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Resources and Services for Remote Access: A Content Analysis of Alabama's Public Four-Year University Library Web Sites

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Introduction

For more than a century, academic libraries have sought a solution for better serving their remote users. Mail, telephone, audiotapes, and videotapes have been used for years, but those have proved unsatisfactory in satisfying user needs. With the introduction of the Internet in the 1990's, a new, effective method of providing library information to distance learners was established. Academic libraries in great number have developed web sites and made them available on the Internet for researchers and students at remote locations. Now students can access online catalogs, electronic databases, virtual tutorials, and even real-time reference services from their home or dormitory room. Remote access is growing in popularity as patrons become more technology-literate and as communities become ever more wired.¹ The web site has become one of the library's most visible artifacts for communicating with users.²

Establishing library resources and services via the Internet has attracted the attention of educators and scholars in recent years. Several major national and international projects have been conducted, and other research efforts are underway. The emphasis of recent research has been on electronic databases and online catalogs, while other web-based resources and services have received less attention.

This study examines the web sites of the sixteen Alabama public senior colleges and universities in order to identify the principle

characteristics and current trends in web-based services. Because web sites are evolving constantly, the study intends to make a static comparison of web-based resources and services provided by those libraries at a fixed point in time. Besides identifying trends in library web sites, this study will serve as a benchmark for comparisons of future web-based developments and for improving existing services and resources in the subject libraries.

The establishment of the Network of Alabama Academic Libraries (NAAL) in 1982, and a Statewide Online Catalog in 1988 has enhanced resource sharing for all academic libraries in the state.³ The Alabama Virtual Library has been providing students, teachers, and citizens of Alabama online access to essential library and information resources since August 1999. Meanwhile, some university libraries have been locating resources and services on their web sites since the mid-90's. All of these factors have enhanced the ability to conduct research from a remote site.

Literature Review

Web sites of academic libraries vary in form and content depending on the nature of the institution, its mission, size, and programs offered. A web site can serve as a portal where the user finds databases, electronic texts, the online catalog, and more. It is a means of accessing the aforementioned library products as well as serving as a window to the Worldwide Web by making Internet resources available on a selective basis. It also is a communications tool, where information about services, people, facilities, and collections can be found.⁴

In a study of university library web sites in four English-speaking countries, Still found that all of the sites examined provided

access to the library catalog and some databases.⁵ Information on instructional materials and remote access was less frequent while the availability of encyclopedias, request forms, and pathfinders (lists of specific subject resources) varied. Cohen and Still found that large institutions made greater use of freely available Internet resources and were more likely to create web versions of paper documents such as pathfinders.⁶ Grafstein found that proprietary textual and bibliographic databases are increasingly becoming available remotely by means of password authentication or proxy server.⁷ For example, the University of Southern Mississippi has set up a Virtual Reading Room for open online access to their special collections.

In Osorio's study, 65% of the examined web sites provided library hours and an online catalog for remote access.⁸ Tyckoson found that many libraries added some form of email or chat line so patrons could contact a reference librarian.⁹ Helfer cited the 24-7 Project in Southern California, which provided sophisticated tools well beyond chat, to enable librarians to interact with patrons.¹⁰ Starr pointed out that off-campus students should be able to contact the library in several ways including email, telephone, and computer conferencing or in person if they come to campus.¹¹ Bao found that the location of the library link on the institution's home page and whether the library provides online databases are critical factors in faculty and students' use of web sites.¹²

The literature indicates a growing body of research on library web sites. An important aspect of that research is the variety of resources and services academic libraries make available for their remote users. The extent of those resources and services in Alabama's academic libraries is the focus of this study.

Methodology

The literature review indicated that most documented studies of web sites have used qualitative assessment, often by relying on

surveys. Content analysis was selected for this study in order to collect specific data from a variety of participants. Library web sites of the sixteen Alabama public senior institutions were selected for analysis. These institutions were identified by the Alabama Commission on Higher Education (ACHE), the statewide coordinating agency for higher education in Alabama. An important criterion was that each library selected have its own homepage. When an institution listed multiple locations, data were collected separately for each location. If an institution listed multiple libraries at a single location, only the data from the main library were considered. All data were collected during the month of August, 2001.

According to Harrod's *Librarian's Glossary*, library resources include books and non-book materials of all kinds, while the facilities provided by a library for the use of books and the dissemination of information are library services.¹³ Combining these dimensions constitutes a measure of overall resources and services. After an initial exploration of each subject homepage, the following list of resources and services for remote access was developed:

Library Resources

- Books
- Journal Articles
- Internet Sites
- Others

Library Services

- Catalog
- Reference
- Research Guides
- Information Delivery
- Others

Library Information

- Contact Information (address etc)
- Operating Hours
- Policies
- Linkage from university home page.

An Excel spreadsheet was used to record data for each library. Special features were included under "Other", if found. The total

occurrences of checks for each feature was calculated and a simple percentage obtained. Special features under "Other" were explained separately without calculating percentages of occurrence.

Analysis of Data

Table 1 lists the library resources available for remote access. The sixteen libraries in the study show some degree of variance. Full-text books (e-books) can be accessed from eight of the web sites (50%), while full-text journal articles are available at all sixteen web sites (100%). Links to Internet sites supporting academic research are included on fourteen of the web sites (87.5%) and some full-text special collections can be accessed on-line from eight of the libraries studied (50%). Also, it was noted that Auburn University offers full-text reserve articles (e-reserve) for remote access.

