

## Northern Alberta Library and Information Network (NORALINK) Challenges and Highlights of a Collaborative Initiative

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### INTRODUCTION

Athabasca University, in Athabasca, Alberta, is Canada's Open University, and has an enrolment of nearly 18,000 students across Canada. AU offers six undergraduate degrees, nine university certificates, two graduate degrees, and two graduate diplomas. Student enrolments have climbed steadily since 1970, as have the number of graduates. Every Province and Territory of Canada is represented in the AU student body. The highest proportion of AU students, however, live in Alberta. Edmonton and Calgary, have the largest numbers of AU students and also are home to the University of Alberta, and the University of Calgary. Two other major centres in northern Alberta, particularly Grande Prairie, and Fort McMurray, also are home to colleges, Grande Prairie Regional College, and Keyano College. In each of these cities there is a nucleus of AU students who could benefit by having access to the library resources in their vicinity.

One of the primary functions of Athabasca University Library is to support AU programming and courses; providing library support to AU students. While AU Library sends materials to students postage-paid both ways, it must be pointed out that AU students living in cities in which there are library resources have enhanced options through which information needs could be met. Most university libraries have collections that are much superior to AU's; these collections normally are available to external users on a walk-in basis.

The concept of the Northern Alberta Library and Information Network (NORALINK) emerged in early 1992, initiated by Athabasca University Library. NORALINK was a response of the Library to two situations. First, a response to AU students in Edmonton who wanted access and borrowing privileges from the University of Alberta Libraries. Second, a response to a shared premise that libraries of post-secondary institutions could provide services to one another's students, and treat one another's client's as their own. For example, an AU student living in a city in which there is a NORALINK library could go into that library and expect to receive reference service and borrowing privileges as if the student attended that particular institution.

### THE PARTICIPANTS

Participating libraries in the NORALINK initiative include Keyano College Library in Fort McMurray, Alberta; Grande Prairie Regional College Library, and Grande Prairie Public Library, in Grande Prairie, Alberta; Lakeland College Library, in Vermillion, Alberta; Alberta Vocational College Libraries, in Slave Lake, and Lac la Biche, Alberta, the University of Alberta Libraries, in Edmonton, and Athabasca University Library.

### THE AGREEMENT

Several points of agreement were reached and it was hoped that benefits would be realized by each participating library.

- Each library agreed to serve one another's students as if the student was their own.
- Each library agreed to provide reference assistance to a student of a participating library.
- Each library agreed to extend borrowing privileges to a student of a participating library, and if necessary, support the policies of the participating library in the event of fines, lost books, recalls, or suspensions.
- Athabasca University provided a computing account to each participating library so that a connection to AU's online catalogue could be made to search the Library catalogue on behalf of an AU student. Through this account, then, requests for materials from Athabasca University Library could be sent electronically to AU's Library Information Desk. It was also arranged for ILL requests to be expedited to AU or to the U of A. Materials or ILL requests for journal articles could be sent on behalf of an AU student in another library's geographic area, or on behalf of a student of the participating library. By default, all materials sent to an AU student were sent to the student's home address; arrangements would be made, however, to have materials delivered by courier to one of the AU Learning Centres, or by Provincial Courier to a site in the student's vicinity.
- Athabasca University hired a part-time document delivery clerk to work in the ILL section of the U of A Library. The purpose of this position was to provide a means by which ILL requests from any NORALINK Library would be expedited as efficiently as possible.

The participation of the University of Alberta in NORALINK was a bit different than that of the other institutions. The U of A's policies did not accommodate reciprocal borrowing privileges to Athabasca students. However, the U of A did provide office space for Athabasca University to provide a place to which AU students in Edmonton could come for liaison and orientation to the University of Alberta Libraries. AU students could obtain reference assistance, receive instruction and assistance search the U of A's online catalogue, have messages for materials from AU Library expedited to Athabasca by electronic mail, and use one of the five institutional, secondary borrower's card to check out books from the U of A collections.

