

# The Online Library

## A Professor's Personal Experience

**Distance learners can find themselves in a very difficult spot if their institution does not offer good electronic library resources.**

**D**istance education began as a quiet revolution initiated by correspondence schools using the postal system. It benefited many types of learners, including those who could not enroll in traditional classes and needed to study after midnight while dressed in pajamas. Back in the 1980s, I began my distance learning experience exactly in this manner while pursuing a bachelor's degree. But more recently, when I sought an advanced degree, I was thrust into the sophisticated environment of the Internet, the World Wide Web, and synchronous class activities that promoted the concept of "community."

As a distance-learning student, I discovered firsthand how difficult it was for such students to obtain library resources for assignments and research. Study materials were still sent to me mostly by mail, although some assignments were posted on the Internet. However, library support remained almost non-existent.

**By Ann Greer**

My experience was certainly not unique. Distance learners can find themselves in a very difficult spot if their institution does not offer good electronic library resources. In the early days of graduate online courses, one student was writing her dissertation and in desperate need of library services. Unfortunately, her university library had no online resources and could only send her large, card-stock forms on which she was to request articles and books. The forms then had to be returned to the library by mail. During the lengthy waiting period before she heard back from the library, she never knew if she would get the requested materials or a notice that they were unavailable. This was very frustrating for an online learner under pressing deadlines. In addition, this student could not use her local university library because she was no longer teaching or studying there. No other local university would give her access to their libraries either, although one of their librarians finally suggested that she contact the local public library's academic services department, which, despite its limited resources, did try to help.

On many occasions, one of her professors ordered some of the needed articles and books, sending them to her either by fax or mail. Finally, after a number of students expressed similar needs, the uni-

versity hired a full-time distance-education librarian, and now they are doing all they can to help all their off-campus students.

In the early days, many online students had similar problems, as universities with new distance-education programs belatedly recognized these students' unique needs and scrambled to find creative ways to address them.

### The Internet and Seventh-day Adventist Libraries

According to the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL): "Access to adequate library services and resources is essential for the attainment of superior academic skills in post-secondary education, regardless of where students, faculty, and programs are located. Members of the distance-learning community are entitled to library services and resources equivalent to those provided for students and faculty in traditional campus settings." How well an academic library supports distance learners is one factor that national accrediting bodies look at when evaluating colleges and universities.

When my employer, Southern Adventist University (SAU) in Collegedale, Tennessee, expanded into distance education, part of my responsibilities, as a librarian at McKee Library, was to develop a 21st-century electronic library for our off-campus students. My goal was to supplement the university's anytime, anywhere education with anytime, anywhere library resources. I found the Association of Seventh-day Adventist Librarians

(ASDAL) (<http://www.asdal.org>) to be an important resource. To contain costs, the Adventist Library Information Cooperative (ALICE) consortium of ASDAL has helped obtain online database licensing for multiple users. Consequently, all of SAU's distance-education students—even those who lived on other continents—could access electronic fulltext and bibliographic databases free or at minimal cost. In addition, ASDAL has developed a Z39.50 program so that distance learners can simultaneously search the electronic catalogs of member libraries. The program has been func-

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tional since the year 2000.

Also, in 2000, a Distance Education committee was established to help ASDAL members develop electronic library support. "From a Distance," ASDAL's homepage (<http://www.asdal.org/reports/distance.html>) includes online forms, tutorials, HTML coding, multimedia, and a distance-education manual for libraries needing resources to offer support for their off-campus students. ASDAL's Distance Education committee serves as liaison with the Adventist Virtual Learning Network (<http://www.avln.org>), a grassroots "think tank" for promoting innovation in Adventist education. ASDAL continually seeks opportunities to expand library support throughout the Adventist educational system worldwide.

Back on the home front at McKee Library, in the spring of 2001, arrangements were made with the university's educational technology and information technology departments to streamline access for off-campus students. This involved setting up single-portal authentication, in which a student has to type his or her login and password only once to access all information pertaining to an online course, including library resources. Older types of authentication required distance students to exit their courses,

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re-authenticate using the same or another login and password, and type in the address for a library Web site. Customizing the WebCT authoring tool that SAU uses for its online courses allowed a hyperlink to the electronic library to be added to the main menu of each online course, making it easy for students to electronically access library resources.