Table 2 reflects the library services available for remote access. All libraries in the study (100%) provide online catalogs, while fourteen libraries (87.5%) offer phone numbers and email addresses of reference librarians for remote reference service. Only one offers a real-time, interactive, online reference service. Twelve libraries (75%) offer electronic versions of research guides (pathfinders, tutorials, online instructions, etc.) and fourteen institutions (87.5%) provide document delivery service for remote users.

Table 3 lists library information included on web sites. Fourteen libraries (87.5%) indicate their geographic location and include library policies on their site. All of the subject libraries (100%) include both hours of operation, and direct links from the institution's home page.

Conclusion and Discussion

This study examined resources and services for remote users available on the web sites of Alabama's public senior academic institutions. The results, as summarized in **Table 4**, indicate a substantial level of support for

distance education by all of the subject libraries. Online catalogs and electronic databases are universal features found in all sixteen of the libraries examined. Research guides, Internet links, reference services via telephone and email, and various types of library information are gaining in popularity. The results also reveal access to new areas such as e-books, e-reserves, special collections, and interactive reference service.

Library resources and services available for remote access varied from institution to institution. This study is a snapshot in time, and some institutions will have added services while others may have refined existing features. It is difficult to speculate what particular trends exist, other than that libraries are expanding their offerings for distance learners. A subsequent, comparative study of the same libraries might disclose trends in individual services.

From a more immediate, practical perspective, those libraries not offering some of the more common services might consider their addition in the near future. One expects that SACS accreditation teams will be looking for an appropriate level of off-campus library support and such remote services demonstrate the library's participation in distance education. It is unclear, however, how the resources and services on a library's web site are used by distance learners, whether they affect research methodology, or how often they are accessed by off-campus students. Those areas are ripe for study. The importance of this concern is suggested by Riggs.

...it is practically impossible to offer library services of equal quality to those received on the local campus. However,...users must be provided access to paper and online resources, dependable and fast document delivery, and bibliographic instruction of the highest quality...and be certain that the future will continue to focus on the needs and expectations of the users.¹⁴

The views expressed by Riggs are also important from a theoretical perspective as

they suggest that, while a recent phenomenon, the provision of resources and services on library web sites plays a greater role in supporting academic research than previously indicated in the literature.

The library web site not only changes the culture of the library, it also changes the types of resources and services available to

off-site users. Online office hours, real-time reference service, e-books, and e-reserves all create challenges for academic libraries. Examining and understanding those features will be crucial in the years ahead as remote access becomes increasingly entrenched as a method of providing library services.

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Table 1
Resources for Remote Access from Alabama's Public Senior Institutions

<u>Institution</u>	<u>Books</u>	<u>Articles</u>	<u>Internet Sites</u>	<u>Other</u>
Alabama A&M		<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	
Alabama State		<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	
Athens State		<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	
Auburn	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	E-reserves, Special Coll.
Auburn at Montgomery	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	
Jacksonville State		<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	
Troy State	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	
Troy State at Dothan	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	Special Collections
Troy State at Montgomery		<u>X</u>		
U. of Alabama	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	Special Collections
U. Alabama at B'ham	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>		
U. Alabama at Huntsville		<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	Special Collections
U. of Montevallo	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	
U. of North Alabama	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	Special Collections
U. of South Alabama		<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	Special Collections
U. of West Alabama		<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	Special Collections
Total	8	16	14	
%	50%	100%	87.5%	

Table 2
Services for Remote Access from Alabama's Public Four-Year University Web Sites

<u>Institution</u>	<u>Catalog</u>	<u>Reference</u>	<u>Research Guides</u>	<u>Delivery</u>	<u>Other</u>
Alabama A&M	<u>X</u>			<u>X</u>	
Alabama State	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	
Athens State	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	
Auburn	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>InfoChat</u>
Auburn at Montgomery	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>		<u>X</u>	
Jacksonville State	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	
Troy State	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	
Troy State at Dothan	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>		<u>X</u>	
Troy State Montgomery	<u>X</u>			<u>X</u>	
U. of Alabama	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	
U. of Alabama at B'ham	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	
U. Alabama at Huntsville	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	
U. of Montevallo	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	
U. of North Alabama	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	
U. of South Alabama	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	
U. of West Alabama	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	
Total	16	14	12	16	
%	100%	87.5%	75%	100%	

Table 3**Library Information for Remote Access from Alabama's Public Four-Year University Web Sites**

<u>Institution</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Hours</u>	<u>Policies</u>	<u>Linkage from Univ. Home Page</u>
Alabama A&M	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>		<u>X</u>
Alabama State	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>
Athens State	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>
Auburn	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>
Auburn at Montgomery	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>
Jacksonville State		<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>
Troy State		<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>
Troy State at Dothan	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>
Troy State at Montgomery	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>
U. of Alabama	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>
U. Alabama Birmingham	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>		<u>X</u>
U. Alabama at Huntsville	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>
U. of Montevallo	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>
U. of North Alabama	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>
U. of South Alabama	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>
U. of West Alabama	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>
Total	14	16	14	16
%	87.5%	100%	87.5%	100%

Table 4 - Summary of Resources and Services

Resource or Service	# of Libraries	%
E-Books	8	50%
Articles	16	100%
Internet Sites	14	87.5%
Online Catalog	16	100%
Reference	14	87.5%
Research Guides	12	75%
Materials Delivery	16	100%
Location Information	14	87.5%
Library Hours	16	100%
Library Policies	14	87.5%
Linkage from Univ Homepage	16	100%