### STAFFING

Each NORALINK Library participating in the agreement, other than Athabasca, did so with existing staff. At the NORALINK Office at the U of A, Athabasca University Library hired one professional librarian to staff the office. It was decided to split this into two half-time positions. After consideration was given to the extent of irregular hours and the six days a week that the office would be open, it was decided that one person would not reasonably be able to give all afternoons and Saturdays to this work. Furthermore, two persons could cover for one another, and discuss ideas and strategies.

Following confirmation that office space in the Cameron Library at the U of A would be made available, the hours that the Office would be open were established. Consideration was given to "the typical AU student;" this student was most likely employed, had family and community obligations. It was decided to schedule the Office five hours a day, six days a week; Monday through Saturday, 3:00 through 8:00 p.m.

VA half-time document delivery clerk position at the U of A Office was also funded and hired by Athabasca. The purpose of this position was to expedite interlibrary loans that could be filled from the U of A collection for AU and the NORALINK participants.

#### PROMOTION

Through the Office of the Registrar at Athabasca University, a list of active students living in the greater Edmonton region was generated. The term "active student" is significant; at any given time there are considerably more students who are registered with Athabasca University than there are students taking a course. It was decided to pull address labels of students who were currently working on at least one AU course. At the time the list was prepared, in September 1993, there were just over 2500 active students in greater Edmonton. A letter announcing the opening of the NORALINK Office as an enhanced service for students living in the Edmonton region was prepared and sent out.

The letter sent to students provided a description of the service and the location of the office, including the times the office was open, and telephone numbers of both the NORALINK Office and the Library Information Desk at Athabasca. The service was promoted as an enhancement or added benefit to AU students living in the Edmonton region. Book marks and posters were prepared and distributed from the Library Information Desk in Athabasca, at the Edmonton Learning Centre, and through the various campus libraries at the U of A. The letter was also included in packages of library materials sent out to students living in the Edmonton region.

#### THE SERVICE

The service provided by the staff at the NORALINK Office may be summarized as follows, as presented on the letter sent to AU students in the Edmonton region.

- Online access to AU Library collections
- Online access to journal indexes
- Instruction in the use of CD-ROM databases
- Rapid document delivery from AU collections
- Assistance in the use of "The Gate" (U of A's online catalogue)
- Shared use of U of A institutional borrower's cards
- U of A campus library directory assistance

At the NORALINK Office, connectivity was available to both the U of A library systems, and Athabasca University. Expedited messaging of requests was possible between the two sites. The delivery of materials was expedited by using the AU courier that regularly stopped at the U of A.

Statistics of all activity were kept; contacts by students and faculty. In addition, a "usage log" was developed to track and account for material that was borrowed on the institutional cards. There was potential for materials to be checked out on one card by more than one student. In the event of overdue and fines, it would be critical to determine who used the card on a given day. The "log sheet" recorded the date, name and ID number of the student, the borrower card number, and signature of the student. The signature indicated agreement of the student to accept responsibility for the

materials and/or pay any fines that accrued because of overdue material.

Through the NORALINK Office, an additional service was provided; AU faculty could have their U of A library materials renewed.

### THE HIGHLIGHTS

Highlights of the service kept the initiative going as long as it did. NORALINK was a new idea, and while the intent was to provide an enhanced service to Edmonton area students, the reality is that much work was done to bring in even a few students over the 18 months the office was open. Reports from the students who contacted the office and came in to search the Gate, to ask for assistance with their assignments, to drop in and see what was going on were very positive

Here is a sampling of comments by students who used the service.

What kind of help did you receive?

- They (NORALINK staff at the U of A) helped me to locate books that AU did not have. Also gave suggestions of places I could try that I had not thought of.
- Individual help on computer; lots of good suggestions and ideas as what to look under; map of U of A libraries.
- Help with a literature search.

What did you like best about the service?

- Simply that I could get access to the U of A library.
- Availability of resources outside of AU.
- That the staff were there to assist me; very responsive and helpful.
- Personal; one on one; was not rushed.

What could be done to make the service better?

- Better hours.
- Promote it.

It was a highlight to provide an avenue for AU students to access the U of A Library collection. While individuals normally can come on campus to use the collection on a walk-in basis as an external user, this is often misunderstood by many students. Furthermore, many external or community library users may be unsure of the locations and complexities of a large academic library system. It was rewarding to say to our students "if you live in Edmonton, or can get to the U of A, we have an office through which you can borrow materials from the U of A."

