

## Special Forum: Distance Learning

# Supporting Distance Education Students

by *Stacie Schmidt*

Biola University, located on the Los Angeles side of the Los Angeles/Orange County border in California, has approximately 6,000 undergraduate and graduate students. Biola students are primarily residential or local, with close to 500 distance education or online students across several programs. Approximately 110 of these distance education or online students are Talbot Theological Seminary graduate students. Attempting to discern the exact number of distance education students was a challenging task, as Biola does not easily differentiate between in-person and distance education students. Furthermore, Biola does not consider itself as having “distance education students”; instead, Biola has “online students” who may be in any location.

Similar to the perspective shared across the university, the Biola Library does not differentiate services for distance education students. We do have a page on our website “For Online Learners”—the phrase “online learners” was chosen over “distance education students” because Biola emphasizes the style of delivery format (online) over location (distance). Our services for online students are a mixture of concessions for Biola students studying at a distance and promotion of our existing online services.

Students in online classes have the same access to our librarians and staff as in-person students. Reference Services offers chat, phone, and email support that is heavily used by online students for research assistance. Our major concession to students who do not live locally is that they can use interlibrary loan to request copies of articles or a book chapter we only have access to in print, and we will provide a scanned copy. We ask students to come in and copy it themselves if we notice that they have a local address. We do not mail books to students. The Biola Library maintains membership in a number of nationwide reciprocal programs, including Atla, which allows students to access libraries closer to them.

Our librarian and staff support for distance education students is superb. They receive the same high caliber of research and resource assistance as our in-person students. Students appreciate the personal connections that can come from repeated use of our reference services, and some have come to introduce themselves when they visit campus. Our interlibrary loan staff provide timely and valuable assistance to obtain articles or chapters for distance education students. Our Technical Services prioritizes electronic purchases of e-books, journals and other resources to provide material that is accessible for our students who do not have easy access to our physical collections.

Unfortunately, there are a number of recurring issues. Several online programs at Biola have reduced or cut their required research training, which means that students are less equipped to do library research. There can be a significant disconnect between some distance education students and the library. Many students are unaware of existing services or online resources, attempting to do their studies without utilizing the resources available to them. Some students expect or anticipate services that the library does not offer. Quite a few distance education students are disappointed when they realize that we do not mail books. Some students are in foreign countries without easy access to libraries or required textbooks and ask the Biola Library to provide all required resources electronically. These situations are frustrating for all involved, but provide avenues for future growth.

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COVID-19 has turned all Biola students into distance education students and revealed some of the weaknesses of our support for distance education students. Biola's emphasis on format (online) versus location (distance) has led the library to focus on online material and support. American copyright law restricts us from copying more than a chapter or 10%, whichever is less, of a physical item in our collection. This restriction, while necessary to meet copyright standards, means that our distance education students have less access to our physical materials. I know this equity issue has plagued libraries for decades and has been a keen source of friction for our patrons during our COVID-19 closure. Many of our fellow Atla libraries mail books to their students. While the Biola Library had considered this option before and deemed it difficult to implement, mailing physical books to students would alleviate significant research and resource needs of students who are not local. Additionally, stronger marketing and departmental engagement by the library liaisons could ameliorate a lack of knowledge on the part of distance education students. Each librarian is a liaison to a specific school at Biola.

I am hopeful that the experiences of COVID-19 will have radical implications on how we support distance learners in the future. COVID-19 has made each one of us into distance education students, staff, faculty, or librarians. We are now dealing with the same experiences that distance education students have dealt with for years: limited resources, poor connections, lack of content, and the list could go on. As the Biola Library moves towards reopening amid an uncertain world, we are eager to find improved ways to support our distance education students.