

Research, Instruction, and Outreach on a Global Scale: Challenges, Best Practices, and Sustainable Librarianship

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Introduction

Librarians play a pivotal role in bridging gaps and fostering learning across diverse global networks of campuses and learners. At Northeastern University's library, the Global Campus and Online Learning Unit (Online Learning, for short) supports the 16 (and growing) global campuses.

The Online Learning unit has crafted an intermediary liaison approach to serving this large network in response to institutional culture and scaling needs. The unit liaises between different subject liaison groups in the library's Research and Instruction Department—STEM, arts, social sciences, humanities, and entrepreneurship—and students across the network. Online Learning is also responsible for maintaining, creating, and assessing online learning objects, tutorials, and online learning research modules. Engineering students at any of the global campuses might reach out to the engineering liaison in the STEM group for research help, but librarians in the Online Learning group perform outreach to ensure these students, whose student experience is different from the in-person Boston experience, still know about the resources available to them.

As the online learning environment becomes increasingly integral to education, librarians face unique challenges in serving a broad spectrum of users. This article delves into these challenges, exploring how librarians can adapt to changing needs and priorities while maintaining effective support for a global user base. The authors also examine departmental and organizational changes that enabled Northeastern University library to address these challenges effectively.



The Northeastern University Setting

The Global Network

Northeastern University has grown from a small commuter school to a global university with over 16 campus sites. Growing at a rate of about a campus per year, the university has stretched human and capital resources. While the university has slowly hired additional librarians, meeting the speed at which Northeastern has grown remains unsustainable. It has been a challenge for the library to create sustainable instructional materials that can support a wide range of students and colleges.

Overall, Northeastern University's student body is over 45,000. As of the writing of this article, about a third of the students are remote or based at one of the global campuses. Student demographics vary by campus and program. Many campuses, including Boston, host large populations of students from Asia and South Asia. Accomplished students are drawn to Northeastern's experiential approach to education (see Table 1 for a full list of campuses and their characteristics).

Boston Campus

Northeastern's flagship campus is located on 73 acres along Huntingdon and Columbus avenues in Boston's Fenway Cultural district. Undergraduate and Graduate students walk between historic halls and eye-catching new buildings under the canopy of the only college campus arboretum in Boston.¹ The campus includes primary student support services, including the newly renovated Snell Library. Northeastern has become a key feature of this neighborhood, and it is not always clear where the university begins or ends. The rest of Boston is easily accessible via the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority public transit lines.

Northeastern has operated in this Boston neighborhood since 1898. First known as a technical University serving a commuter and adult population, Northeastern has transformed into a school known for its residential undergraduate program, co-op placements and rigorous admissions. Top programs include engineering, data science, business, and health sciences. The student population on this campus is roughly half undergraduate and half graduate students, for a combined total of around 31,000 students in the fall of 2023. Fifty-six percent of the students are women and 44 percent of students live on campus.² As of 2022, 32.9 percent of students in Boston were white, 13.6 percent Asian, 7.65 percent Hispanic, 4.19 percent Black, and 36 percent were International Students.³

Toronto

Established in 2015, Toronto is one of Northeastern's fastest growing campuses.⁴ With more than 1,400 students and 100 staff and faculty, the Toronto campus has outgrown its original home at First Canadian Place and is in the process of moving into a larger space at Queen Street West. Located in a fast-growing tech center, the Toronto campus features graduate programs in biotechnology, computer science, project management and engineering. Like many of Northeastern's regional campuses, Toronto's Northeastern campus is located within a busy professional district, lending to a very career-focused campus that departs from the traditional university experience.



London

In 2019, Northeastern partnered with the New College of Humanities to expand Northeastern programs to an established campus in London. Undergraduate and graduate programs focus on the humanities and data science. London also offers unique non-degree options. This campus does not have a physical library space but does employ two part-time library staff who work with faculty and Boston-based library staff to ensure students in London have the library support they need. Faculty in London conduct research in economics, English, history, philosophy, and politics and international relations.

Challenges

Sustainability of Liaison Workloads

The rapid growth and responsive changes to local environments of the global network has required online learning librarians to carefully consider their approach to instruction. The Online Learning unit manages the library's research tutorials to ensure accessible, reusable, and up-to-date tutorial resources. This includes support models for basic information literacy questions, including finding books, developing keywords, defining databases or search engines, and so on. Online Learning also pursues scalable solutions in collaboration with subject liaisons, such as curriculum mapping and storyboarding more in-depth and subject-specific learning materials. This strategic approach to instruction emphasizes asynchronous learning opportunities that maintain the ability to engage with students at scale.

