

Special Forum: Distance Learning

Serving Our Distance Learners

The Work of the Styberg Library at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary

by Daniel Smith

The Ernest and Bernice Styberg Library, formerly known as the United Library, serves the students, staff, and faculty of Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary and Bexley Seabury Seminary. Both institutions have a growing number of online/distance students in their programs, and we are working to better connect with them to meet their information and educational needs. To this end, we have updated our policies, programs, and services to better serve this population, which is predominantly made up of students. We also continue to evaluate our policies and programs in order to best meet the needs of our online/distance community. Finally, we intentionally listen and observe how our community is using online resources and seek to incorporate this into the way that we offer our services. While this work can be challenging at times—particularly connecting with distance learners—we remain committed to it.

First, in an effort to make our distance learning policies, programs, and services more accessible and findable, we have created dedicated webpages with relevant content. On our website (library.garrett.edu), we have created a custom tab for distance learning that highlights the services and policies that are relevant to online/distance students. This tab features tutorials for some of our most popular databases as well as brief tutorials about using the online discover layer—USearch. There is also a page with information about how to access electronic resources, like databases and e-book platforms. The tab also includes links for the most popular, promising electronic resources that are available through the library, specifically select databases and e-reference collections.

Regarding physical resources and access, we aim to extend our physical library to students at a distance (over 50 miles) by offering to freely mail any circulating materials to them, as long as they agree to send them back to us. This has proven to be a very popular service for our Doctor of Ministry students; however, others have taken advantage of this resource as well. In a similar vein, we offer an electronic document delivery service that allows students to request scans of materials that are available in our library. We then scan and send requested materials to students. Similarly, we offer to interlibrary loan and email articles and chapters for our patrons who are online or at a distance.

In terms of reference and research consultations, we are available via chat from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. during the week. This service is attractive to our distance students, and we regularly assist online students with their questions about the library. Currently, we use LibraryH3lp which allows us to share links, content, and screens with our users. We have also created a virtual study room via Zoom where we keep regular virtual office hours, and many students have connected with us this way. Our online forms have also been a beneficial way of connecting with our distance students. Of course, we continue to be available via phone and email as well.

To assist our distance learning students with finding library resources, we have also increased our library research guides and aim to always include online content that is either freely available or available through the library. Similarly, we have curated a list of religion databases that features

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many open access, online resources. Likewise, we work with our faculty to develop course guides and highlight our relevant, online resources. We also continually digitize our special collections and archives and make those available online. All of our digital content and library research guides are incorporated into USearch, which increases their discoverability and usability with our online/distance community. Tutorials that show how students can utilize these resources have also been created and continue to be expanded and enhanced.

In addition to these services and resources, we endeavor to offer an online option (via Zoom) for every program that we host in the library, including monthly writing nights, periodic workshops and instruction sessions, and faculty book talks. We also have online-only instruction sessions for online courses. Embedded librarianship has proven to be a great way of connecting with distance students as well.

Being in the Chicagoland area offers a lot of possibilities for supporting students, including those who are online or at a distance. We are affiliated with the Northwestern University Libraries, which gives us access to thousands of electronic resources, primarily in the form of articles, e-books, and media. This wealth of electronic resources is available to all of our online/distance students, and we are working to expand it to include even more relevant content. Regarding additional connections/partnerships, whenever possible, we also highlight the reciprocal borrowing program that is available through Atla, and we have found that students are very excited about this possibility.

As a recent graduate of the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign LEEP program, I seek to continually reflect upon my experience as a distance student to better meet the needs of our online/distance students. This experience has proven to be invaluable for me because I had previously only experienced online learning in a limited way. I am also currently a mentee in the ACRL Distance Learning Section's beta mentorship program for new librarians who are engaged in supporting distance learning students. This has been a very rewarding experience, as it has connected me with a more seasoned distance-learning librarian who regularly encourages, challenges, and resources me, and this opportunity has motivated me to look for articles, like the many that have been published in *Theological Librarianship*, about distance learning. This online community of practice has given me ideas for future programs and services for our online/distance community.

The Styberg endeavors to serve our distance learners in the best ways possible. We try to offer a comparable experience to our on-campus students. The pandemic has given us opportunities to improve upon our policies, services, resources, and programs, and we continue to evaluate the ways that we can best serve all of our distance students. This continues to be exciting and rewarding work for us, and we are excited about what the future will bring in this regard!