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# *Library Support for Online Graduate Students in the Summer Session*

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## **Abstract**

Summer sessions are an excellent opportunity for graduate students, and have been increasing in popularity in recent years. However, many of these sessions are moving online. Online library databases can be challenging to navigate, and there is a lack of student-librarian interaction. This paper discusses the research on the problems that arise for online graduate students during summer sessions and presents best practices for digital library support for those students. These best practices include

- online citation and reference management workshops,
- online subject-specific library navigation and user guides, and
- collaboration between library and teaching faculty.

These practices will help eliminate students' use of unreliable research resources and provide them with proper support. Library support for online graduate students during summer sessions is imperative and that it must be designed to meet specific student needs.

## Introduction

Summer sessions are an excellent opportunity for graduate students to conduct their research assignments and write graduate theses and dissertations. A substantial body of research shows summer research sessions for graduate students promote the development of critical research and communication skills (Ghee et al., 2014; Lopatto, 2007). In traditional face-to-face summer session modalities, students are more likely to ask for research help from librarians. However, the lack of student-librarian interaction in the growing online summer sessions requires institutions to rethink how the library can support online graduate students. The trend toward online summer sessions in higher education institutions will most likely continue due to changing student populations, high enrollment by international students, new course formats due to COVID-19, and evolving institutional priorities.

According to the US Department of Education, the number of college and university students (both undergraduate and graduate) taking at least one online course increased from 31.1% in 2016 to 33.1% in 2017 and 34.7% in 2018 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). The number of online summer students skyrocketed in 2020, reaching a maximum of 98.6% in both public and private learning institutions due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). The increasing number of online graduate programs presents a challenge for librarians to provide support to this group.

Based on my own experience and extensive research evidence, online library databases can be challenging to navigate, and many are built on a structure that is not intuitive to graduate students. While librarians have made electronic guides available in online libraries, Bellard (2005) noted that they build the guides without information about students' previous experience using virtual libraries. Liu and Luo (2011) found that students described digital libraries as difficult to use and likely to contain older materials. Since librarians cannot offer face-to-face support in online sessions, online students may not be able to find or access the academic materials they need in an online library. As a result, they can become disenfranchised and turn to incompetent resources, which will keep them from finding the most appropriate resources for their work. Therefore, librarians are responsible for creating an online library support system for graduate students doing their research. This paper presents best practices of digital library support for online graduate students during summer sessions.

## Library Best Practices during Online Summer Sessions

While there is abundant discussion on library services for on-campus sessions, fewer studies have focused on library services during online summer sessions. However, changes in the educational landscape, such as online classes and distance learning, are driving the need for more comprehensive online library services for graduate students. While some studies may provide information that can help enhance online library services to graduate students during the academic year, there

are issues that come into play when graduate students plan and conduct their research during summer sessions. These may include finding and accessing library resources online, collecting and analyzing data, managing citations, and navigating the online library. Though some librarians certainly meet the needs of graduate students during the summer session, others may consider developing support systems to help online graduate students to navigate online libraries and their databases, find and access online library resources, manage citations, and explore options for accessing books off campus.

Based on a research study by Bussell et al. (2017), the following recommendations for better online summer session practices include citation and reference management workshops, online library navigation and user guides, and collaboration between library and teaching faculty.

### Citation and Reference Management Workshops

Bussell et al. (2017) found that citation and reference management was the topmost challenge for most graduate students during online research. In their study, respondents reported several suggestions to effectively provide online library instructions to graduate students. One response in relation to the students' needs and feedback was hands-on reference and citation management workshops so students could receive timely and relevant support. Online workshops were possible with the advancement in video call technologies. Students were invited to bring in the specific resources for which they had referencing questions. The librarian would then examine the resources and address individual challenges during the online workshop. In addition, libraries working more closely with faculty members during online summer sessions would attract many students by aligning the online workshops with summer session schedules when the graduate students needed research support.

Online workshops go beyond learning about research skills. As a result of subject-specific workshops, graduate students will have an opportunity to be acquainted with librarians assigned to their field of study. Students would benefit from establishing relationships with the specialized librarians and working with the same librarian on multiple research assignments and projects throughout their academic period. In a nutshell, online workshops, as a library support strategy, offer an opportunity for librarians to train a significant number of graduate students, even those who may shy away from direct consultations. The support will help alleviate research difficulties among graduate students and ultimately support their academic success.

