Distance education is not new. The ACRL Distance Learning Section was formed more than 30 years ago, for example, but online learning is now growing rapidly. From 2002 to 2008, undergraduates enrolled in at least one distance education course rose from 8% to 20%. In turn, more librarians are connecting with online students and faculty, often without truly knowing where to start in a strategic, meaningful way. This article, based on our panel presentation at the 2012 ALA Annual Conference, contains tips and advice for new distance learning librarians, presented in four categories: Create a relay team, Be brave and dive in!, Plunge into the deep, and Swim with the current. These tips can also serve as a good refresher for seasoned distance learning librarians.

Create a relay team
When first starting as a distance education librarian, one of the first things to do is stop and listen. Listen to what is going on at your institution, in your library, and with your peers. Arming yourself with lots of research is an excellent way to listen. Learn from others’ mistakes and what others did successfully. Become very familiar with the ACRL Standards for Distance Learning Library Services. When you are asked for your professional opinion on distance education, you will be well equipped by knowing what is done and expected elsewhere.

Upon listening to what is happening with your peers, you can focus on what is going on at your college or university. What are the goals and plans for distance education? How can your library assist in these plans? Meeting with your library’s administration at the very beginning will ensure everyone is on the same page. Once this step is completed, see if you can put all of these pieces together and create an environmental scan so you are acquainted with internal and external factors, stakeholders, strategic plans, etc. The more you know before you dive in, the better off you will be.

After listening, building relationships will be crucial. Meet with stakeholders to start creating your relay team; these will vary by institution. They might be university administration, library administration, centers for teaching and learning, centers for distance education, program coordinators, and/or course developers. Meet with people outside the library so they can begin placing a name and face with their new advocate. Never underestimate the power of casual conversations with people across campus. Conversations inside the library are also imperative, as you never know what vitally important silos of information others might have. Conversing

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Diving into distance learning librarianship
Tips and advice for new and seasoned professionals
with many stakeholders (and don’t forget—students are stakeholders, too) will give you a greater perspective and build a strong relay team on your campus.

Building relationships involves reaching out. Too many distance students and faculty automatically assume that the library is only for those on campus. We all know this is flawed, but how do we correct this misperception? Marketing. Marketing can assume many forms: e-mails, surveys, printable flyers, bookmarks, and brochures are just a few forms. Since you’ve already started to create a team, you’ll know which formats will best resonate with your target audience.

One last part of creating a relay team is advocating. When you are meeting formally and informally with those stakeholders, make sure they’re aware of distance education needs. Distance faculty and students have specific needs, tell others about them. You’re an important part of the equation, so don’t forget to advocate for what you must have to meet those needs, too.

**Be brave and dive in**

In addition to building relationships, essential components for a distance education librarian include taking risks, trying new ideas, and trying new tools and techniques. The ability to improvise can be key, as you never know when you’ll need to move to Plan B midstream. One issue is that what works for on-campus students doesn’t necessarily work for distance students. This requires either modifying an existing program or instructional offering or creating something completely new. Also, it is important to document what you are doing and why. This is where good data can come in. If you’re basing your ideas on research, or evidence you’ve gathered about the needs of your students, or proven instructional design, then you can develop a solid plan for your activities.

New distance education librarians are likely to feel they are being pushed outside their comfort zone. For example, conducting a session over interactive broadcast is very different than working with a face-to-face class. It can be helpful to have a short debrief with yourself after a class. This debrief can be useful for evaluating what worked with the class, what didn’t work, and what you might want to change for the future. If you can find a flexible professor to work with, he or she can be ideal for trying out new ideas and seeing what works best. If you try something and it’s not successful, you might consider modifying it instead of starting over from scratch.

Another area that potentially calls for some amount of bravery is collaboration. It might feel risky to put yourself out there and suggest an untested plan, particularly with people outside your organization. Valuable collaborators might include librarians in other departments, teaching faculty, student coordinators, online learning coordinators, and instructional technology consultants or instructional designers. You might start with collaborations between yourself and a faculty member or with other departments in the library.

As described earlier, you’ll likely start building relationships and reaching out to people beyond the library early in your career as a distance education librarian while you’re learning more about your constituency, and you can use these contacts to collaborate on learning initiatives. Hopefully you’ll find yourself in a position to work with groups inside and outside the library or create something new with faculty or others connected to distance education at your institution.

