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Learning Online: A Report on Distance Education in LIS Programs

By Christine Jackson

With the advent of increased technology and better means for appropriating that technology, online LIS programs have become increasingly viable for library school students and increasingly valued by the employers who hire those students. Students may now attend schools with fewer limits on where the school is located and whether they have the time and physical means to attend traditional classes. In her article, “eLearning: Libraries Increasingly Help Steer the Ship,” Ericka Bennett discusses the perceived status of online learning: “From modest roots, to shoddy diploma mill notoriety, to academic esteem, to the status of economic juggernaut, eLearning’s rags-to-riches story seems almost Hollywood in scope.”¹

Definition of Distance Education

As its name suggests, distance education is most heavily defined by the distance allowed between student and institution. Karen Novick, in the article, “A Good Match: Lifelong Learning and Distance Education,” writes that online learning is “an educational experience in which the instructor/presenter and students/participants are separated by space or time, or both,” allowing “people who cannot come to a particular location at a specific time to participate in education provided by an organization.”²

Students note that learning online often requires more discipline and self-motivation than physical classes. Sally Gomez, a student learning at San Jose State University’s online program, remarks that “instead of having a regular, standing appointment to be in class and be prepared, we have to make appointments with ourselves to fulfill the week’s requirements ... and to help ourselves stay on track with larger assignments.” Online learners are required to guide their own learning experience more so than on-campus learners due to the distance between learner and organization. Distance allows online students to pursue their education while requiring that they make their own schedules and budget their own time. Students gain greater independence while also taking on greater responsibility for their education.

Advantages and Disadvantages

The decision to attend an online LIS program instead of an on-campus program is definitely a personal one for students, and the decision depends heavily on the student's circumstances and individual needs. Many students pursuing an MLIS need to work in addition to attending school and online education provides an opportunity to do so. Chrissie Anderson's article, "Earning Your MLS Online," asserts that "online education presents a wonderful opportunity to those who may not want to abandon 'real-life' to go back to school for 1-2 years to complete the degree to further their careers."³ Students also have family responsibilities and busy lives that prevent them from being able to attend physical classes several times a week. Jennifer Cox, another student attending the online program at San Jose State, asserts that distance education "has been especially helpful since I have two jobs. It would be nearly impossible to find time to attend traditional classes." Online programs provide students with the flexibility to organize their schedules according to their individual needs, allowing a degree of individuality and autonomy not available on campus.

While online education entails a number of advantages for busy students, students have also found that it contains a number of disadvantages. While providing a time-management option for students with busy lives, the online format does not necessarily make it easy for students to balance the responsibilities asked of them. Sally finds the process frustrating at times: "Like many students, I'm trying to juggle work, school, a family and a social life while trying to stay physically active. Oftentimes I feel like I'm wedging books into an already tightly packed bookshelf and the only way I can fit one more book in is to remove another one." Students may find themselves trying to accomplish too much, taking on more responsibility than they can realistically handle because they believe online courses are less challenging than traditional ones.

Students also must handle the challenge of being isolated from their peers. "Communicating via email seems somewhat limiting," says Loretta Dunne in the article, "Going Online for your Degree." "With twenty to twenty-five students in the courses, I have a hard time differentiating between students since I have no image to associate with their name."⁴ Even with the advent of live meeting tools, discussion boards, listservs and virtual realities such as Second Life, students may still feel profoundly isolated from their classmates. Bonds created in physical meeting classes may not be possible in an online format.

Why choose online learning?

Library school students have a lot to think about when choosing whether or not to study online. Some may not have the self-motivation required to learn independently. Some may feel unfulfilled when trying to connect with their classmates via distance learning tools. Some may realize that they do not have the time to study online even though they do not have to commute for classes. Some may not be comfortable with the technology and computer proficiency required in an online program. Many students have decided to sacrifice whatever needed in order to go to school online because it is the only option available to them to pursue their interest in librarianship.

Distance education may not be for everyone, but for many students it is the only path available to the coveted MLIS. As Sally puts it, "Despite all the work, I have to say I would definitely not be able to attend an MLIS program if it weren't for the distance education option—so it is definitely worth it."

Works Cited

1. Ericka Bennett, "eLearning: Libraries Increasingly Help Steer the Ship," *Library Connect* 6, no. 3 (2008), <http://libraryconnect.elsevier.com/ln/0603/ln060315.html> (accessed October 18, 2008).

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