The approach also allows the Online Learning librarians to maintain connections with liaisons they might not encounter frequently. Liaisons benefit from the Online Learning librarians' expertise in online and distance learning best practices, while the Online Learning librarians can leverage these collaborations to identify gaps in instruction, applying the knowledge to longer-term strategic planning and advocacy for additional resources.

The Online Learning unit employs three individuals, and the Research and Instruction department is home to 17 liaisons; together the units are responsible for supporting all 45,000 plus students across Northeastern. Along with the rapid growth of the campuses, subject librarians find the population of Boston-based students growing as well, leaving their ability to thoughtfully support their patrons unsustainable and their time at a premium.

Program Diversity

Programs throughout the Global Network vary depending on location. For most of the campuses, the dominant programs are accredited degree-granting programs, though some also include skill-building courses, mini-programs, bootcamps, and non-accredited courses. The largest college represented is the College of Professional Studies, which is present on almost all of the campuses. Differences in campus procedures and culture can make it difficult to ensure students are getting equitable exposure to library information. Students in non-degree programs often have limited access to library resources, as many of the resource agreements do not permit use by non-credentialed users. In addition to

Table 1.
Northeastern University Campus Characteristics

Campus	Features
Boston, MA	Flagship main campus. Primary student support and library services present in Boston. Central hub. Top programs include Engineering, Data Science, Business, Health Sciences, College of Professional Studies. Mix of undergraduate and graduate students.
Oakland, CA	Established campus with local student services, including a physical library and local library staff. Mix of undergraduate and graduate students.
London, UK	Established campus with a focus on Humanities and Data Science. Mix of undergraduate and graduate programs. This campus also has a large population of certificate students, non-credit courses, and bootcamps and is served by two part-time library staff.
Portland, ME	Research and partnership campus focused on innovation in Maine businesses. Primarily graduate and post graduate students.
Vancouver, Canada	Smaller campus with a focus on Computer Science and Data Science. Primarily graduate students.
Toronto, Canada	One of the fastest growing campuses, featuring programs in Biotechnology, Computer Science, Project Management and Engineering. Primarily graduate students.
Seattle, WA	Campus with a focus on Computer Science, Project Management and Data Science. Primarily graduate students.
Charlotte, NC	Health Sciences campus with accreditation pending for new nursing programs. Primarily graduate students.
Miami, FL	Emerging campus focused on Computer and Information Science.
Arlington, VA	Research and partnership campus. Primarily graduate and post graduate students.
Nahant, MA	Marine research and partnership campus. Primarily graduate and post graduate students.
Burlington, MA	Research and partnership campus. Primarily graduate and post graduate students.
New York City, NY (transitioning into the global network)	Will be an established campus with graduate student presence, as of the writing of this article. Unknown student demographics.

this lack of consistency in academic programs, many programs also vary in duration. Some are quarter based, while others can be as short as two weeks. These variations add additional strain on the librarian liaison's workload.

Diverse User Needs and Information Literacy Levels

One of the most significant challenges librarians face is the varied information literacy levels among users from different cultural and educational backgrounds. This is especially evident among the high population of international students within the Global Network. As of 2022, 15.2 percent of undergraduate students and 64 percent of graduate students across Northeastern University are international students, according to the university's Office of Belonging.⁵ A large portion of these students have not been a part of a US higher education system before. Learner needs and foundations vary, for everything from technological literacy to familiarity with academic integrity.

Jan Černý and Martin Potančok found significant gaps in international students' information literacy knowledge as related to the current information environment and advanced search methods required in a business intelligence context.⁶ Russell Michalak, Monica D. T. Rysavy and Alison Wessel found, consistent with previous work, that international students' information literacy confidence did not match their actual skills. Female students tended to be more confident and score better on the study instrument the researchers designed for their study—an Information Literacy Assessment (ILA) and a Student's Perceptions of Their Information Literacy Skills Questionnaire (SPIL-Q). On average, students scored below a passing grade in most information literacy skill areas, with the exception of citing sources.⁷ Guyong Liu demonstrated that information literacy instruction was effective in augmenting international students' information literacy skills, despite the well documented challenges to providing information literacy instruction and library support in a western context to international students.⁸