### Online Library Navigation and User Guides

Graduate students in Bussell et al.'s (2017) study expressed a need for support to navigate and use the university online library while attending online summer sessions. The fact that a significant number of students (63%) expressed a challenge in the usability of the library points out an area that needs improvement (Bussell et al., 2017).

Keeping students' recommendations in mind, it is important for an online library to have embedded user guides to aid students with its navigation and use. An online library tutorial is an ideal example of user guides that can orient new graduate students to library resources and navigation procedures. The librarians can make the tutorial available when the students sign up to online course management systems. The development of the guides should include a structure that meets students' preferences with a clear design, simple language, and a limited number of database links. Moreover, a study by Ouellette (2011) recommended breaking library guides into subdisciplines. According to the study, students valued electronic library resources but were often confused by the structure and the complex language used by librarians. As a result, a subject-specific approach in the development of the library guides would allow articles and books to be found more easily.

### Collaboration between Library and Teaching Faculty

In their 2017 study, Bussell et al. revealed that graduate students identified a need for subject-relevant library resources. Accordingly, since faculty have substantial knowledge on subject specifications and preferred citation styles for documentation and formatting, a collaboration of librarians and the faculty in developing library services and support strategies can lead to an improvement in library support during online summer sessions. In addition to developing information literacy instruction, collaboration can help in embedding library instructions in coursework. In particular, librarians can develop sessions to educate graduate students about the basic elements of the online library during research methods courses. The sessions should focus on online library navigation, use of library databases, and available library support during off-campus sessions.

### Library Support and Implications for Practice

The primary challenge for librarians during online classes is to provide library services and support that equal the support offered in person for traditional on-campus students. With the current graduate education trend for summer sessions to be offered online, students need to be familiar with using online resources, which requires additional instruction on how to use various library technologies, how to navigate the online library and databases, and how to manage online citations and references. A common misconception is that graduate students already have know-how and skills in using an online library. Libraries and librarians need to develop online library user guides, tutorials, and workshops, and collaborate with faculty to meet the unique need for graduate students to conduct their research conveniently during summer sessions.

The benefit of library support during distance learning is that it provides students with instruction on how to access and use library databases, and how to effectively choose reliable resources. Distance learners who cannot access university library resources often rely on platforms such as Google's search engine. Although Google is a resource for finding abundant information, users have become complacent and tend to use the first resources found online, which can be unreliable.

Library support for distance learners provides an opportunity for institutions to eliminate the use of unreliable information during research and to promote the growth of competent graduate researchers. Another advantage of library support for distance learners is that they receive all the services provided by a library, including citation and reference management, library searches, access to relevant information, and education on library navigation. Distance learners have often been excluded from library services due to geographical challenges, compared to their on-campus counterparts who can easily access librarians. Therefore, having specific strategies to support distance learners with effective library resources eliminates the education inequality.

Hoffman (2011) reported that library support that is embedded in the online library, such as user guides and tutorials, reduces the time spent by librarians answering questions through emails and by telephone. Accordingly, librarians are able to deliver a higher quality of work and have additional time to be innovative. At the same time, as the students interact with the embedded library guides, they become aware of the resources available to them and feel confident using the online library for their research. On an institutional scale, library support beyond a campus boundary shows resourcefulness and innovativeness. The institution also shows that it understands its responsibility in promoting the development of competent researchers and professionals, and that it is proactive in conducting online summer sessions.

## Conclusion

This paper has identified the library needs of graduate students during online summer sessions and provided the best library support strategies that can be adapted in a university setting to meet the needs. Given the large sums spent to support online summer sessions, it is imperative for librarians to develop library support that is effective and sustainable. It is recognized that online summer sessions are a period characterized by minimal student-librarian interaction for direct consultations concerning library services. However, it can be concluded that key issues surrounding library services to remote graduate students are universal and must be actively addressed to successfully meet the research needs of students (Bussell et al., 2017). For future studies, researchers should focus on subject-specific library support, and whether library support differs for humanities and sciences graduate programs. Assessing the challenges of the different disciplines might benefit institutions in employing librarians and library support in different subjects.

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## **Biography**

Quincy Martin III is an assistant professor and coordinator of the higher education administration concentration of the interdisciplinary leadership doctorate program at Governors State University. During a career spanning nearly 25 years, he has held various positions at both the community college and university levels, managing multiple units, programs, and functions in student affairs. His research interests include higher education and the student experience, with special emphasis on retention of male students of color, student affairs administration, and leadership in higher education.