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ABSTRACT

This article describes the early pioneering work of an online librarian in one of the first religiously-oriented, Internet-based colleges. Despite their lack of accreditation and neglect of information infrastructure, these degree programs are often quite popular with the general public. The author takes a critical look at library services and accreditation issues for these types of degree-granting college programs.

KEYWORDS

Distance Education; Religious Colleges; Librarians; Accreditation

INTRODUCTION

Distance education, also known as nontraditional education or nonresident learning, is a growing phenomenon that must be taken seriously by educators and accreditation agencies. The rise of the Internet has led to tremendous growth in "online universities," especially in the realm of "faith-based" or religious colleges (Baker 2000). A theological education through electronic means is now offered by established, accredited institutions of higher learning as well as by educational businesses of dubious merit that in times of old were sometimes dubbed "diploma mills" (Bear and Bear 2001). This article will provide the reader with a case study of my own experience as a pioneer online theological librarian, as well as reflections on the future of online librarianship in religious colleges and the importance of librarians in any distance learning program. In addition, accreditation issues for Internet-based, religiously-oriented colleges are addressed.

LIBRARY RESOURCES FOR ONLINE DISTANCE LEARNING PROGRAMS IN RELIGIOUS COLLEGES

The success of an online distance learning program in a religious college or university is dependent on criteria that are, for the most part, no different than what would be expected in a secular educational environment. One of the primary requirements for any online distance learning degree program must be the establishment of certain library and information resources. These resources include a core collection of

books (including electronic books), access to online journal article databases, an online professional librarian, a library and information resources Web site, document delivery services, and borrowing agreements with traditional libraries (Harmeyer, 2001).

While online students may feel liberated from traditional modes of educational delivery such as classrooms and libraries, the content of their educational experience (as opposed to the format) will remain constant. This is especially important vis-à-vis books and journals. The proliferation of electronic books makes this proposition fairly easy to implement in an online distance learning program (Dillon 2001). A recent search on NetLibrary's collection revealed hundreds of electronic books related to religion or theology. Thousands of religious or theological books are in the public domain and are available through Web sites such as Christian Classics Ethereal Library (http://www.ccel.org), Project Gutenberg (http://promo.net/pg/), and the Michigan Electronic Library of Theological Texts (http://mel.lib.mi.us/).

Online journals are another way for distance students to research various topics at religious colleges. Two leading providers of aggregated full text journal information, Proquest and EbscoHost, include specialized modules for researching religious studies. The ATLA Religion Index, published by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA), is now available in a variety of online formats. Another important tool published by ATLA is the ATLAS project, which plans to digitize 50 journals in religion and theology covering the past 50 years (Eidson 2001). In addition, many electronic journals related to religious or theological studies are now available through direct subscription from the publisher, or can be found in aggregated collections of digitized

journals such as Project Muse or JSTOR. Whatever the method that is utilized, religious colleges and universities must provide access for their online distance students to collections of electronic books and journals if the college is to offer these students a well-rounded education.

In addition to electronic resources such as ebooks and journal databases, a good distance learning program at a religious college or university will also ensure that a professionally-trained librarian is available (for a reasonable number of hours per day) for consultation with students. These consultations might include email, online chats, and bulletin board discussion rooms. In addition, the online librarian should create an appropriate Web site with links to relevant resources, answers to frequently asked questions, and other pertinent information.

Another important aspect to the online distance learning program is the effort that religious colleges and universities must make to provide their online students with access to traditional library resources. Public libraries are ubiquitous and free, but most do not provide enough scholarly resources to satisfy the requirements of a good undergraduate education. While many students will live or work within a reasonable distance from a traditional university, most will not have immediate borrowing privileges to the library associated with that university. Thus, the student enrolled in a distance program must generally purchase borrowing privileges from his or her local academic library. The distance program can facilitate this process by subsidizing these costs for their online students, or by arranging for reciprocal borrowing agreements among various universities.

Finally, a crucial feature of any good online distance learning program is the provision of document delivery and interlibrary loan services. Students will always need to have access to some materials that are not owned by their university library, and this is especially true in the online distance learning environment. Providing a subsidized document delivery service, whether through fax, email, or regular mail, is critically important if the distance learner is to have a successful online educational experience.