According to Shanton Chang, Catherine Gomes and Dana McKay, information seekers build complex and contextual information ecologies. When international students leave their home environments, these ecologies are fragile until learners gather enough context to adapt. Often students with fragile ecologies are given either not enough information, or too much.⁹ Considering the international information-seeker as one with a fragile information ecology is a helpful framework for considering them as a learner with known skills who can still struggle in a new context. While Diane Mizrachi is not commenting on information ecologies, when they

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note “studies involving international students in American universities consistently show their levels of library anxiety to be much higher than their American peers,” it is reasonable to see a connection between a fragile information ecology and library anxiety, or other behaviors that may look like library anxiety.¹⁰

International students may require introductions to Western academic norms, including citation and plagiarism. Students from collectivist cultures may struggle not only with translating information about academic integrity, but also with the idea of a text as owned by an individual.¹¹ In addition to acculturating international students to Western academic norms, Cheryl A. Riley and Marian G. Davis also addressed cultural differences in punctuality and communication styles.¹²

Information ecologies do not need to remain fragile. Chinese students studying in the United States exhibited transnational habitus, a willingness to engage with information sources in both Chinese and English and synthesize the information for an understanding of multiple viewpoints.¹³ This practice makes for dynamic information literacy that transcends political and language borders.

One of the earliest projects the Online Learning unit undertook was creating profiles of each of the campuses. These profiles (hosted on an online SharePoint notebook and presented for administrative reference) included information about the programs being supported at each campus, the student and faculty demographics, and a log of the most asked questions or research requests from that campus. Based on the profiles and conversations with on-site staff, Online Learning began to brainstorm tutorial ideas, interactive modules based on existing online objects, and plans for longer-term sustainable support.

Technological Disparities

Technological disparities mean that users from different regions may experience varying levels of internet connectivity and access to digital devices. For instance, high-speed internet might be readily available in urban centers but scarce in rural or underserved areas. This is especially applicable to international students who might be logging on from overseas. Technological disparity factors into the decisions about the tools used to create tutorials. Offering multiple options such as downloadable slide decks, PDFs, and infographics alongside captioned videos allows students to access content through their preferred or available method.

Lack of Faculty onboarding and Adjunct Isolation

Adjuncts comprised 68percent of university and college instructors in 2021.¹⁴ Northeastern's College of Professional Studies program is no exception. With many instructors being adjuncts, the university's global network lacks the benefits of relationship-building over time. Additionally, the absence of a centralized faculty onboarding program makes initial connection with all faculty inconsistent. For full-time faculty not based in Boston, this often presents a challenge to feeling part of the university system. A few campuses offer their own faculty orientation, contributing to a siloing effect. Other new faculty are not required to attend a campus orientation at all, and gain information about starting their new role through college orientations, which do not include any librarian facetime. In addition, it is often difficult for the Online Learning team to obtain a meaningful

presentation slot in the various faculty orientations since there is so much information that needs to be shared.

Librarians have made slow but steady progress in presenting at the global network orientations. They are often invited through word-of-mouth or through a contact made at a particular campus. In many instances, the sole point of contact is the gateway to information for the campus, and the librarians' relationship with this contact is crucial to getting into these orientations and gaining facetime with faculty.

Adjunct instructors may feel particularly isolated in a system where in-person instruction on the Boston campus is the "default." As librarians work to support the variety of programs, it is difficult to present to new faculty all at once. Instructors who are assigned classes often know of the library but may not be aware of the full scope of the support services offered. The lack of point-of-contact conversation also makes it difficult to determine what support the instructors need from the library. While many faculty use the library as the place to obtain resources for their classes and their own research needs, the library's data services, instructional support, and other valuable support services and resources are sometimes underused.

Communication

All the challenges mentioned so far contribute to a larger problem that is visible in many library systems: decentralized communication. Fragmentation of information, creation of information silos, and increased administrative redundancy undermine institutional coherence and efficiency, which is especially evident when trying to gauge information literacy needs along with the gaps in support to the global network.

The Research and Instruction department collaborated with the library's communications and marketing manager to develop and send personalized newsletters to specific departments and individual global campuses, tailoring the resources, relevant news, and support options for each of the global network sites. While this helped outreach efforts and widened the library's scope of influence, it remained difficult to reach faculty listservs, gain faculty buy-in, and achieve high click and read rates of the newsletter.

