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Integrating Library Services Between Two Urban Institutions

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Abstract

In 2006, an intra-institutional partnership was formed between the William and Anita Newman Library at Baruch College, City University of New York (CUNY) and the CUNY School of Professional Studies (SPS) for the provision of library services to the university's first entirely online degree program in the fall of 2006, the CUNY Online BA in Communication and Culture.

Since 2006, SPS has grown exponentially. Currently, SPS offers 10 undergraduate degrees, including a BS in nursing and six masters' degrees, including MS degrees in urban studies, data analytics, and an MA in applied theatre.

Integrating a new and growing school with its own unique practical and programmatic needs into an existing college library posed unique challenges and opportunities in an effort to provide the same suite of services to the externally based SPS distance community as those offered to traditional Baruch students and faculty.

The experience of launching such services is examined through the lens of the current literature for the purposes of highlighting examples of lessons learned for the benefit to librarians currently supporting or considering support for an influx distance learners at their institutions.

This paper describes the author's experiences as the library's liaison to the school in planning, launching, and providing highly used library services for this unique urban population while at the same time establishing a foundation for providing similar services for our home institution.

Keywords: distance learning, library services, institutional collaboration, planning, access services, institutional change

Introduction

In 2006, an intra-institutional partnership was formed between the William and Anita Newman Library at Baruch College, City University of New York (CUNY) and the CUNY School of Professional Studies (SPS) to provide library services to the university's first entirely online degree program, the CUNY Online BA in Communication and Culture.

I was designated as the primary liaison between the Newman Library and The SPS. Our chief librarian and I collaborated in planning beginning in the summer of 2006. The initial question was: What changes needed to be made in order for a face-to-face library to begin supporting distance learners?

Today, there is no shortage of information about libraries that support distance learners. The literature includes many accounts of institutions that promote and provide point of use access to online resources, reference services, research consultations, interlibrary loan services, and electronic course reserve services (Nielsen, 2014). There is also a body of research that details the wants, needs and expectations of faculty, students, and librarians involved with distance learning and the means by which to assess such services (Kvenild & Bowles-Terry, 2011; Ritterbush, 2014; Thomsett-Scott & May, 2009; White, 2010).

In 2006, the literature was not as vast. The circumstances under which our library embarked upon providing these services were unique, as we were asked to initiate support for online students from an external school with a library oriented to face-to-face interactions with its primary constituents. We did not know exactly what to expect, and like many libraries at the time that were faced with the task of supporting distance learners, we built our own model after surveying the options other libraries offered, and in consultation with the ACRL guidelines. Like SPS, we were "flying the plane while building it" (Walters, Smiley, Otte, & Bernhardt, 2011).

Background

CUNY is the largest urban college system in the United States and is composed of 23 individual colleges and institutions throughout the city of New York. In 2004, the university hired a new executive vice-chancellor of academic affairs who was a proponent of online learning, having previously developed online programs at the University of Massachusetts.

The CUNY SPS is one of the newest schools in the CUNY system. It was founded in 2003 as an entity of the University Graduate Center to meet the needs of working adults, and offers a range of non-degree, continuing-education programs.

In 2006, SPS would become the university hub for distance learning when it launched the university's first entirely online degree program, the CUNY Online BA. The program was designed by a consortium of CUNY faculty in order to provide opportunities for students who had "stopped out" of college, rather than dropped out, i.e., those who had earned over 30 credit hours and left college in good academic standing. SPS was aware of thousands of students enrolled previously at CUNY who met this profile and launched the degree to help meet the demands of those who needed to complete their studies. The majority of those "distance" students enrolled would, in fact, be local New York City students (Otte, George, 2007).

Baruch College, home to the Newman Library, is a centrally located, four-year senior college located in Manhattan that serves 18,090 students (CUNY Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, 2014). Baruch offers a wide range of undergraduate and masters' degrees, and has an award-winning library with a large collection of electronic resources and services.

In 2006, our chief librarian was approached by CUNY Central offices about the possibility of designating the Newman Library as the home library to the CUNY Online BA. The SPS was interested in providing its students with the same suite of library services that are available to students at Baruch College.