CASE STUDY

Background

Eastern Bible College (a pseudonym) is a distance education provider that offers college and graduate degrees to several thousand students around the world. While originally a correspondence school that used telephones and mail delivery to facilitate faculty-student interaction, it has developed into a multi-faceted college that enrolls students in both online and traditional programs. The online format began as a CompuServe forum in the early 1990s, and has since migrated to a Web-based system (although EBC continues to have a relationship with CompuServe). EBC does not hold standard regional accreditation, nor is it a member of the Association of Theological Schools (ATS). However, it does have a special agreement with a European university that allows it to claim a form of accreditation. In addition, it holds accreditation from a

small, national organization whose purpose is to provide a stamp of approval to distance learning institutions.

EBC uses a variety of formats to deliver courses over the Internet. Faculty and staff communicate with students via telephone, email, discussion groups, chat rooms, and even old-fashioned correspondence. Written assignments are sent to instructors through either the postal system or through the Internet. Audiotapes are the primary means of providing students with course content, but other media are used as well, including video tapes, Web sites, CD-ROMs, and written materials.

Many of the courses at EBC use as their pedagogical base the ideas and principles developed by Benjamin Bloom. These ideas are commonly referred to as "Bloom's Taxonomy" (Bloom, Hastings, and Madaus 1971). Bloom was an educator and educational psychologist who in the mid twentieth century developed a classification system that delineated the different levels of the intellectual learning process. Cognitive learning, which is especially important in this taxonomy, is divided up into the following sequential categories: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. EBC uses Bloom's Taxonomy to create a structured hierarchy for their distributed learning model. Thus, undergraduate students at EBC focus on knowledge and comprehension. Masters level students emphasize analysis and application. Doctoral students concentrate on synthesis and evaluation. While the structure is often transparent to students, faculty members who develop courses and teach from a distance are encouraged to follow this model.

The Need for an Online Librarian

Why did EBC need an online librarian? In the mid 1990s the college was at a relatively early stage of developing its online program, and the EBC administration believed that an online research librarian would be a helpful addition to the online curriculum. In addition, EBC was seeking regional accreditation, and at the same time it was also pursuing a relationship with a European university. The administration believed that an online librarian would help the school in both of these endeavors. Finally, the concept of an online research professional was thought to be good public relations. In its marketing campaign, EBC could proudly boast of the "cyberlibrarian" who would assist in traditional and electronic library research.

In 1995, after extensive conversations and correspondence with the administration, I entered into an agreement with Eastern Bible College to become their "Online Research Specialist." I would also have adjunct faculty status. The administrator with whom I negotiated this contract informed me that the decision to hire me was based upon my previous experience in both traditional and nontraditional educational environments, as well as my graduate degrees in library science and religious studies.

I agreed to work approximately 10 hours per week in the capacity of online librarian, with a set monthly salary. In addition, I would be able to contract with

individual students to perform tasks (such as specialized research services) that would go beyond my regular duties.

Strategy and Tasks for the Online Librarian

The model for the Online Research Specialist was two-tiered. The first tier was available to all students and would include the following services: Preliminary literature searches, research consulting, bibliographic instruction, Internet training, and organizing and maintaining a "virtual library" for the EBC Web site.

In addition, I was available to students who desired more specialized research services. These included exhaustive literature searches, document delivery, and individualized research and instruction. These services were contracted on an individual basis, and usually involved an extra fee paid by the student. The Online Research Specialist was meant to primarily serve the needs of EBC's online students. However, similar services were also offered to off-line students.

Along with offering online reference service, I also wrote and posted a number of basic online guides to finding information. One such "handout" included advice on borrowing books and acquiring journal articles, using both the Internet and local libraries to facilitate this process. It suggested that students utilize full text databases, document

delivery services, the Web, public library interlibrary loan service, and local theological
libraries. In addition, the handout described the literature review process and mentioned
the necessity of utilizing article databases, online public access catalogs, and
bibliographies.