Boston-centric Mentality

Many colleges and universities that started with a traditional campus and moved into an online or distributed model experience cultural divides between student and faculty populations on the original campus and new locations or modalities, and Northeastern

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is no exception. This problem is likely influenced by local factors, but anecdotally there are some similarities across institutions.

Staff, faculty, and even students on the original campus may not consider what they do not see—online programs, faculty, and students are part of a peripheral group that residential students, faculty and staff do not consider very often. Members of the original campus's community often have not had to change their experience, even with the university's addition of the campuses and modalities, so they continue as before in how they access resources or expect service. Despite Northeastern University efforts to promote an identity as "one university," there are some events and programs that are aimed at residential students or are place-based. Some groups may not take or create opportunities to stretch services or experiences to the network, and limited resources may incentivize them not to do so.

Additionally, staff in these online or new campus groups often feel slighted. They often see themselves as a unit that offers the college financial stability without being seen as part of the "real" college. Hierarchical lines and job responsibilities are blurred when students become global. For example, which librarian is responsible for supporting a specific program, campus, or subject is unclear.

Northeastern University and the Online Learning Team

To meet these challenges, Northeastern University Library's Online Learning team has crafted an approach guided by the following hallmarks:

- Concentrated outreach to global campus students and faculty
- Leading instructional design and tutorial creation efforts, and
- A focus on scalable, accessible instruction.

As part of Northeastern Library's Research and Instruction department, the Online Learning unit has moved away from a model in which librarians act as subject liaisons, to one that positions the three current members of the team as the liaisons and primary contacts for and have significant job duties associated with one of the following groups: students across the global campus, faculty across the global campus, or instructional design projects for the library.

The Online Learning unit's structure is as follows: The head of global campus outreach and online learning oversees the unit. Reporting directly to them are the accessibility and online learning librarian (responsible for global campus outreach and accessibility work), and the library program manager for online learning (responsible for developing online learning objects, tutorial creations, and outreach). Reporting to the program manager are two global network librarians, responsible for instructional design.

This structure allows the Online Learning team to work in parallel with colleagues in Research & Instruction and to leverage each team's strengths. Notably, the Online Learning team does not try to handle everything but prioritizes a human-centered approach to large problems. They act as the first line of defense for incoming student and faculty requests for support, and either offer online learning objects to answer questions or redirect individuals to subject liaisons for more in-depth consultations.



Students and Faculty across the Global Campus

Northeastern's global campus student-facing librarian meets quarterly with student-facing staff contacts at the global campuses. This librarian coordinates with global campus staff to contribute library-related content to any planned orientation activities for new students.

This online learning librarian requests updates about the programs offered and student demographics, and reports this back to the library's departments through the Global Campus Services Steering Committee. In turn, the online learning librarian shares information about new resources with campus contacts and works with them to add information about the library to their newsletters.

The global campus faculty-facing librarian works similarly with faculty-facing staff contacts at the global campuses, meeting with contacts quarterly, contributing to new faculty orientations, and sharing information in both directions.

Instructional Design

The library program manager for online learning leads a small team of instructional designers who work independently and in collaboration with subject matter experts across the library to build engaging, accessible, and scalable instructional materials. These modules, videos, and tutorials may be used or implemented in global campus courses but might also be used in hybrid formats by faculty at the Boston campus. This team also conducts curriculum mapping projects to identify appropriate places in the curriculum to employ information literacy instruction.

Tutorial creation and workflows

The program manager for online learning is responsible for overseeing tutorial development and creation. This includes running a voluntary tutorial working group where librarians can brainstorm ideas for tutorials, offer informal feedback, and plan out future tutorial revisions. The two global network librarians who serve as instructional designers work with subject liaisons to develop online learning objects to support gaps in instruction and ensure the liaisons are working sustainably. As a part of this process, the unit has recently taken on curriculum mapping to determine which courses need library support and map those courses' assignments and outcomes to existing tutorials or note new tutorials to be created.

After generating these reports, the global network librarians, alongside volunteers from the library's tutorial working group, sign up for tutorial development. This scaffolded process includes developing learning outcomes, storyboarding, drafting in an existing tutorial template, and assigning the draft tutorial for peer review. On average, a tutorial requires about six to eight weeks to go from inception to the completion.

Feedback and assessment

Feedback and assessment are crucial components in tutorial creation, particularly when supporting a global network. Instructional content must not only be effective and



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authored the tutorial can choose whether to include the feedback in revisions or not. If a tutorial is interdisciplinary, the final edits are completed by the program manager. This offers subject librarians autonomy when creating items, and the program manager can oversee consistency in language, design, and implementation of best practices in instructional design.