As the program had not yet been launched at that time, we had our share of concerns about its potential to be a source of confusion for all parties involved, in terms of access, and information technology support.

Despite these concerns, the library stood to benefit from being involved in the historic launch of CUNY's first online degree program, and ultimately, the library had the opportunity to work with the most experienced online faculty at the university. SPS would serve as a test case for the development of services for both online and traditional on-campus students at Baruch College. Distance learning at Baruch in 2006 was still nascent, but it had been targeted in the college's strategic plan as an area for growth.

The two colleges appeared to be well matched to form a partnership, as both institutions shared the university's mission statement to provide educational access

and excellence to citizens of the City of New York. Both were centrally located and physically proximate. Baruch had a long history of service to commuter students, as we are located in downtown Manhattan and do not have a typical live-in campus. An agreement was drawn up between both parties for the library to accommodate the 300 students expected to enter the program in the fall of 2006, and we began to design support services for them.

Planning

In the summer of 2006, we met with the program's founding faculty consortium to gain an understanding of how they envisioned that the library services would support the program's online curricula, as well as to answer questions about services the library offered the Baruch community at the time.

The faculty told us that, in addition to providing the SPS community with access to electronic resources, including eBooks, it would be essential that these resources be available readily and redundantly. The program would be offered completely within the confines of Blackboard, and it would be useful for a library presence to exist there, as well as on the web. The faculty also wanted a video tutorial that provided an overview of the services available.

We also met with SPS administrators and IT staff, Baruch IT staff, and the CUNY Office of Library Services to work out technical details to ensure that CUNY Online BA students could be identified properly and given borrowing privileges across the CUNY system. This involved assigning users ID cards with unique library numbers that met CUNY library standards, and working with CUNY central to assign a new institutional prefix for SPS to attach to them. As SPS had no previous experience in assigning library ID numbers, we referred them to a vendor who could provide them and showed them how to associate the numbers with student records in their student information system, so that they would eventually make their way into the CUNY library system, Aleph. In this way, the library would have the ability to tie fines to the registrar in case a block needed to be put into effect.

The other major issue in providing library privileges to SPS would be to set up remote access by having SPS pass along login information to the library to add to our proxy server for activation; however, this was not of immediate concern, as before we could allow access, SPS needed to have students.

Aligning and Upgrading Services

We began to look at the ways in which other schools provided library services to distance learners. We found that many with existing online learners offered toll-free numbers for reference services, fax services for document delivery, and home delivery options, as well as chat and phone reference services. We also sought guidance from the 2004 ACRL Guidelines for Library Services for distance learners (Committee & others, 2004), and began to develop our own model to fit the unique needs of SPS, while taking into account CUNY's urban setting.

A dedicated webpage was created on the Newman Library website for students in the CUNY Online BA program. The site contained a simple, customized set of links, including a direct phone number to my office, so that students could obtain immediate and informed help. The goal was to keep the number of links to a minimum for clarity, and to offer immediate value to the program during a time when the Newman Library's website contained an overabundance of what would be, for this user group, superfluous Baruch-specific information. The page contained links to the A–Z list of databases, the journal-finder tool, the university book catalog, and the library's Ask a Librarian service that offers 24 hour chat and email reference services, as well as directions to the library. The same information was also added to the Newman Library tab page in Blackboard.

The recommendation of the ACRL Guidelines that book delivery services be available for this population was met and made possible via the fortuitous, coincidental fall 2006 university-wide launch of a new patron-driven book delivery service among CUNY libraries (CUNY Libraries Inter-Campus Services: CLICS). This service allowed CUNY students to search for physical books in the university catalog and request their delivery to the CUNY library of their choice. This platform appeared to be well suited to meet the book delivery needs of the locally distant CUNY Online BA population.

After deciding upon the services and the methods we would use to deliver them, we updated everything on the Newman Library website that SPS students would have occasion to use and made sure to revise the language presented there to accommodate SPS. This included updating our authentication page, so that it included language that referred SPS students who needed password assistance to the SPS IT helpdesk, and alerting the Baruch helpdesk to do the same for SPS students if they accidentally called Baruch.

