

10-1996

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Publication Info

Bulletin of the Medical Library Association, Volume 84, Issue 4, 1996, pages 549-552.

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Collaboration in a continuum of learning: developing the next generation of leadership*

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A project to create a lifelong learning community among health sciences library and information professionals by demonstrating the potential for using complementary technologies to provide access to a full range of educational experiences as recommended in *Platform for Change*, the Medical Library Association's educational policy statement, is described. The cooperative project brings together the rich continuing education tradition of the Medical Library Association, the experience of the University of South Carolina in distance education, and the Library and Information Science Distance Education Consortium to create a virtual campus through which health sciences library professionals may engage in lifelong learning.

INTRODUCTION

"Exponential growth in biomedical knowledge and new information technologies are redefining the infrastructure of health care, education, and research, spawning an array of professional specialties and reworking what was a well-defined arena of information service." [1]

As Webb has noted, the currents affecting our discipline are so strong and changing so rapidly that it is more challenging than ever to maintain a professional bearing [2]. These currents are coming from many fronts. As is emphasized in medicine, lifelong learning is essential in a profession that changes. With

the rapidity of scientific discoveries and the advances in the digital environment, health sciences library and information professionals are faced with the need to develop new skills or to face the prospect of being replaced by professionals in other information fields who compete with librarians for jobs once considered the province of the librarian [3].

No one organization can provide all of the educational opportunities needed by today's health information professional. Therefore, a project jointly proposed by the University of South Carolina College of Library and Information Science (USC/CLIS), the Medical Library Association (MLA), and the Library and Information Science Distance Education Consortium (LISDEC) is intended to create a lifelong learning community among health sciences library and information professionals by demonstrating the potential for using complementary technologies to provide access to a full range of educational programs, activities, and services.

* This work is supported by NIH Grant No. 1 T15 LM 07108-01 from the National Library of Medicine. The views expressed are solely those of the authors and do not represent the official view of the National Library of Medicine.

MEDICAL LIBRARY ASSOCIATION

The Medical Library Association (MLA) has one of the oldest and most respected continuing education programs in the country. Begun in the 1950s when other major professional library and information science associations were paying little or no attention to professional development needs, this important activity of MLA serves as the foundation of this project.

In *Platform for Change*, the Medical Library Association's educational policy statement, a series of recommendations sets out the relationships between education providers and the individual professional. Various groups of providers of educational opportunities, both formal and informal, are identified along with their suggested roles. It falls to the health information professional to use those opportunities effectively in practice.

An outgrowth of the tenets in *Platform for Change*, the project focuses on lifelong learning, although some of the outcomes will be just as pertinent for the entry-level degree as for the most sophisticated continuing education opportunities.

Platform for Change grew out of the work of the Medical Library Association's nine-member Task Force on Knowledge and Skills. The task force began its work with a survey asking members to identify the knowledge and skills they needed to be professionally active at that time and the knowledge and skills they perceived would be required of them in the twenty-first century. They were further asked to identify where and how such knowledge and skills could best be obtained. The results of the survey formed the basis for *Platform for Change*, which was approved by the MLA Board of Directors as the association's educational policy statement in December, 1991 [4]. Key ideas in the document include the following:

- Individuals must assume personal responsibility for aggressively seeking lifelong education and professional development opportunities from a variety of sources.
- Learning moves along a continuum from stable and consistent conditions toward those that confront learners with changing and less-structured but learner-important problems, close to actual work situations.
- A coalition of interdisciplinary educational providers and consumers should be established to explore new opportunities in the continuum of learning [5].

Platform for Change defines the professional attributes and technical capabilities required of health sciences librarians. The task now at hand is to determine the most effective means of providing dynamic continuing professional education to the widest audience of health sciences librarians possible.

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

The development of a learning community requires more than a workshop or two; it requires an initial investment with ongoing nurturing, which one organization cannot manage independently. This project brings the Medical Library Association with its rich history and tradition of continuing education together with the distance-education capabilities of the USC College of Library and Information Science and with the Library and Information Science Distance Education Consortium to create a virtual campus through which health sciences library and information professionals may engage in a variety of lifelong learning opportunities.

The University of South Carolina has more than twenty-five years of experience in the delivery of educational programs through the use of communications technology. The College of Library and Information Science began offering its classes via the SCETV closed-circuit interactive television network in South Carolina in 1982. The college has experience in offering its full Master of Library and Information Science degree program through interactive technology in the states of South Carolina, Georgia, West Virginia, and Maine. The offering of full degree programs in multiple states with a combination of satellite technology and intensive weekend sessions represents the first such effort by a program accredited by the American Library Association.

LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE DISTANCE EDUCATION CONSORTIUM

The Library and Information Science Distance Education Consortium, based at the University of South Carolina, is a consortium of programs of library and information science education, state library agencies, state departments of education, and professional associations. LISDEC was established to provide a mechanism for the cooperative development and sharing of graduate credit courses. It has recently refocused its mission to include continuing education for library and information professionals. In 1993/94 LISDEC produced four teleconferences, using the University of South Carolina's facilities, primarily for school library media specialists. A wider range of teleconferences has been carried out in 1995 and 1996.

