

GUEST EDITORIAL

Once a young man would remove himself from secular society, cloister himself away in the confines of a monastic-like university, and study. From such a study he would emerge ready to become a scholar, a man of God, a man of the law, or a man of medicine. The man who wished to earn a living at some other vocation would leave his family, perhaps even his town, and commit himself to an apprenticeship to learn the trade. From such study he would become a wage earner and contributor to the economic growth of society.

The world has changed substantially from those early years. Formal learning is no longer restricted to men in most countries, and the barriers of race, nationality and economics have been substantially broken to provide passage for a much broader spectrum of groups and individuals. Religious study is no longer the center for higher education, and formal professional education has gone beyond law, medicine and teaching. Yet it is still true, perhaps even more so, that economic growth for the individual and society, as well as the maintenance of our cultural heritages, depends upon the success of education. There remain the spectres of sexism, racism, self-serving nationalism and other prejudices of groups with unwarranted feelings of superiority. The people of the world, however, have thrown off many of these bonds and are breaking new ones each day, while the world is feeling the fresh breath of individual freedom fill its lungs.

Many of the barriers set up by self-serving and misguided members of our world community have been broken by those whose vision has gone beyond accepting tradition's limitations. Barriers have been broken as individuals have become informed, trading ignorance for education. And many barriers have been broken since the 1960s with the increasing availability and influence of technology, which has provided people with information once sealed in inaccessible books and libraries in some distant city.

Political scholars and sociologists have suggested that the recent, unprecedented and unanticipated events in Europe, South Africa, South America and the Soviet Union have come as the result of the influence of technology, especially television. Television is the eye that has brought the agony of war, the horror of famine, the lost trust of government corruption and the unbearable human condition of oppression into living rooms worldwide. Television has also provided images for greater personal and societal expectations as well as offering opportunities for personal and societal development. As maligned as it is, television, with its converging technologies, has probably been the greatest influence in creating the Global Village.

Like any community, our Global Village must have certain assurances of services, the two most important of which are continued access to information and increased opportunity for personal growth through education. Technology, increasing in capability and availability and decreasing in cost, can provide these services, but

only if individuals seize the opportunity to make this technology work for the good of the community. As library and information professionals, we are in a unique time and position to make ourselves and our work essential to the Global Village by seizing that opportunity. To do so, we must turn the public's image of the library as a warehouse where logistical exchanges are conducted into a public image of a full service information utility which is both a place and concept, available at the flip of a switch as well as a turn of the steering wheel.

This scenario is presented to set the stage for this issue, devoted to distance education in library and information science. Distance education is a concept that combines and involves all of the elements just mentioned. By using it, educators can continue to remove the artificial barriers to education described above, as well as the barriers of time, geography, physical disability, and family and occupational responsibility. Distance education is a rapidly developing international phenomenon that has caught the attention of engineers, health care professionals, lawyers, literacy workers, educators at all levels, criminal justice professionals and fire-fighters, among many others.

Distance education is a concept that will place many new responsibilities on libraries and information centers of all types. No education is effective if it relies solely on textbooks and classroom content. A wide range of resources and information is needed if the learner is to gain the fullest measure of her or his participation in a single course or in a complete curriculum. This is where library and information professionals can enter the picture as partners in the teaching/learning process. Whether it is a school library media center, public library, corporate information center or university library, distance education will impact the information needs of their clients. The clients then will turn to these information centers to have their needs met, if, that is, library and information professionals are aware, willing and able to fulfill this role. If not, clients will find some other agency that has greater insights into human service to meet their needs, chipping away again at the already fragile image of the library as an essential institution in a technologically rich, information-driven society.

As possible participants in or clients themselves of distance education, library and information professionals (and those who aspire to be such) should demand attention from institutions and agencies that have accepted the responsibility of initial and continuing education. The technology is available to serve these educational needs as it is to serve the needs of other professional groups.

Distance education has the potential of continuing to reduce our separateness nationally and internationally by replacing ignorance with knowledge and heightened aspirations. It is our obligation as library and information professionals, researchers, educators and practitioners to explore together, in a united effort, every possibility and exploit every opportunity to make that potential real for our communities and for ourselves.

Daniel D. Barron
College of Library and Information Science
University of South Carolina
Columbia, SC
USA