Collection Considerations

We looked next at options that would provide a better solution for offering eBooks than we had at the time, as our offerings were scattered across multiple platforms. Based upon what we learned from the faculty, we purchased the potentially expandable ebrary Academic Complete package, which would ultimately make thousands of eBooks accessible via the book catalog to support the curricular needs for both student populations.

As SPS students were not on campus physically, and we knew it would be difficult to offer individual database workshops for this community, we began to investigate federated search tool solutions in the hope that providing such a service would allow access to the more than 200 databases to which we subscribed. Within a year, we launched 360 Search to accommodate both populations (Ellis, Hartnett, & Waldman, 2008).

Outreach

With these services in place, the next step was to create an online instructional video to introduce students to the library and its many resources and services. Based upon previous discussions of what should be presented as essential links on the webpage, we developed a script and translated it into storyboards.

We were concerned that our efforts to build services would be of no avail if students did not know, or care to know, about the library, which certainly seemed possible, as there was no intrinsic physical connection between SPS and the Newman Library, and it would be very easy for SPS students to feel marginalized.

We worked with Baruch College's Media Services group to produce a live video that portrayed a real person (gulp, me) in a real library. During the planning process, we tried to imagine what has an immediate impact on first time visitors to the Newman Library. In our experience at Baruch, we knew from previous LibQUAL survey responses that students found that the building itself plays a major role in forming initial impressions. "Library as place" was the dimension of service quality in which we come closest to meeting the desired level of service.

Thus, we wanted to represent the Newman Library as a physical place, and took steps to feature the building onscreen. When it was finished, the video was eight minutes long and divided into five individual modules: Accessing the Library through Blackboard; Searching the Book Catalog; Accessing Books; Accessing Databases; Logging in, and Reference Services. When it was completed, we created a link to the video and posted it on the CUNY Online BA Library Services page and our Blackboard tab.

We also envisioned that the best way to reach students would be by engaging the faculty first. The literature indicated that doing so is beneficial, as faculty members who are aware of library resources are more likely to include assignments that involve library research (Adams & Cassner, 2001; Markgraf, 2002).

Equipped with the information we had gathered in our meetings with faculty, as well as that provided by SPS administrators, we contacted every faculty member individually by email and asked for his/her phone contact information. When communicating with them, we noted the class that they would be teaching, and identified existing library resources that might be useful. We explained that the library offered an electronic reserve service and that we would be more than willing to accommodate requests to place items on reserve in a flexible manner, and that they should direct requests to make use of the service to me. I also asked that they contact me directly with reserve requests, rather than funneling them through Baruch's reserve desk.

Just prior to the launch, we provided their offices with a library services brochure that listed the fall hours, as well as my personal business card, which would be included as well in a package of CUNY Online BA material that would be mailed to enrolled students. The only thing left to do prior to the launch was to load the student authentication information into Baruch's proxy server as soon as SPS provided it. It seemed that everything was in place.

Implementation: Launch Problems

We received the authentication information from SPS the day before classes began, as planned. I passed it along to our library systems contact and asked for immediate access. We were told that SPS would have to wait a day or so for access, like everyone else. They explained that there was no pressing need for students to have remote access, as they would not yet have any assignments that required such access.

We had to remind them that the CUNY Online BA was making a much-anticipated launch and that students would be eager to obtain access, as many faculty had placed course materials on our electronic reserve system that students would be unable to view without access.

The next day, SPS sent us another list of students to load into the system. In fact, we continued to receive multiple requests per week to load student information into our proxy server for nearly a month thereafter, as SPS continued to enroll and un-enroll people. This was a source of great displeasure to our systems contact, who informed us that Baruch students usually have to wait for this information to be provided to them, especially if they register late. We were told that our expectation that SPS would receive on-demand loading of proxy numbers was unreasonable, considering the fact that Baruch students did not receive such immediate service. We again pointed out that, in this case, equal treatment of SPS students would be equivalent to providing them a disservice, given their unique access needs as students in an online program.

The constant requests to add and drop students to and from our proxy server also made it difficult to keep an up-to-date roster, which we needed to ensure that the total number of SPS students enrolled did not exceed our number of licensed users. To address these issues, we eventually came to an agreement with SPS that proxy requests would be processed on a number of specified dates throughout the semester, and that the roster list provided would be complete, so that previous rosters could be disregarded. These proxy uploads would be turned over directly to Baruch systems, and we would obtain a separate list of students' email addresses for outreach purposes.

