



*Evidence Summary*

**Promoting the Library to Distance Education Students and Faculty Can Increase Use and Awareness, but Libraries Should Assess their Efforts**

**A Review of:**

Bonella, L., Pitts, J., & Coleman, J. (2017). How do we market to distance populations, and does it work?: Results from a longitudinal study and a survey of the profession. *Journal of Library Administration*, 57(1), 69–86. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2016.1202720>

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**Abstract**

**Objective** – To determine if library promotion efforts targeted at distance education students and instructors were successful and in line with similar activities at other institutions

**Design** – Mixed: longitudinal and survey questionnaire

**Setting** – Large publicly-funded, doctoral-granting university in the midwestern United States

**Subjects** – 494 distance education students and instructors in 2014 compared to 544 in 2011 and “more than 300” (Bonella, Pitts, & Coleman, 2017, p. 77) professionals at American academic libraries.

**Methods** – In the longitudinal study, the researchers invited all distance education students and instructors who were active in the 2010-2011 academic year ( $n = 8,793$ ) and the spring 2014 semester ( $n = 4,922$ ) to complete an online questionnaire about their awareness and use of library’s services. Questions were formatted as multiple choice or Likert scale with optional qualitative comments. The

researchers used descriptive statistics to compare the responses.

Then, the researchers invited library professionals via relevant distance-education and academic library listservs to complete an online questionnaire about how distance education is supported, promoted, and assessed. Free text questions comprised the majority of the questionnaire. The researchers categorized these and summarized them textually. The researchers used descriptive statistics to collate the responses to the multiple-choice questions.

**Main results** – The researchers observed an increase in awareness of all the library services about which they asked undergraduates. Off campus access to databases (92%,  $n = 55$ ), an online course in the learning management system (78%,  $n = 47$ ), and online help pages (71%,  $n = 43$ ) had the highest awareness in 2014 as compared to 2011 when off campus access to databases (73%,  $n = 74$ ), research guides (43%,  $n = 44$ ), and online help pages (42%,  $n = 43$ ) were the top three most visible items. Fewer undergraduates said they do not use the library at all between 2011 (54%,  $n = 56$ ) and 2014 (30%,  $n = 18$ ).

More graduate students reported that they were very satisfied with the library in 2014 (45%,  $n = 12$ ) than in 2011 (27%,  $n = 10$ ). Faculty members were more aware of library services, especially research guides, which had 79% awareness in 2014 ( $n = 56$ ) up from 60% ( $n = 55$ ) in 2011. Almost half (46%) of faculty member respondents had recommended them to students in 2014 as compared to 27% in 2011.

The library professionals who responded indicated that their institutions did not evaluate the success of distance educators and students' awareness of the library's services and resources (54%,  $n = 97$ ) nor the success of any promotional campaigns they may have undertaken (84%,  $n = 151$ ). Both the respondents (37%,  $n = 54$ ) and the authors recommended partnering with faculty members as a best practice to promote the library.

**Conclusion** – More libraries should be marketing specifically and regularly to distance education students by leveraging existing communication and organizational structures. Assessing these efforts is important to understanding their effectiveness.

### Commentary

The Association of College & Research Libraries' (ACRL) Standards for Distance Learning Library Services begin by espousing that everyone at an academic institution is "entitled to the library services and resources of that institution...regardless of ...the modality by which they take courses" (para. 1). This frames services and resources for distance education students and instructors as an equity matter. Promotional efforts targeting this community like email campaigns or embedded content within the institution's Learning Management System (LMS) are designed to increase awareness and use of the library, but how do we know if they are effective? As the results of the authors' longitudinal survey indicate, it is rare for libraries to assess their promotional efforts, but those promotions could be an individual's only contact with their library.

The results of the longitudinal study suggest that the promotional interventions employed at the institution were successful. However, the authors rely heavily on face validity and miss the opportunity to perform a more thorough analysis (Glynn, 2006). The descriptive statistics presented in this survey are interesting and suggestive, but without statistical analyses we are unable to determine if they are significant. Similarly designed studies have used *t*-tests for this purpose (England, Lo, & Breaux, 2018).

In surveying library professionals, the authors added value to their longitudinal study by contextualizing their promotional interventions and assessment efforts in common practice. These responses and the authors' experiences were used to create a list of "best practices" in supporting distance learners and instructors. These suggestions were all sensible and helpful, though it seems

curious that the authors chose to call them *best practices* considering their survey showed that little formal assessment had been done. More research like the longitudinal survey presented could help validate these suggestions as evidence-based best practice.

Practitioners can make use of this mixed methods study in two ways. Firstly, the longitudinal survey presented a realistic and replicable model for assessing the effectiveness of library promotions. It could be implemented with distance learners or any other distinct population within the library community. Analyzed statistically, results could indicate where gains have been made. Secondly, the emerging best practices presented provide library professionals working with distance populations some suggested activities and approaches to service and promotion design.

## References

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