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Serving the Public: The Academic Library and Cooperative Extension

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Serving the Public: The Academic Library and Cooperative Extension

Abstract

The article describes the successful design and implementation of various outreach services for Extension at the Albert R. Mann Library, Cornell University. It examines the outreach challenges facing an agricultural and life sciences library in an Ivy League institution, which is also part of the land-grant colleges and as such serves an extended New York State community.

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Introduction

Albert R. Mann Library is the largest science library in the Cornell University Library system. It serves the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, the College of Human Ecology, and the Division of Nutritional Sciences. Serving statutory colleges in a land-grant university involves providing information literacy training courses and other services not only to Cornell students and faculty, but also to Extension staff both in Ithaca and throughout the state.

Extension staff are an audience with very distinct needs. They need to be informed consumers of the information stored and disseminated by research libraries but also serve as mediators between the research information and the ultimate consumers of that information, e.g., the farmers in the field. One of the major challenges that an academic library faces as a preserver and disseminator of information is the facilitation of this mediating role of Extension staff in the process of information consumption (Rozum, 1997).

Novel instructional technologies, document delivery, and electronic reference help can be a solution in this process. Below we discuss the outreach program of Mann Library for Extension, focusing specifically on information literacy courses, online services, and document delivery.

Information Literacy for Cooperative Extension: In-Person Training and On-Site Visits

Our instructional program for Cooperative Extension started officially in 1999, when a Public Services Librarian at Mann Library was named Cooperative Extension Liaison. The initial stage was primarily promotional, with public services librarians attending and presenting at Extension events. Gradually, the Administrative Office of Cooperative Extension included library orientation sessions in their regularly scheduled new staff introduction workshops held twice a year on the Ithaca

campus. Today, additional sessions can be requested directly from Mann Library by contacting the Instruction Coordinator. Until the role of Extension Liaison became part of the formal job description of the newly created position of Outreach Librarian in 2003, the Instruction Coordinator also served as Extension Liaison.

These sessions are hands-on and are held in a computer lab at Mann Library. They are designed to introduce new Extension staff to the Library's services, as well as the print and electronic resources at Cornell. The goal is to encourage active learning (Allen) and future self-sufficiency in information access, retrieval, and management. Since the fall of 2000, we have taught 22 sessions for Extension staff in Mann Library.

Three general tendencies have emerged from those sessions:

- Marked variation in the participants' level of technological expertise and comfort.
- Lack of opportunity for sustained library usage training.
- Variable levels of technical support throughout Extension offices.

While some Extension staff are comfortable and familiar with using the Web, others find it harder to grasp the idea of Web-based information delivery and access. Because library instruction is typically a one-shot event, even if the participants' level of comfort with the technology increases considerably by the end of the session, the lack of continued exposure often results in underutilization of the skills acquired. Finally, the level of technology and technological support throughout Extension offices can preclude efficient access of online systems for information retrieval.

All of these considerations led us to the conclusion that customized on-site instruction may be a valuable supplement to in-library sessions for all new Extension staff. Thus, our second initiative, site visits to Extension offices, was born. They are customized to meet the immediate need of the respective office and include time for hands-on practice, informal discussion, and information on remote access. Since 2000, librarians from Mann have made 17 site visits to county offices and presented on topics as varied as marketing plans design, nutrition, and agricultural Web resources. While those are at the point of need and address the specific needs of Extension staff, they are also very time consuming and potentially not cost-effective for the library.

On-site instruction sessions also pose some of the familiar challenges:

- Participants have varying levels of computer competencies and experience with the library's remote electronic resources.
- A number of Extension offices do not have high speed networking available in group meeting rooms, which precludes the possibility of online demonstrations and/or hands-on exercises.

There are several strategies for overcoming these problems:

- A thorough preliminary discussion of the instruction session's objectives.
- Bringing technological solutions to the office.
- Flexibility in content and instructional approach.

Preliminary discussions focus on the attendees' computer skills and particular resource needs. If a high-speed Internet connection is not available, we use the library's traveling laptop and projector and PowerPoint. During the session, flexibility is key. Questions and comments dictate the teaching strategy. We may extend the length of the hands-on part, include more basic information in the overview, talk more about search strategies, or focus on electronic journals. Establishing a dialogue with Extension staff before the instruction session to discuss expectations and needs, and remaining open to change during the session, are the keys to success.

Electronic/Online Services: Web-Based Instruction, Reference, and Document Delivery

Both site visits and in-person sessions have established the need for a more permanent connection between Extension staff and the library. One way of meeting this need is by employing technologies that utilize the remote capabilities of the WWW.

Our first attempt was an extensive section on our Web site on resources, services, and access for Extension. As with all static pages, however, there is no possibility for active learning for the user, and the instructions tend to be lengthy and time-consuming. Further, the resources on the resource list are limited in number and, even though selected by a librarian, cannot be as comprehensive and customized as we would like. As a result, we are currently working on an interactive tutorial for instructing patrons how to use the Library Catalog, the Library Gateway, and electronic journals.

Online instruction either through a Web page or an interactive tutorial is only one of the ways in which the online environment has changed our outreach program. As part of a sustained outreach

effort for Extension, we also provide online reference help via e-mail and a chat service. At this point it is not possible to evaluate the popularity of the service with Extension staff because both our e-mail form and the Live Chat interface do not track patron status to this detailed level, but in the future we plan to include Extension as a separate option under Patron Status, in order to facilitate the evaluation of the service.

Discussions with Extension staff about how they access information identified the need for remote access to Mann Library's print journal and book collections. In January 2001 we implemented document delivery for Extension staff using the ILLiad interlibrary loan system.

Once registered, Extension staff can request articles and books from Mann Library, other libraries at Cornell, or from other libraries via interlibrary loan. Articles are delivered electronically in PDF format. This service has been extremely popular. We are processing approximately 30 articles per week. This number will increase as we continue to market this relatively new service. Extension staff have been impressed by the speed--24-hour turnaround time--and the quality of the images they receive on their desktops. Occasionally, books are requested, which document delivery staff deliver via UPS. However, the majority of our document delivery requests are for articles from the Mann Library collection.

Conclusions

Mann Library's outreach program for Extension has helped to identify areas for mutual collaboration between the library and Extension staff. Our instruction sessions and site visits provide an opportunity to talk to Extension staff about their information needs as well the needs of end users who contact Extension offices for information and documents. We are in the process of working with Extension staff in several offices to determine the information needs of farmers and small agricultural businesses. There is the potential for collaborating with Extension staff on conducting user studies with these audiences, and ultimately, reaching those end users directly and meeting their practical information needs.

In the span of 4 years Mann Library has created a robust outreach program for Extension that continues to evolve with the changes in technology. It is our belief that creating a partnership between the library and Extension can ultimately benefit both sides. Extension staff's informed access to the rich resources of the Cornell library system and the expertise of the library professionals can facilitate their mission of serving their audiences more effectively. In turn, a sustained partnership with Extension will help Mann Library fulfill its mission as a land-grant library, which supports not only academic research but also responds to the practical needs of the citizens of NY State.

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