Access Services Needs Emerge

In the meantime, our faculty outreach efforts appeared to be effective. My non-bureaucratic approach of having electronic reserve requests emailed directly to me soon had me operating something akin to my own SPS reserve system in an attempt to deliver a service that, in fact, was not yet offered.

Access services would emerge as a key in providing support for the program. I moved into an office located in the Access Services department, in order to be able

to help and, at the same time, ensure that SPS requests were not comingled with Baruch requests.

Making requests for off-campus faculty to have items placed on electronic reserve in 2006 was a convoluted process. It required filling out an electronic form with the citation information for the items they wanted to make available to their students, together with information about the course. Then, they either had to provide the material to the reserve department in a separate email, or drop off the material physically and fill out a paper form. There was no way to attach materials to the electronic form.

Although my approach to receiving requests was working, it quickly became labor-intensive, as faculty frequently made additions, deletions, and adjustments to their class pages. The files that faculty sent to be placed on electronic reserve were often too large for my email address to accept or had file names impossible to match with citations. We were also asked to locate materials in the collection to be made available electronically, and faculty physically mailed personal materials for us to scan. At the end of the semester, we would need to inform faculty members that their materials would be deactivated and to remind them that, if they taught the class again, they needed to alert us prior to the new semester.

Our experiences led eventually to the development of a new electronic reserve form that was able to accommodate online faculty. After experimenting unsuccessfully with a new form in collaboration with a web designer, we found a way to repurpose the survey software Qualtrics, for which Baruch already has an institutional license. Qualtrics allowed faculty to upload materials and associate them with citations in a single request. It also allowed us to offer an express request option through which faculty could ask that material that had been on reserve in previous semesters be reactivated without having to fill out an entirely new form or giving the impression that faculty had to request everything a second time. In our experience, we found that new faculty members were often hired to teach classes that had been offered previously, and they needed access to the items that had been associated with those classes. With that in mind, we created an option in Qualtrics to request that materials be made available for preview and planning purposes when the semester was not in session. By the end of the first semester, 10 of the 17 classes offered had items placed on reserve.

Faculty Video Needs

Through reserves, we began to receive many requests from SPS faculty for the ability to share streaming video with their classes via e-reserve. Such requests could not be met by simply placing a DVD on reserve and lending it to students with a set of headphones. At the time, the library did not have a standardized method to address such requests. To accommodate these requests, we investigated and located the rights holders for the media in question and sent letters asking for permission to show it to a specific number of library users within the confines of our electronic reserve system.

We were surprisingly successful in obtaining permissions in the absence of a standardized procedure. In doing so, we learned that, in many cases, rights holders themselves lacked a standardized way to deal with such academic requests. In some cases, we found we already had the license to a streaming service that gave us the rights to stream material. Based upon our experiences, we eventually dedicated a media librarian who specializes in central management of these requests, not only for SPS, but for Baruch as well. By 2012, we had hired a new head of Access Services, and an electronic reserves coordinator who would manage these functions moving forward.

Rapid Growth of SPS

The CUNY Online BA was soon joined by other degree programs offered by the SPS. A number of degrees in subject areas in which Baruch already had strong collections appeared, including, but not limited to, SPS's Online BS in Business (2008), Online MS in Business Management (2009), and Online BAs in Sociology (2011) and Psychology (2012).

Further, a host of other degree offerings became available that were new to us, such as the MA in Applied Theatre, the MA and BA in Disability Studies (2008 and 2012), the Online BS in Health Information Management (2011), the Online MS in Data Analytics (2014), and the Online BS in Nursing (2014).

This rapid expansion of SPS programs was, as described by Bowen (2015), made possible by the unique structure of the school, which has a governance model that supports growth. Development committees at SPS tend to work more harmoniously in implementing program proposals than do those at more traditional colleges. Rather than areas of study being formed as departments, at SPS, they consist of program committees. This structure has helped the Newman Library meet

collection demands for these programs, thanks to direct access to curricular documents and syllabi in the very early stages of development, and direct access to faculty. This has allowed us to build our collection directly around the curricula.