Other online guides created for EBC students included the following: *Internet
"Fee-Based" Research Services*, *How to Get Doctoral Dissertations*, *The Congregational
Library of Boston*, *Exploring the Internet as Part of the Research Process*, *The Internet
Public Library*, *Web resources*, *Critical Thinking on the Internet*, *Using Knowledge Index
through CompuServe*, *Using the ATLA Religion Indexes*, *Religious and Theological
Abstracts*, *Reference Tools for Theological Research*, *Mark Stover's Top Ten List of
World Wide Web Sites*, and *Search Engines on the Internet*. Many of these documents
are still in use today on the EBC Web site.

Another service that I provided for EBC students was my availability in the
"online chat" room for 2-3 hours per week. This was a forerunner of today's "live
reference" services that are gaining popularity in both academic and public libraries. The
chat room often generated questions and discussions about the difficulty of finding
research information on a "virtual" campus. More common, however, were questions
sent via email. On average I received between five and ten email reference questions per
week.

In my online tutorials, postings, and discussions with students, I explained how the Internet is a constantly changing communications tool that can also be used for research. It connects millions of people throughout the world with common interests, and it provides a mechanism whereby individuals can search for and locate a variety of information resources. In short, it can be a useful way to supplement traditional research.

I also tried to demonstrate to students that research on the Internet can have its pitfalls. For example, how does a user know whether or not the information he or she has discovered is accurate? Who knows whether or not statements made or research presented in an online article on the Internet are true? I believed that EBC students who used the Internet for research needed to know how to distinguish between authoritative information and dubious data, and I tried to integrate these concepts into my instructional and reference activities.

Most of my work was done from home, using Internet resources, online databases, and my own personal library of reference books, commentaries, and primary documents. On occasion, however, reference questions or literature searches would require me to travel to nearby libraries, including a liberal arts college library and a theological seminary library. I communicated with EBC faculty and students through email, telephone, and online chat rooms.

Along with my online tutorials, I also developed a 3 unit class on audiotape that would strengthen student information literacy. Entitled "The Virtual Campus," this

course introduced students to computerized research techniques and encouraged use of

online databases and the Internet. However, this class was not offered to EBC students

until after my departure from the school.

COMPARISON AND CONTRAST WITH TODAY'S DIGITAL LIBRARIANS

The mid 1990s were pioneering years for online librarians. The Web was a

relatively new phenomenon, and very few librarians were assigned to support distance

education programs. Today's situation is quite different. Many (if not most) colleges

and universities have developed at least a semblance of an electronic distance educational

program, and librarians often struggle to provide adequate services to the students

enrolled in these programs (Coffman 2001). Sophisticated Web-based courseware like

Blackboard make EBC's original audiotape paradigm look primitive by comparison.

Riggs has written about the ways that technological advances are creating a different

world for the distance learner. He states:

> "Compressed video, audio teleconferencing, and interactive
>
> multimedia are adding "real value" to the learning, teaching and
>
> research components of distance education. Digital technology is
>
> changing the nature of creating and disseminating knowledge"
>
> (Riggs 1997, 209).

Librarians are investigating (and in many cases implementing) digital reference services for both distance learners and residential students (Stormont 2001). These services include reference email, Web-based tutorials, and live (or chat-based) reference (Meola and Stormont 2000; Coffman 2001). There are a number of universities that have hired full time distance education librarians to handle the growing enrollments in these programs (Riggs 1997; Stanley and Lyandres 2001; Tunon and Pival 2001). Library educators and library practitioners agree that the future education of librarians must include preparation for working with distance learners (Gupta 2001; Hoerman and Furniss 2001).

Yet, despite the advances in technology that have been made in the last few years, the EBC librarian model was in many ways not much different than the typical online librarian of today. I engaged in reference transactions through a variety of means, including telephone, email, and chat. I performed outreach using email and electronic bulletin board messages. I even attempted bibliographic instruction with students, although this was not as successful as I originally anticipated.

Perhaps the biggest barrier to my success as an online librarian at EBC, a barrier that today's digital librarians are usually able to overcome, was the lack of a large core electronic library and insufficient interlibrary loan or document delivery functionality. EBC did not invest in these important resources, and as a result students were often unable to retrieve important materials for their research.