Assessment of the tutorials occurs on a yearly basis, with the program manager reporting views, downloads, and class sections in which content is embedded. Tutorials are reviewed and updated on a bi-annual basis (or earlier when affected by changes to database layouts or library website design) by the tutorials working group. A feedback form is used to review the content of the tutorials, timeliness of the content, and whether the format of the learning object is still the best option.

This balance of informal and formal feedback facilitates continuous improvement of tutorials, ensuring they meet the varying expectations and challenges of an international audience.

Best practices and recommendations

Addressing the challenges described in this article is part of the Northeastern Library Online Learning team's daily work. Over time a variety of tactics that help meet the

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relevant but also accessible and adaptable to diverse learner needs across different cultures and regions.

The program manager for Online Learning also manages the peer review process. If a tutorial is completed during the volunteer's assigned month, that individual fills out a feedback form to be shared with the librarian who created the online learning object. If the tutorial is subject-specific, the subject librarian who

needs of the university's global campuses have become prominent. The most effective strategies for a given library online learning team will depend on many factors that include the characteristics and size of the network of campuses, the composition of the online learning team, the student demographics, and how the library organization functions. While all institutions are different, here are some general recommendations for supporting distributed populations across a diverse network.



Accessibility

As teams plan instruction, orientations, or tutorials for a university network, be sure to incorporate accessibility in as many forms as able. Public and private universities in the US have responsibilities to provide accessible resources and experiences to their students. Universities in other countries often have responsibilities under similar legislation. Accessible services and resources are a legal and ethical requirement for serving patrons with disabilities and benefit a wide spectrum of users including students for whom English is a second language.

Accessibility is much easier to accomplish when done proactively. Fixing issues in a large collection of tutorials or lesson plans is daunting, especially for small teams. Instead, incorporate Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.2 AA criteria to avoid the need to scramble for accessible solutions later (see <https://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG22/>). Build accessibility checks into processes and policies for tutorial and other resource creation.

Finding Library Services Ambassadors

No single librarian can be in every room at once. This is doubly true when working with distance campuses or a global network. Consider leveraging colleagues' connections to increase library reach share news. Use a proactive, communicative and collaborative approach throughout as much of the library organization as possible. Encourage colleagues to share information about new programs, campuses, or online learning initiatives with the online learning team. Some colleagues might do this naturally, but others will need an explicit invitation. Then, do the same for them.

Additionally, consider reminding colleagues what the team does, or find ways to include details about the team's work in related conversations. If the library is large enough, siloed teams may insulate colleagues from one another's work. Online learning can be particularly vulnerable to this phenomenon.

The term "online learning" is broad, and Northeastern's Online Learning team was given flexibility as a new unit within Research and Instruction to determine initial priorities. This isolated process has contributed to lack of understanding from colleagues of the team's work. Even years after the unit started working with the global network, the constant change and re-shifting of priorities has led the Online Learning Unit to adapt their job responsibilities, making it more difficult for newer colleagues to know what the unit does.

Librarians can all be guilty of losing track of what others are up to. However, if colleagues do not know what one another does, they will not know what information is important to share. Building awareness does not have to be formal, as some of the Online Learning team's strategies have involved informal conversations when asking colleagues about their teaching or outreach for the semester. Online Learning has also created and shared trading cards (both physical and digital) that colleagues pass along if they happen to hear about a gap where online learning support can be incorporated.

Northeastern library established the Global Campus Services Steering Committee specifically to bring together representatives from across the library to share information related to serving the wide network of campuses. The committee also provides dedicated



time to tackle challenges like online learning assessment, evaluating progress toward various standards, and so on. This committee can take on projects that require a wider library view to accomplish.

Recently, the Global Campus Services Steering Committee spent time comparing library services to the global campuses and online student populations to Association of College and Research Libraries' (ACRL) Standards for Distance and Online Learning Library services. What the committee learned through this work prompted the creation of a physical book-mailing pilot program. Students and faculty at one of the more research-focused campuses can now request titles from Boston's print collections, and resource sharing staff send books to the campus for pick-up. The committee is tracking the success of this pilot program, which will inform the future adoption of the program for other campus sites.