Discussion

Many of our initial questions with respect to where to begin, what services to provide, and how to serve distance students best might be answered more easily in today's literature. Nonetheless, the experiences we had when faced with a sudden influx of distance leaners gave us something of a crash course in developing such services, and doing so allowed us to identify some unique problems and pose some unique solutions that did not exist in the literature then, and still do not. Thus, our experiences may be beneficial for librarians working with distant learners either externally or at their home institutions.

In retrospect, the real question in our particular situation was not what changes we needed to make in order to achieve the desired ends of equal service, but rather the means by which we could make those changes happen, considering that the users who required the services are not the core population and the library worked perfectly as it was. In our experience, those means were not only technological, but rather required a flexible attitude and strong advocacy.

Indeed providing library services to distant learners requires resources. Our investments in ebrary and the federated search tool 360 Search were useful and is something that other librarians have done. Bower & Mee (2010) pointed out that during the collection development process, they preferred full text electronic resources when building their collection. When we invested in ebrary and the federated search tool, we knew that these resources would benefit all library users, as the lines between distance and campus users are becoming increasingly blurred (Bower & Mee, 2010).

It should be noted that resources include staffing. My move to the Access Services suite was not unprecedented. Matesic (2009) described having done the same thing in an effort to change the existing services at her institution and invest the time in becoming familiar with the processes in order to better change them. Ezell (2013) also described his experiences in the dual roles of resource sharing and distance librarian. Farkas in an interview with ALCTS Newsletter Online further described

the primary functions of distance library services as being access services and electronic course reserves (2012).

The process also requires advocacy. Online learners have unique needs, such as the need for immediate access. All of the planning that we undertook prior to launching the online library services would have been of no value if the users of the system we were building were unable to access it. While we were well aware of the upcoming launch and the pending influx of new users, it was not clear immediately that these users would require expedited services, and the focus on providing equivalent services actually translated to a disservice. This example is of value to any library providing services to distant leaners and is not reflected in the literature. One should not assume that access needs are being bet with existing internal processes. Care needs to be taken in order to accommodate these needs. It should be noted that this example also illustrates the fact that the work performed in support of online learners (especially those from different schools) can easily be invisible to other library constituents. Librarians who support distance learners need to advocate strongly and in advance for these needs with IT support services. Nickel & Mulvihill (2010) expressed the need for librarians supporting distance students to advocate for them to the rest of the library.

Librarians who advocate for the transitioning to new services require flexibility. Our approach, in which we simply asked faculty to email us with their needs for electronic course reserve services that could support distance users allowed us to develop a body of knowledge about what faculty wanted. It also allowed us to consider using Qualtrics to develop a highly customized form to accommodate their requests most effectively. In her study, Thomsett-Scott identified electronic reserve services as the most well-known and used library service (2009). Diaz (2012) described libraries that use open- source software to control the costs of providing course reserves, while Poe and McAbee described the launch of the platform Docutek (2008). There does not appear to be any mention in the literature of repurposing software to accommodate such services. Libraries with a preexisting license to adaptable software may consider using it to meet their needs.

Finally, the process involves a personal touch. Our approach in featuring the library as a place with a real librarian and a direct phone number, is also consistent with the approaches of other librarians who offer distance library services (Coonin, Williams, & Steiner, 2011)

Benefits

Working with SPS has been beneficial for the Newman Library because of the experiences we have gained. When we first began, we imagined that we would be able to leverage the services we developed to support Baruch students. In 2013, Baruch College unveiled its Strategic Plan 2013–2018, which calls for at least 20% of its classes to be offered online or in a hybrid format within the next five years (Baruch College, 2013).

Since 2006, we have been able to develop and streamline many access and streaming media course reserve processes, and we have already seen the benefits of these efforts. When Baruch launched a film minor in 2010, the library was prepared to accommodate the program based on our experience with SPS faculty. Working with SPS has also benefitted our collections, not only in the beginning, when we invested in the eBooks and federated search platforms, but in terms of the resources we have been able to collect in support of the programs offered.