**Plunge into the deep**

Equally essential to building a team around you, making connections, listening, advocating, taking risks, and improvising are plunging into the deep and thinking big. Distance and online constituencies can no longer be an afterthought and must be considered in all decision making as the new normal. Strategically planning services for distance learners, marketing, and collecting are essential pieces of libraries that serve distance learners well.

Serving distance and online learners should not be a singular endeavor. Though
a dedicated distance education position is not always possible, aligning yearly plans for services and resources is imperative. Take into account the needs of distance/online patrons. Listen to them, whether through surveys, conversations, or focus groups, and use this in planning. Also consider plans within the library’s missions and goals; make this constituency part of librarywide strategic planning and decision making. The university is a big piece, too. Is your institution particularly focused on assessment, for example? Where does this fit into your plan for distance learners? Lastly, the ACRL Standards for Distance Learning Library Services mentioned earlier stipulate equal access for learners at a distance. These are our guiding values and can aid in advocating for distance learners.

There is an inherent disconnectedness for students and faculty working in an online or distance environment. As already noted, distance patrons may assume the library is not for them. Librarians, thus, cannot expect these populations to remember us, and marketing to people we may never see has significant challenges. These students and faculty must be part of overall strategic and marketing plans, but also do not underestimate the simplest form of marketing—word of mouth. Foster a positive user experience, provide great customer service, and, with time, positive word-of-mouth should follow. There are also plenty of basic ideas like sending e-mail blasts to students and faculty. Think about your relay team, identify stakeholders, and build relationships with whomever does marketing on campus. You never know when you might be included in a larger feedback campaign or asked to be in a promotional video.

Simultaneously easiest and hardest when plunging into the deep may be collecting; identifying great resources is easy, but the sky doesn’t rain money. Most libraries have already moved to as many e-journals as possible, and e-books are saturating our resources; focus should now be on strategy, knowing our populations, and advocating for appropriate resources in content and format. With e-books, for example, consider the most effective and appropriate mechanism for e-book delivery at your institution for your populations. Also, be aware of holes in electronic content for particular programs, work to ensure they are still represented in the print collection, and keep up on e-resource opportunities and issues.

**Swim with the current**

After learning the importance of building a relay team, bravely diving in, and taking a plunge into the depths of planning to support distance education, it’s time to launch off the diving board and keep stride with the currents of technology. The following tips suggest uses of technology for outreach, technologies for asynchronous and synchronous instruction, and methods for how to keep up.

Users expect an effective, efficient, and satisfactory digital user experience (DUX). For students who never step foot in the physical library, the DUX is their only connection. Developing a portal or Web site for distance students creates a personalized space for discovery, access, and help while letting students know the library understands their distance situation. Campus policies, brandings, and restrictions might limit what can be done, but creating a winning campus relay team may assist with these challenges. Try usability testing, from surveys to hosting focus groups, to know your institution’s users when creating the portal.

Orientations are rare for distance students, so creating a personal welcome video will help ease their anxiety and shape connections with their online library. Meeting students at their point of need is critical. Consider embedding a library chat widget on major library Web pages, in databases, or in failed searches in the library catalog. Another option is a “Not Finding it?” drop down widget on strategic library Web pages to suggest tutorials, guides, or library chat.

It is a challenge to reach distance students for instruction. For synchronous instruction, acquire a Web conferencing room to offer online workshops, such as Tools for Research or Using EndnoteWeb. Try a free room if your campus doesn’t have a license. When
topics can be flipped. From class assessments, we have also come to realize that in the future, we need to make sure that students are actually completing the activities outside the classroom. This will increase the effectiveness of the technique and improve the level of class discussion. We could increase their motivation with short, in-class quizzes, or require a quick presentation on the readings. One option to consider is working with faculty to make completion of the out-of-classroom activities part of the students’ grades. Greater collaboration with faculty might give us more information on how effective these techniques are in the long term. Also, we discovered that running a flipped classroom means developing a whole new skill set and way of being in the classroom. It requires the librarian to relinquish control and authority over the classroom, which can be difficult. But the rewards are worth the risk.

Notes
enables distance learners to participate in the improvement of library Web sites and tools, by providing valuable input to the information architecture of library created objects. Libraries and librarians will need to suss out for themselves if online card sorting techniques will meet the needs of their library, project, and patrons. For us, digital was better than analog. OptimalSort was the right tool at the right time and at the right price.

Notes


9. Screenshots of dendrograms, similarity matrix, and participant-centric analysis from the project are available at http://dr.archives.pdx.edu/xmlui/handle/psu/9246.