Harmeyer (2001) lists several methods by which theological libraries can support distance learners in higher education. These include consortium relationships, provision of fee-based online databases and other digital resources, selection of free Web resources, electronic reserve collections, interlibrary loan and document delivery, and assistance or recommendations in building personal libraries for students. While I attempted to utilize some of these methods in serving EBC online students, most of the services on this list were impossible to implement at EBC due to the limited informational resources and infrastructure of the college. EBC charged a low tuition rate, and thus expected its students to pay for almost any kind of service that would normally be included in the standard college library, such as interlibrary loan or a reserve materials collection.

In fact, the policy at EBC during my tenure was to guide students toward local academic libraries to fulfill their information needs, with no regard for prior affiliation or consortial agreements. This advice is strongly discouraged in Harmeyer's article, which emphasizes the importance of contractual borrowing agreements with other libraries in the distance learning process. Some institutions with online programs have encouraged their students to purchase library borrowing privileges from these local libraries, and then be reimbursed for any fees incurred. However, EBC had no such policy with regard to fee reimbursement.

A similar EBC practice held true in the arena of electronic databases. EBC required students to pay for a monthly CompuServe membership, which gave the

students access to a variety of useful databases. However, these databases were available only on a "pay per use" basis, above and beyond the monthly CompuServe service charge. Thus, students could access value-added online resources, but only at their own expense. This type of service is often subsidized by traditional colleges and universities, although one might argue that ultimately the student does pay for these resources indirectly through tuition dollars.

Ebooks are an important new medium that libraries can use to serve distant students. The public failures of ebook distributors such as NetLibrary and Questia to sustain a successful business model, along with technical problems such as screen resolution for reading, have caused some to doubt the significance of ebooks for academic libraries. Despite these doubts, both traditional and online universities continue to purchase these tools for their libraries, although user response has not always been enthusiastic (Lonsdale and Armstrong 2001; Dillon 2001). Still, the obvious problem for schools like EBC is that an ebook collection cannot be utilized by students if the institution does not purchase the ebooks in the first place.

ACCREDITATION ISSUES

Eastern Bible College is, for all practical purposes, an unaccredited institution of higher learning. Its recognition by a European university and its connection with a tiny "distance-learning" accrediting body do not provide it with the standard form of accreditation that is used in the United States, that of the regional accrediting agency.

There are currently six regional accrediting bodies in the United States: Middle

States Association of Colleges and Schools, New England Association of Schools and

Colleges, North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, Northwest Association of

Schools and Colleges, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, and Western

Association of Schools and Colleges. In addition to regional accrediting bodies there are

also other ways to seek accreditation. Several religious-oriented accrediting agencies

focus on particular levels of education (e.g., graduate school, etc.). These include the

Association of Theological Schools, the Accrediting Association of Bible Colleges, and

the Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools. Another accrediting

agency, the Distance Education and Training Council, is devoted to (as the name would

imply) the accreditation of distance programs. None of these accrediting bodies have

given approval to EBC. It is unclear if EBC has ever sought this approval.

Despite the legitimacy of these other accrediting bodies (which are all recognized

by the U.S. Department of Education and the Council for Higher Education

Accreditation), the regional accrediting agency remains the primary means to quality

control and respectability among colleges and universities both large and small. In the

past, regional accrediting agencies often demanded a level of residency for students that

was impossible for distance schools like EBC to fulfill. Some colleges, such as the

Fielding Institute (Brown 1998) and Nova Southeastern University (Tunon and Pival

2001), satisfied this requirement through seminars, face-to-face orientations, and

institutes.   While these functions were often only a week or less in duration, they were

intensive and rigorous and thus showed "good faith" to the accrediting teams that came for accreditation site visits.

In addition, the accrediting agencies often required standards for library and information resources that would be difficult for a "virtual campus" with relatively low tuition like EBC to provide. For example, while EBC does encourage students to use free resources on the Web, they have not invested in costly electronic databases or print sources (i.e., a library) that would be provided for all students at no charge. Students are told about many of the CompuServe full text and bibliographic databases, but these are only available to students on a "pay per search" basis.