We do not currently have programs in all of the disciplines that SPS offers. By supporting such programs, we have gained not just experience but also resources that accompany them that we otherwise would not have required. Some SPS programs, such as nursing, are multidisciplinary. The Nursing program's resources help support Baruch's natural sciences faculty. They also help support Baruch's Health Policy Program, and the MBA in healthcare. Each SPS program that we do not have at Baruch nonetheless helps support other programs.

In 2008, while working with the SPS faculty to acquire resources to support its new MA program in Applied Theatre, we received a special collection donated by a founder of theatre studies at CUNY, which serves to benefit Baruch's Fine and Performing Arts department's needs.

One of the programs has allowed us to serve students with disabilities better. The launch of the MA in Disability Studies in 2009 required processing many electronic reserve requests that needed to be entirely OCR readable. We worked with Baruch's Office of Services for Students with Disabilities to find a more optimal method than what was offered at the time to make texts readable with assistive technology. In doing so, we developed a solution (in this case, the reserve desk was able to obtain a license for Adobe professional and develop a workflow process so that the reserve desk could do it again). SPS students and faculty affiliated with the program often inquired about assistive technology at the library, and our strengthened

relationship with the assistive technology manager led to a better library-wide understanding of the services available to students.

While Baruch College unveiled its Strategic Plan 2013–2018 to expand into the virtual realm and offer classes online or in a hybrid format, paradoxically, SPS has become more brick and mortar in nature, having moved into its own dedicated building in midtown Manhattan in 2013, with four floors of classrooms within walking distance to the Newman Library. Currently, we are working with SPS to help it create its own laptop loan service modeled on the Newman Library's experience. Relationships formed in this partnership have benefitted both parties. Ironically, a contact at SPS asked us recently how the library provides access to computer workstations that support people with impaired vision, as SPS was installing new workstations at its own campus.

Today, SPS has almost 2,600 students and constitutes a large portion of the users that the Newman Library serves (CUNY Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, 2014b). While it would appear that the Newman Library is reaching SPS students effectively, as these students report the highest use of library electronic resources in the university, and that "statistical relationships exist between student GPA and their use of e-resources," much remains to be done (CUNY Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, 2014a; Samson, 2014).

Limitations

Despite the success of the SPS programs, we cannot pinpoint the specific reasons for their success, and we do not know whether or not their effectiveness is associated with our activities, or those of the SPS faculty. We have been privy regularly to survey data provided to us by SPS and CUNY, and via information gathered from faculty and students every semester, though we have yet to undertake a targeted study of our own to identify the factors related to the success of SPS. Meeting the information literacy needs of the SPS population remains a challenge, as the ability to provide classroom instruction has been limited to the instructional resources and video modules we have produced, course-related lectures, and workshops we have provided for those programs that meet in person, via discussion boards in Blackboard, and via the provision of reference services at various points of need.

Further Research

There is room for more embeddedness, although it is a challenge for one person to be everywhere, and the literature has indicated that "going it alone" is not the best approach (Tumbleson & Burke, 2010; York & Vance, 2008). The single person "super liaison" model we use to support all of the SPS departments has been beneficial in developing a physical sense of support, although there are limitations to working alone (Jaguszewski & Williams, 2013).

As mentioned previously, serving as the liaison between the SPS population and the library has involved not only advocating for the library with SPS, but equally, to advocating for, and communicating the requirements of the new user population to the existing library constituents, and making their existence known. To manage this more effectively, monthly meetings among librarians have been instituted to address the needs of this unique student group.

With respect to meeting the future needs of Baruch students, some of the benefits of having worked with a new school and new faculty and having access to curricular materials very early on may not necessarily match when we begin to provide access to pre-existing departments accustomed to the old ways.

The ability to identify distance learners is a known problem for libraries that offer services to distance programs (Shell et al., 2010). We were fortunate not to have this problem, as we are working with an external population that has a unique prefix associated with its library ID numbers. Knowing this in advance might allow us to find a way to identify Baruch online students and faculty in need of customized services and outreach more effectively.

Based upon the experiences we have gained in providing library services to the SPS, it appears that the Newman Library will be ready to accommodate the needs of the Baruch College community fully in the near future.

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