THE PROJECT

The partnership among LISDEC, USC, and MLA provides the means whereby the professional development programs of the Medical Library Association can be greatly enhanced by technological innovations in the delivery of library and information science

education. These innovations include both converging technologies, such as the cameras, satellites, telephone systems, and fiber optics needed for the transmission of a "televised" class, and complementary technologies that support the entire learning and teaching process. Examples of complementary technologies include listserv discussions with other class members or with members of the health sciences library community, the availability of online resources related to the topic of the class via the Internet, and communication with the instructor and submission of assignments through electronic mail or fax.

The educational experience described above is possible now. Its components have been validated in a wide range of situations with a wide range of learners, as the USC College of Library and Information Science has delivered the M.L.I.S. degree program through distance education to more than 300 students who live in West Virginia, Georgia, and Maine. With careful planning, MLA, USC, and LISDEC will establish a series of challenging, integrated, innovative events and activities that meet the educational needs of health sciences library and information professionals throughout the United States.

An advisory committee, made up of representatives from each of the three collaborating agencies, has held one meeting in Columbia, South Carolina, and will hold another during the summer of 1996. MLA representatives include the executive director, the director of professional development, and the chair and chair-elect of the Continuing Education Committee. From the University of South Carolina, there are the dean of the College of Library and Information Science, the director of Distance Education and Instructional Services, and the project coordinator for Instructional Design and Assessment. LISDEC is represented by its coordinator.

Parallel activities taking place at the University of South Carolina include the following:

- development of an inventory of resources in the health sciences currently available via technology, (e.g., CD-ROM products and Internet resources)
- assessment of the lifelong learning needs of health information professionals
- development of demonstration projects

An added benefit of the project is the opportunity to gain much needed demographic information for the Medical Library Association. The needs assessment survey will be submitted to a sample of the entire membership of MLA. In addition to the demographic information, the survey provides an opportunity to determine the technological needs and capabilities of MLA members. The latest figures indicate that about 70% of the membership have e-mail access.

The survey also provides an opportunity to reevaluate the knowledge and skills reflected in *Platform for Change*. Nearly seven years have passed since the

survey on knowledge and skills was administered to a sample of the MLA membership. The first half of this decade has seen unprecedented technological and health care changes that could not have been anticipated by the membership. The major thrust of this survey will be the reevaluation of the skills the members possess and what they anticipate will be needed in the twenty-first century.

Another assessment effort will be a survey of employers of health information professionals to determine how much importance is placed on staff development by employers and supervisors and to determine the kind of assistance they are prepared to give their staff members.

At the same time that the needs assessment and inventory are moving forward, demonstration projects are being developed in conjunction with the USC Distance Education and Instructional Services Division

- to provide models for using complementary technologies,
- to build on the demonstrated success of
 - * MLA's teleconference and MLANET,
 - * LISDEC's TeleShops, and
 - * USC's distance education infrastructure.

In order to determine topics for the demonstration projects, MLA committee, section, and chapter chairs and the MLA board have been asked to suggest one or two topics. It is anticipated that one activity will take place in the fall of 1996 and one in the spring of 1997. A possible sequence and example for a teleconference follow.

Determination of the topic as well as identification of a content consultant are currently under way. The USC distance-education team will work with the consultant to determine the nature of the content, to develop delivery alternatives, to provide general support and instruction, to assist in developing materials, and finally to assist in follow-up activities.

Prior to the day of the teleconference, a Web site will be developed and linked to MLANET. Participants will be asked to read materials from the Web site as well as those in traditional formats. By means of a listserv specially set up for the participants in the teleconference, the consultant will stimulate discussion of major topics, key issues, and necessary background. The consultant and the distance education team will monitor the listserv as active participants.

On the day of the teleconference, there will be a mix of demonstration and presentation, local discussions, call-in discussions, and specific local activities. Follow-up activities will be outlined, and local goal-setting will be shared on the listserv or Web site.

Follow-up activities may take place in a variety of formats. Participants may be assigned to discussion groups, which will then report back to the entire

group. Discussions will be followed and stimulated by the consultant for a period of time. Participants will be asked to post reports of follow-up successes and related questions to the listserv and to MLANET. In addition, participants will be asked to suggest related resources (bibliographies, other CE activities, etc.) for the Web site.

PROJECTED RESULTS

The products that will evolve from this project include the following:

- analysis of the needs assessment survey, which will provide the basis for an update of *Platform for Change*, and will provide the Medical Library Association with considerable information about the membership and its ability to participate in lifelong learning activities at a distance
- two demonstration teleconferences, which will be made available in 1996 and 1997
- a plan for developing an ongoing series of learning activities and programs for distribution in a variety of formats through the use of many technologies

The collaboration of the Medical Library Association, the University of South Carolina, and LISDEC

will result in the production of a wide range of lifelong learning opportunities for health sciences library and information professionals. The project will not only address new developments in the health sciences but will also involve participants in the use

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Received April 1996; accepted May 1996