Northeastern University library departments have a culture of sharing monthly or quarterly reports to the rest of the library. Instead of viewing this kind of reporting as a chore, consider on the audience for such a report and consider it a way to share with (or brag to) colleagues about the team's hard work.

Creating Tutorials and Online Learning Objects

Consider an approach that prioritizes module and tutorial creation. These, and other, scalable, asynchronous approaches to instruction will allow the unit to serve larger numbers of students and invest in more time-intensive activities strategically. It will also allow librarians to adjust quickly if the organization makes large changes to programs or colleges quickly. Even if getting traction with outreach to faculty is a struggle, consider this approach. All it takes is one successful outreach to double or triple the number of students you serve synchronously.

The front end of this strategy is often a heavier lift. If the library does not already have a set of tutorials or online learning objects ready, focus on identifying the gaps in your current offerings. Potentially conduct curriculum mapping for supported programs. If curriculum mapping feels too ambitious, consult reference data to identify skills that need support.

Then, storyboard and create online learning objects. While this is a time-intensive process, it is an investment that can yield great returns. Online Learning at Northeastern found that this process is often best done during the slower times of the year (for Northeastern, summer). If possible, get the entire department involved or create a working group. This shares the workload, and the instructional materials will benefit from a variety of perspectives.

These online learning objects do not have to be elaborate and can be as simple as a word document or PDF, a template email with resource links, or a research guide. Be strategic about the type of material created. Videos may seem like the obvious tutorial choice, but they take a long time to produce and are difficult to edit once they have been completed. When creating videos, keep them short and focused on a single, small chunk of information. Whenever possible, create text-based tutorials instead. Text-based tutorials are easier to make accessible, and easier to update. Note that tutorial creation is likely to be an ongoing process. It may help to create templates early and then fill them with



topic-based content over time. Alternatively, it may make sense to tackle often-sought topics that can be built into more complex modules later.

Once the topic and the mode of transmission, whether research guides, tutorials, or templated emails with links to resources, continue to triage and prioritize. Consider which projects will have a good return on the invested time. This assessment might include looking at usage and viewing statistics for existing online tutorials, analyzing pre- and post-class assessments through an online form, looking at the number of class sections where a module or tutorial has been embedded, or even using informal feedback from librarians about which formats or outreach strategies work best with certain programs and colleges. It is not always possible to know what the return on investment will be, but do not be afraid to change course if results are not as expected.

Train for Success

University students and faculty bring a variety of cultural, religious and other backgrounds and viewpoints to the library. As a university's campuses move farther afield, and the student population changes, having an inclusive support system for that population is crucial. Invest in DEIA training for library staff to ensure they are prepared to meet students where they are. This is also helpful when a team considers what student portfolios look like. Does the library cater to a primarily online student population? Are there many digital natives among the students? Are university students mainly working professionally and balancing home life with part-time study? Librarians need to know enough not to add additional barriers to a student's library use. It is important to pay attention to how students from different backgrounds' needs differ.

Keep it User-centered

In collaboration with campus contacts, the Online Learning team orients new students to library services and offers classes and workshops. Most subject-specific classes are taught by subject liaison librarians. Global campuses conduct in-person, campus-specific orientations and host online orientation information in the learning management system (LMS). Online librarians join in these established orientation activities, including crafting and maintaining orientation modules in the LMS, providing quick presentations about the library to students and faculty as part of a parade of many support services, and offering longer orientations to the library's resources and services that are scheduled around other orientation activities. The librarians also attend resource fairs and similar events as they are offered to students.

It can be easy to build a habit of doing things the way they've always been done. When resources are thin on the ground, what is possible necessarily becomes part of the conversation around what we choose to do. Still, it is important to continuously check in on what students need from the library. Especially when resources are lim-

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ited, libraries need to ensure efforts are spent on the initiatives and resources that most effectively support students.

Of course, librarians can incorporate opportunities for feedback into instruction and outreach efforts, but consider the following as well:

