

## Library Services at Athabasca University: Change the Same

Mr. Steve Schafer  
Director of Library Services  
Athabasca University, Canada  
Email: [steves@athabascau.ca](mailto:steves@athabascau.ca)  
<http://www.athabascau.ca>

### Introduction

Athabasca University (AU) is Canada's Open University, and specializes in the provision of distance education courses at the post-secondary level. The admission requirement for undergraduate students is that applicants to the University are 18 years of age. Students may take courses leading to a number of certificates and degrees -- AU offers 15 certificate programs, 13 undergraduate degree programs, and 3 graduate programs. The number of AU graduates is increasing year by year and there are an increasing number of students who enroll in a course at AU to transfer the credits to their home institution upon successful completion of the course at Athabasca University. These *visiting students* may take an AU course because a course is not being offered at their home institution, because there are timetable difficulties at their home institution, or because they want to take a course in addition to their course load at their home institution. A large number of students come to AU because they prefer the flexibility that is part and parcel of taking a distance education course. Students also may wish to take an AU course for their own interest, simply because they wish to "take a course".

Since its inception in 1970, Athabasca University continues to experience growth in both its undergraduate and graduate programs. The growth rate in course registrations is now at an unprecedented level, and is largely attributed to the quality of the learning experience offered to the student: the high-quality materials coupled with the high quality support services that are provided to the student and included in the tuition fee. Among the units in the University that provide support services to students it is believed that quality library service has in the past, and will continue to contribute to the growth and success of Athabasca University.

A survey of Athabasca University students in 1997 revealed that 98 per cent of AU students would recommend Athabasca University to a friend or colleague. The findings of this survey were also supported by the findings of a series of three teleconference focus groups conducted in 1997 by AU Library to determine the level of student satisfaction with library services.

Participants in the focus groups conducted by the Library reported that they were highly satisfied with materials supplied from the Library and that Library staff are knowledgeable and helpful and "go the extra mile" to help. Students reported that they appreciated that materials were sent to them could be returned to the Library postage paid by the

University. Most students were satisfied with the available on-line services and reported that some students may be unaware of such services. Participants also reported that there is a need for more instruction and explanation of techniques to access the available services.

This series of three focus groups also confirmed that more AU students are acquiring computer equipment and obtaining connectivity to the Internet. More AU students, it is concluded, want to do more of their searching and researching. AU Library is working diligently in this regard by entering into reciprocal agreements with other institutions and also by licensing more databases for access using the Internet.

### Library Services

Athabasca University Library provides a full range of library services to students registered in AU courses. Every registered student may benefit by the following services provided to them by AU Library.

- Students may borrow materials from AU Library.
- Students may search AUCAT (the library catalog) and other information resources available on the AU Library's web page.
- Students may expect library instruction and research assistance.
- Students may request interlibrary loan (ILL) for journal articles.

Since the early 1970s when the University was founded and since AU Library was developed, the Library has evolved and developed immensely. AU Library first occupied an area in the basement of the office building in Edmonton, Alberta. The collection at that time was quite small and supported but a handful of courses. In 1984 the University was relocated to the Town of Athabasca, Alberta and now occupies the largest area in the central office facility. The collection has been developed to about 130,000 items; these materials are used by faculty in the preparation and development of courses and by AU students who are registered in one or more of the more than 400 courses offered by the University.

The Library has established a service benchmark of responding to all requests to the Library Information Desk within 24 hours, or the next working day. Most recent data indicates that, not only are responses made, but that about 85% of the time the materials are sent out within 24 hours or the next working day.

### Changes

As mentioned earlier, changes in the location and size of the Library have taken place during the history of Athabasca University. Aside and in addition to the changes to the

physical location and description of AU Library, other changes have taken place respecting how AU Library conducts its core business and in the way users acquire information. The following points identify some of these changes.

- *From* a time when communication was based primarily on telephone and mail as a means for requesting materials, students *now* are able to request materials by fax, email, and directly from the library catalog.
- *From* a time when libraries built their own collections independently, libraries *now* collaborate with others on initiatives such as joint licensing and collection rationalization.
- *From* a time when students expected services primarily from their home institution, students *now* benefit from formal and informal agreements that are made by the home institution with other institutions (reciprocal loan programs).
- *From* a time when the library was the primary place to go for information and to study, *now* mega-bookstores provide thousands of items and journals for patrons to peruse in the comfort of stylish reading areas while having a café late.
- *From* a time when a book order was made through a bookstore or distributor (and it could take several weeks to receive), *now* order can be done electronically or through online bookstores with users inputting their credit card number and choosing priority delivery if necessary.

The technologies and processes used by libraries and information seekers have evolved over the years and now provide new and more efficient ways to conduct the core business of the Library. The expectation of our user/students, however remain the same -- students still expect to receive high quality service and receive high quality materials in a timely manner. It may be argued that the service expectations of library users are higher than ever before.

In 1999 AU Library purchased and has nearly completed the installation and implementation of a fully integrated and web based library system. The new INNOPAC library system makes it possible for users to search the catalog and request materials directly from the catalog, for users to view their patron account and renew their materials, for users to search other library catalogs, for users to search online databases from the library's web page.

At the same time, the new system makes it possible for library staff to catalog Internet resources, to mount help sheets and user information, to gather more meaningful statistics regarding library usage, to make it possible for the distance education student to conduct his or her own research.