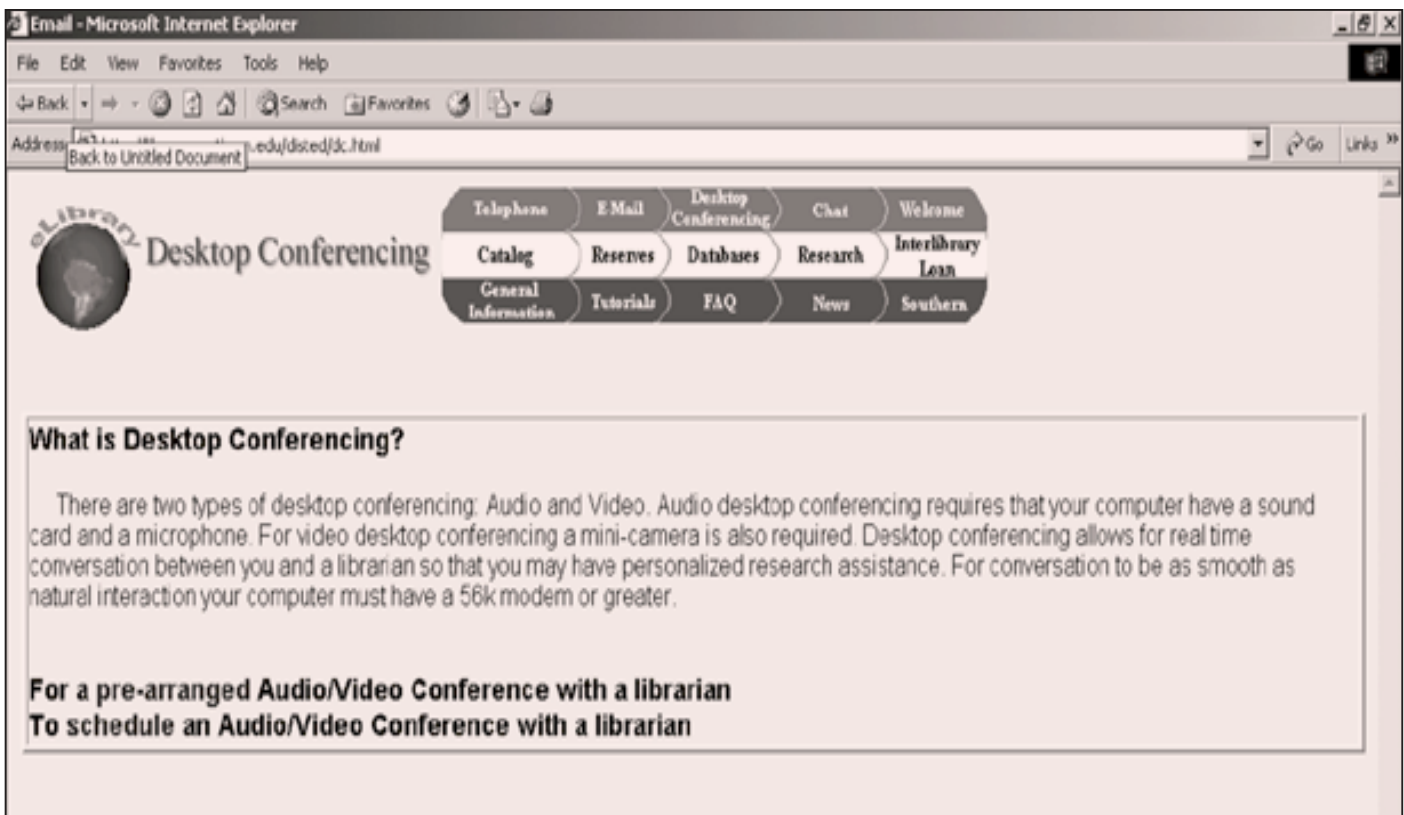
In addition to single-portal authentication, a graphical interface, or homepage, to meet the unique needs of distance learners, was designed.

Available on the homepage are synchronous services such as chat sessions and desktop opportunities with the reference librarian, as well as a variety of asynchronous services and resources.

Asynchronous support includes detailed tutorials that help users choose the correct syntax to retrieve resources from the Internet and the library's licensed databases. Tutorials help students review basic information literacy skills, evaluate

resources, and choose search engines. Specialized tutorials provide help in various disciplines, such as business, education, and nursing.

Additional features of the electronic library homepage include access to licensed databases of fulltext and bibliographic resources.



The SAU library homepage incorporates the principles of human computer interaction (HCI) developed by computer scientists. These include enhancement of cognitive process, memory, and orientation by color-coding and grouping. In addition, the homepage depicts the global and spiritual dimensions of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, of which the library and its parent organization are a part. Thus, faith and learning have been integrated into the distance learner's gateway to online library support.

Many of the hyperlinks on the electronic library homepage are limited to users who have a southern.edu Internet provider (IP) address. However, librarians, or others who need a model for designing an electronic library may access the interface at <http://library.southern.edu/disted> or contact the author by E-mail at [atgreer@southern.edu](mailto:atgreer@southern.edu).



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## How well an academic library supports distance learners is one factor that national accrediting bodies look at when evaluating colleges and universities.

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