- Leverage connections with staff from student support services. Staff in a variety of student support offices see a different side of students. Try to connect with meaningful groups who are willing to meet occasionally. Northeastern's Online Learning team has found luck with a student-facing and faculty-facing contact at each of the university's campuses and tries to meet with them quarterly. The relationships with each contact are different, but all have given important insight and allowed access to resources, like space in locally focused newsletters and time in orientation agendas. Consider finding funding for a student "library advocate," a student who is available to table at student events or spend time circulating among student groups to educate peers about library resources. Students will be able to articulate why their colleagues should use the library, and often, students will take what their fellow classmates say more seriously.
- Are students showing up? Are they using the learning objects the library creates? It is not always possible to get usage statistics (this is a notable bug in one tool for making tutorials, h5p) but when it is, pay attention to when content is used, and how often. If offering synchronous sessions and students are not attending, that does not mean they do not need the content, rather that something is not working, and it is worth investigating to find out what.
- Adapt outreach as needed. When the Online Learning librarians began outreach, the team noticed that some campuses preferred in-person events more than others, or they were on a different yearly cycle, and students benefited more from orientations during off-season times compared to the Boston campus. Evaluating outreach impact and being flexible with methods and availability will pay off. Another helpful tactic (depending on time, resources, and finances) is to create an outreach plan that includes taking the time to evaluate and assess outreach impact.
- Adapt access to resources. During a website redesign at Northeastern, one major conversation involved how to direct students and faculty on the global network to a space that was personalized for their needs. On the Northeastern Library website, a highlighted section of global campus portal pages were created. On this page, staff specifically targeted each campus and listed local resources they have access to (public libraries, reciprocal academic libraries in the area), along with a short list of liaison librarians that support the specific programs on their campus, relevant course reading lists (the library uses Leganto), and other popular highlighted resources or events. Use knowledge of campus population needs and wants to guide design of tools. If possible, creating a specific web space or domain might be helpful. If not, an online learning object (such as a module or even a PDF document with embeddable links) would be another quick and useful way to make connections and center outreach on the user.



Conclusion

Serving distributed and online learning populations is not new—the first completely online program was launched in 1989.¹⁵ However, available technology and the higher education landscape have changed dramatically in the intervening years, creating opportunities to make and remake online and distance librarianship. Librarians across very different institutions may find that they face similar challenges related to rapid growth, workload sustainability, program and learner diversity, and issues around siloing and communication. There is no single answer to these challenges, but the authors hope the recommendations presented here, and a few final thoughts, are helpful to others working in this space.

The authors caution against impulses to stretch resources, including people, too thin to “make things work.” It is okay to say no. Not being able to accomplish all the things, with appropriate documentation and communication, provides rationale for teams to grow. Demonstrate to library and university administration what the online learning team’s work could look like with more staff or resources. Those responsible for compiling and sending reports to administrators, might consider including data on turn-aways—are consultations, classes, or outreach opportunities declined due to lack of bandwidth. Be realistic about what is possible to do well and sustainably.

The Online Learning team has found Meredith Farkas’ work on slow librarianship inspiring. Farkas, and the scholars and thinkers she relates and reacts to, imagines a relationship rich librarianship that pushes back against productivity and hustle culture.¹⁶

Saying “no” is not something we do once. It is often a practice that we must do again and again. In some cases, priorities shift, and projects may require a different approach. The online learning team, library, and students are best served by librarians who have the time and space to be creative, who are not pushing through burn-out. Saying no can often feel like failure but can be a radical act of care for oneself, the team, and the community.

When saying yes, communicate clearly and realistically about the time needed. This might mean a team signature telling people they can expect a reply in 2–3 days, or a tutorial request form that asks instructors to request a tutorial at least 2 weeks in advance.

Whenever possible, advocate for flexible schedules. Students need library services outside of the hours of 9am to 5pm, and as Northeastern’s campus locations are spread around the world and across time zones, 9am to 5pm gets longer and longer. As human beings, the authors of this article enjoy flexible schedules that allow us to meet the needs of our lives outside of work, and with that flexibility the occasional early morning or late evening is easy to accommodate. As she writes this part of the article, Anaya is working at 6:15 pm, waiting to join an orientation for students in California.

Clear expectations within a team are key. What constitutes too late? How does shifting hours work? How can one track flex hours? Flexible scheduling can be great for people and for the work of a team, but it should not mean painfully long days.

If flexibility is not possible, creating standard language sent to students and faculty about expectations for responses and support might be useful. Take the time as a team or department to craft an email signature or outreach materials that outline what faculty and students can realistically expect the group. This is also an important conversation



to have with administrators about potential gaps in support and how schedules can change to better support these populations.

The authors hope that offering student- and people- centered best practices can ground the library's work in human connection and relationships and help to alleviate some of the challenges all library employees face. The Online Learning team at Northeastern University has found great value in collaborating to create strategic plans for the path ahead, even as those plans inevitably morph and change in response to the institutions' and students' needs.

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