However, in the last few years, regional accreditation agencies have changed some of their rigid demands on distance learning programs (Carnevale 2001). Student residency and physical library resources are no longer an absolute prerequisite for accreditation. Still, online schools must make a good faith effort to ameliorate the difficulties caused by the lack of face-to-face contact and the absence of a physical library collection (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education 2002). These efforts include sophisticated software interfaces that facilitate faculty-student communication; intensive document delivery services; access to electronic resources like full text databases and ebooks; training sessions (both at the main campus as well as at remote sites) that develop online information literacy; and collaborative agreements with other universities to ensure that access to a physical library is available (Tunon and Pival 2001).

One might argue that increased and intensified library services are even more important in this era of online distance learning. Indeed, some would assert that "regional accreditation standards for distance library services [have become] much more stringent than had been the case in the 1980s" (Tunon and Pival 2001, p. 413). These authors also write that "accrediting teams are increasingly likely to consider such issues as whether distance students are becoming information literate, whether research is being integrated into the curriculum, and whether librarians are collaborating with distance faculty" (Tunon and Pival 2001, p. 421).

Thus, to receive regional accreditation, a college must demonstrate that it is making progress in these areas. It must provide products and services to its students, and then perform outreach to ensure that students are aware of these services (Caspers 2000). While some completely online universities have received accreditation (Helfer 1999; Heilig 2001), it appears that EBC and similar educational institutions will continue to be denied until they make greater efforts to strengthen their online information infrastructure and build cooperative library agreements with other institutions (Foster, 2002).

In the past, students interested in pursuing formal undergraduate study in religion and theology had few options in regard to distance education. While some legitimate institutions have long offered correspondence courses, this genre was mostly dominated by fraudulent diploma mills and by legitimate but unaccredited schools (Carr and Foster 2001; Bear and Bear 2001). The latter group, exemplified by EBC, has attempted to

dominate the online market for theological distance education through advertising

campaigns, pioneering methods of Internet-based course delivery, and an authentic effort

to provide quality education. Lack of regional accreditation, however, hinders this

endeavor in two ways. First, it discourages capable and motivated potential students

from enrolling. Second, it hinders graduates of the program from finding challenging

careers where an unaccredited academic degree would be valued.

Today, however, a growing number of traditional (and regionally accredited)

religious-oriented colleges and universities are beginning to offer Internet-based distance

educational opportunities (Harmeyer 2001). Most of these institutions were in the past

focused on "land-locked," traditional educational delivery, but a changing society and a

competitive market have pushed these schools into nontraditional methods of teaching

and learning.

While schools like EBC list no residency requirements of any kind, many

traditional colleges have retained this prerequisite for two reasons. First, most regional

accreditation bodies continue to encourage some form of residency as part of a

distributed learning course of study. Second, most college faculty and administrators

believe that face-to-face contact remains an important aspect of the educational process.

This idea extends from the classroom to the library, as well as to other parts of the

university campus. The notion of the library as "place" continues to dominate both the

physical and intellectual architecture of the academy (Van Slyck 2001; Crawford 1999).

It remains a factor for members of university accreditation teams when deciding on the fate of both online and traditional academic programs.

CONCLUSION

Students who earn online degrees through traditional, accredited programs are likely to find success in the job market. Their degrees will in many cases be indistinguishable from degrees earned while in residence. The reputation of their alma mater will not be sullied by the taint of a poor reputation or the lack of regional accreditation (Baker 2000). In addition, their experience with leading edge methods of online teaching and learning, coupled with appropriate contact (both online and face to face) with faculty and with other students, will likely prepare them well for careers and vocations (whether as a teacher, a member of the clergy, or in a variety of other fields) in the information age of the 21st century.

The absence of a librarian is clearly a factor when accrediting bodies deny accreditation to distance-based schools. The lack of substantive library and information resources, combined with the absence of a trained professional librarian to guide students through the labyrinth of print and electronic information, deals a fatal blow to any online distributed learning program that seeks both a high level of excellence and accredited status. Librarians are a vital and crucial part of the educational process. Their presence is a valuable and necessary component of both Internet-based learning and more

traditional forms of higher education, in the secular academy as well as in faith-based colleges and universities.

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