At Athabasca University Library, we believe that we are keeping pace with the expectations of our students. At the same time we are cognizant of the fact that we (the Library) must continue to provide services to the student who is not technologically advanced and who for one reason or another require library services of a more traditional nature. It is for this reason that the AU Library Strategic Plan to the Year 2000 articulated four points regarding the development of library systems and the information gateway:

1. Users who cannot connect to and search electronic sources directly will benefit by library staff doing so on their behalf.
2. Users who have the facility to connect and search, but do not have the expertise, will benefit from library staff teaching them to do so.
3. Users who have the facility and expertise to connect and search will be guided to apply this to their search for scholarly information.
4. Users with a high level of expertise in electronic searching will benefit from subscriptions held by AU and linkages to electronic resources.

The development of the Library's web page as an information gateway now makes it possible for the online catalog, online databases, selected Internet resources, and user help sheets to all be brought together and accessed from one point. The library user may initiate this access either on- or off-campus. This access may also be conducted (mediated) on behalf of a user. A web proxy server provides for automatic patron verification and authentication and makes it possible for users, regardless of their Internet account, to access the *system*. This technology now makes it possible for users, regardless of their geographic location to access information when and where it is most convenient for them to do so. In this regard, the Library is *open* 24 hours a day, year round.

This said, and while the Library is *open* at all times and to all authenticated users, it is our experience that users more than ever require *help* – help connecting, help selecting an appropriate database, help refining a search topic, help preparing a search strategy, help conducting a search, help selecting appropriate search results, helps locating resources, and help citing their sources.

In this regard, the majority of service provided at the AU Library Information Desk remains the same as it did in the early 1970s. Now, however, more requests to the Library Information Desk arrive via an electronic means, at a faster pace, and in a climate of “I need it as quickly as possible – will you fax it to me?”

Athabasca University Library now makes more information available to users at their workspace than ever before. More than 30 online journal databases are accessible through the Library's information gateway. These databases provide bibliographic citations and some abstracts. In addition some of these databases provide the fulltext of journal articles. A recent analysis of seven journal databases that include fulltext revealed that journal

articles from more than 2500 unique journals are available online. This provides for a one-stop-shop: one that is updated frequently, is searchable, and that provides the actual content by providing the fulltext online. At this point the content may be viewed, downloaded, printed, or emailed.

The Library has a number of mechanisms in place on its library system to capture data regarding connection to the library system and use of the electronic databases. Recent analysis of user connections to databases on the library server clearly indicates that the databases that provide fulltext online are accessed the most.

Recent analysis of service usage of the AU's library proxy server revealed that the system *is* accessed twenty-four hours a day. While the majority of use happens during the working hours of local time, there are connections occurring in the wee hours of the morning -- indeed, "around the clock".

While in the early days of Athabasca University the majority of students served by the University resided in Alberta, more students now come to AU from across Canada, and overseas. Recent analysis confirms that the majority of users continue to come to the AU Library information gateway Canada and North America. However, a counter that records the country of the user account's top domain confirm that users of AU Library's information gateway/web pages come from all continents of the world.

Data collected also indicates that users are connecting with high-end graphical browsers and are using computers with high-end operating systems. This is no particular surprise as the cost of computer equipment and Internet connectivity is coming down dramatically (in North America for sure).

#### The Same

In an environment of significant change of processes and technologies and of our users, many of the underlying principles of library use and the quest for information remain the same. The saying "the more things change the more things remain the same" remains true. For example:

- Users of AU Library services and materials continue to contact the Library Information Desk on an individual basis. A noted increase has occurred in the number of electronic (e-mail) requests. The use of the telephone remains as a primary means for contacting the Desk -- even though more messages are left on the voice-mail answering system. The telephone also remains as a primary mode of communication as noted by the number of telephone calls actually taken at the Library Information Desk.
- Users of AU Library continue to contact the Library Information Desk for *help*. Users have known that the Library phones are open and that the Desk is staffed at all times the University is open. Users who have contacted the desk for answers and help with

their library related questions now continue to contact the Library with their questions concerning technology and electronic issues.

- Users who have been satisfied with the Library's services continue to use the Library's information gateway. In this regard, staff members who serve on the Library Information Desk are available to assist users in the transition from holdings to access, and from print-based to electronic resources.
- Users who have benefited by the Library's commitment to respond to requests within 24 hours or the next working day continue to expect this high level of response to questions in the electronic environment.
- Users who have requested books and articles on an individual (title) basis must continue to search and request materials on an individual basis. While the format has changed and the capacity to deliver materials has changed -- the item primarily remains as a distinct one.
- Users continue to rely on accurate bibliographic citation and cataloging. While the information in electronic formats can be zipped and compressed and while the capacity to process electronic information has increased, it is all the more critical that information be accurately marked, coded, and tagged for retrieval.
- Users must continue to cite their sources. Scholarly communication and activity continues to require users to give credit where credit is due. In an environment in which students have the technology and skill to download and "cut and paste" it is more difficult to identify academic misconduct.

## Summary

Athabasca University Library is committed to providing high quality and expedient service to AU students.

The tools available to the Library for it to carry out its core business are now more advanced and more accessible, yet continue to require strategy and clarity respecting their application. The amount of available information continues to increase at a phenomenal rate and consumers (students) who have busy lives with multiple responsibilities continue to require assistance with respect to their information needs.

Yet even with all of the advances and changes in technology and formats of information, the underlying academic research process remains a sophisticated one which requires accountability, critical analysis, responsibility, and skill and strategy.