for their students. We plan to approach a small number of such faculty and offer to serve as embedded librarians for their courses. As embedded librarians, we can develop tutorials, targeted LibGuides, and interactive quizzes; collaboratively monitor message boards; establish online office hours; and provide live instruction. Assessment is a vital component of this plan. If

we collect outcomes data such as information literacy skills improvement, we would then be able to make evidence-based appeals to other faculty.

Cooper and Dempsey's study led them to conclude that librarians should target faculty who are preparing to convert an on-campus class to a distance format. We will develop a library toolkit for distance faculty consisting of assignment instructions, a statement for their syllabi that describes library services for students, and examples of LibGuides and tutorials created for other classes. We will consult with distance learning program coordinators to identify these faculty and send them the toolkit by e-mail. This e-mail will include an invitation to consult with a librarian to develop research based assignments and an invitation to have a librarian become embedded in the course.

In addition to offering services to distance faculty, we plan to make a number of small but vital improvements to KSUL's electronic resources and informational pages. Many of KSUL's instructional pages are written with the assumption that the reader is on-campus and could easily visit the library. Our team will coordinate a comprehensive review of the website and promote wording that recognizes the needs and circumstances of all students. In conjunction with this initiative, we will provide educational sessions to inform all content creators about the needs of distance learners. By advocating for distance learners, we hope to create more enthusiasm for e-resources and the tools which make them easier to access. Similarly, we will encourage efforts to digitize local collections and purchase electronic equivalents of print and microform holdings.

Perhaps most important of all these actions is our plan to assess how well KSUL is serving the needs of distance learners, faculty, and instructors. In the spring or summer of 2013, we will repeat this study using identical instruments. We will be able to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of the changes we have initiated by comparing the data from the 2011 surveys to that from the 2013 surveys. In addition to assessing awareness and use of library services and resources, we will collect as many syllabi for distance classes as possible and examine them to learn what information needs the faculty are creating for distance learners. We will then identify which of those needs are the most likely to go unmet and address them. We will also start conducting regular surveys and focus groups with distance faculty and instructors to learn about the obstacles and barriers they experience in their efforts to promote use of library resources and services to their students. We will look to the survey conducted by Kvenild and Bowles-Terry and the survey conducted by Shaffer et al. for examples of such items. The results of these assessments will be used to identify opportunities for materials purchases, targeted hires, and service enhancements. We will also share the results with administrative staff to help ensure that the needs of distance learners, faculty, and instructors never again recede into the background.

## **Conclusion**

Our surveys and those conducted eight years earlier by Stockham and Turtle both demonstrate quite clearly that services and resources do not promote themselves. They also reveal that many distance learners, faculty, and instructors either do not endeavor to find out what libraries can do for them, or are unsuccessful in the attempt. If you build it, there is no guarantee that they will come, even if it is incredible. While promotion and marketing might entice more of them to come, the much better strategy is to rethink the dynamics of the situation. Education involves

much more than communicating facts, teaching skills, and introducing theoretical frameworks. It also requires challenges that create new needs and new motivations to explore, and the creation of environments to meet those needs. The environments should have entrances throughout the landscape, on libraries' pages, in online classes, in syllabi, and interwoven into the structure of assignments. They will come if they know it exists and expect it will help them.

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