

## Special Forum: Distance Learning

# Library Support for Distance Learning at Colorado Christian University

by *Oliver Schulz*

Colorado Christian University (CCU) is a four-year liberal arts school founded in 1914 as Denver Bible Institute. Its student population currently exceeds 8,400 students (about 3,500 FTE), enrolled in one of two colleges: the on-campus/in-seat College of Undergraduate Studies (CUS—50+ degree programs) and the College of Adult and Graduate Studies (CAGS—80+ degree programs), which offers classes at extension centers and online. The CAGS programs currently represent about 75% of the enrollment.

The Clifton Fowler Library, named after the founder of the Denver Bible Institute, currently employs four full-time librarians: the dean of the library, an information services librarian, a technical services librarian, and a research and instruction librarian. The librarians are supported by a library services assistant, a part-time reference and web library coordinator, and up to nine student employees.

The library has been methodically and strategically improving its collections and services towards the increasing off-campus student population. First, CCU has increased the number of online journal databases to the current 142, ranging from general databases such as EBSCO Academic Complete to specialized ones such as the Atla Religion Database with AtlaSerials. Simultaneously, the library has reduced its physical holdings for journals as they became available online. The library also conducted an overlap analysis of its resources and discovered significant duplication in two large databases, one published by EBSCO and the other by ProQuest. After evaluating various aspects of the two, the ProQuest database was canceled. Naturally, some titles were lost; however, the library invested those savings to upgrade the EBSCO database, resulting in a significant increase of unique resources without additional expenses.

Second, since 2018, the library has shifted significant resources from physical to electronic book purchasing. The library previously preferred physical resources for CUS patrons and electronic resources for CAGS patrons. However, the increasing duplication of academic programs in both colleges, and the commonly-cited advantages of e-books (title is available 24/7, accessible from anywhere, can't be lost/damaged, etc.) led to a change in policy: the library now purchases the electronic format whenever it is available and will purchase physical titles only if the electronic format is unavailable and if they are requested by CUS faculty or students. This has led to a reversal of acquisition numbers; while CCU purchased more physical than electronic books in 2017–18, the library now acquires electronic books at a 2:1 ratio over physical books.

Third, in order to increase the e-book collection, CCU has increased the number of vendor and publishing partners. CCU has added OverDrive in order to provide a limited number of academic titles to patrons. While the access models offered by OverDrive are less preferable compared to others, this move has allowed CCU to provide access to e-books that are not available through other vendors. CCU has also established agreements with other vendors, including various university presses, Project Muse, JSTOR, etc. By increasing its base of vendors, CCU has improved its ability to purchase products on the best-possible terms: vendors and publishers sometimes differ in either

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their pricing or access models, allowing CCU to purchase titles at reduced rates and/or through better access models.

However, we also discovered that certain desirable titles were not available electronically; some smaller publishers simply did not convert their titles to e-books. CCU librarians have reached out to such publishers and have successfully linked several of them to e-book vendors. In another case, a publisher expanded its e-book offerings after extensive communication with a CCU librarian. While not every interaction with publishers has led to increased availability of resources, the successful ones have led to access to important, even essential, resources in a number of CCU's academic programs.

A fourth way that the CCU Library has increased its support of off-campus students is by consistently reviewing and updating the library's website and LibGuides. We had previously conducted a usability survey test of the website and had planned to conduct another one that had to be canceled because of the COVID-19 crisis. Similarly, LibGuides, accessible directly from the library's homepage, are constantly being reviewed and updated. The library currently has 33 guides grouped into 12 different subject areas reflecting the academic programs at CCU. A recent review revealed that many titles were not merely outdated, but were also only available as print copies. While financial restraints prevented the library from bringing all LibGuides up-to-date, it was possible to update many in the past year, almost exclusively with titles in electronic format. Trying to be fiscally responsible, the library first investigated various options, and then either waited for items to be on sale or negotiated lower prices with the publisher/vendor.

In terms of serving the online student population, the CCU Library implemented an appointment reference service called "Book a Librarian" (BAL) in 2013. From the start, librarians offered this service both in-person for the CUS community and as online video conference meetings for the online CAGS community (currently using Zoom). Students click on the BAL link located on the library's homepage, provide their contact information and research topic, and then pick a time to meet with one of the librarians. A librarian then uses a purpose-built template to draft an email with links to the appropriate LibGuide(s) and search results of both books and journal articles, along with information regarding which databases were used and a post-interview survey. During the reference interview, the librarian discusses various search strategies with the student. At the end of the session, the librarian sends the email with the links to the student so that the student can continue their research. Additional resources that are not available as full text can easily be requested by the student through the interlibrary loan system. These reference appointments have been immensely popular with students as well as faculty. Some professors now require their students to make BAL appointments; their feedback has been that the quality of resources used in research papers has dramatically improved. Besides word-of-mouth, librarians have pushed for active advertisement for BAL services in several ways. First, the research and instruction librarian promotes BAL during CAGS-oriented instruction sessions, which are held three times a year (summer, fall, spring). Librarians have also lobbied to add a BAL link in addition to the library link to the course shells of CCU's learning management system. While this has not yet happened for all courses, there has been some success.

Finally, even though limited in its staff, the library attempts to cater towards all students by offering extensive hours with librarians on duty, in person, and via phone, chat, or e-mail. Librarians are usually available all week during the fall and spring semesters, with evening hours four days a week. Students in the CAGS programs often work during the day; others may live in a different time

zone. By being available outside of the regular office hours, the librarians are able to serve those students, including with BAL reference services. The library does provide after-hour chat reference services by subscribing to a third-party provider. This service is particularly popular during the summer months when the library does not provide extended hours.

In March 2020, like so many other institutions, CCU decided to move all on-campus instruction to an online format. No institution or library could have foreseen the extent of the COVID-19 crisis. However, this switch was relatively smooth for the CCU Library because it was already supporting a large off-campus student population. The library shifted some funding from physical to electronic acquisition, purchasing a number of high-demand electronic titles/licenses to support the university's mission in this emergency. All in-person BAL appointments were simply moved to Zoom meetings.

It is immensely satisfying to personally hand a student a resource that will help them in their studies. The current COVID-19 crisis and the greater trend to distance education do not always allow for that kind of experience. However, by planning, implementing, and refining access to electronic resources and online reference interviews, the librarians of the CCU Library believe that they significantly contribute to the education of the next generation no matter where they are located.