While Athabasca University Library provides excellent service to its students who live across Canada, it was rewarding to spend time on a campus such as the U of A. It was a highlight, on occasion, to work on the U of A campus and provide liaison and service to our own students.

It was through the connectivity provided by Athabasca that the northern colleges had expedited ILL service from the U of A library. One of the components of the NORALINK office was a half-time document delivery clerk hired by AU to receive, fill, and send out ILL materials from the University of Alberta collections. The participating NORALINK sites benefited directly from this initiative.

## THE CHALLENGES

It would seem that the challenges outnumbered the highlights. While the core group who initially began working on getting the NORALINK initiative underway were convinced that the possibilities were outstanding, there was much scepticism among faculty and staff. This was primarily due to the cost of keeping the office at the U of A open to serve a relatively few students.

Circulation policies at the U of A prevailed, and it was difficult for students who were accustomed to no fines at Athabasca University Library to accept a fine scheme at the U of A that was double the fine for U of A students. Thus, fines were levied at \$2.00 per day, per item. However, only a few fines were actually levied that required payment. Some fines were explained at depth and successfully appealed. However, while an appeal of a fine on a student's behalf is worthwhile and an excellent public relation activity, this kept staff from other duties of a more productive nature.

The question of "hours" the office would be open was a challenge to determine. While it was thought that mid-afternoon to evening hours would fit best with the schedule of most students, it was learned that other students would have preferred morning hours. So it was difficult to accommodate the best schedule of all students.

Two part time staff had minimal time that their work overlapped. Normally one person staffed the office at a time and dealt with a wide range of queries. This was a challenge of its own. Unlike most library information desks that are staffed by a number of persons having a wide range of skills, the NORALINK office was staffed by one person who any time would have to be both the reference specialist and the technical specialist. This was satisfactory most of the time; however, in the event of technical difficulty with equipment, it is the exception that one staff member can meet every demand. Also, in the event that duties took the staff out of the office, there was no backup.

Athabasca University Library, relatively small in size and complexity, benefits by its flexibility and ability to adjust to new demands. The U of A, on the other hand is a complex organization that has an extensive policy structure. It was a challenge to reconcile the two. One of the outstanding characteristics of Athabasca University is its commitment to remove barriers that typically would restrict access or success. At AU Library, there is no question when this approach must be applied. At the U of A, there was less opportunity to manoeuvre beyond, and make exceptions to the existing policy structure.

Absences for vacation and illness, while not a real challenge, nonetheless required coverage. A staff member normally went to Edmonton to work the office; these times did, however, provided opportunity to spend time on the U of A campus and spend some time in the U of A collection or searching the databases that were available at the U of A.

## THE FUTURE OF NORALINK

Following the completion of the initial one-year pilot project, the decision was made to extend the project. However, this move was criticized because there was a small number of students actually using the service. Effective June 1, 1995, the office was closed at the U of A. At the time this decision was made to close the student portion of the service, 70 individual students had used the service through the period of the pilot project. A personal letter was sent to each student explaining the closure, suggesting that students can use the U of A collection on a walk-in basis, and individuals can purchase an external borrowers card for a fee. Plans were immediately made to enter into a contract with the U of A to retain the document delivery component of the initiative.

It was determined that the resources saved by not hiring staff to provide service for a few could, perhaps, be better used in ways to enhance library service for a greater number of AU students. For example, by developing more help sheets, developing the AU Library Web home page, providing instruction for students to investigate the use of libraries in their areas, particularly those students who live in cities in which there is a college or university library.

NORALINK is an initiative that, in spirit, continues to live on; it was the first attempt by AU Library to help AU students benefit directly from library resources that are in their local vicinity. NORALINK was an initiative that caused librarians across Northern Alberta to extend beyond their walls and consider the patron seeking assistance for his or her information needs.

While the Office has been closed at the U of A, the spirit of cooperation remains. Connectivity between the sites is still in place, and communication between NORALINK participants is better than before NORALINK was launched. The future looks bright as agreements for cooperative programming between institutions are signed. More than ever, it will be essential that more consideration be given to cooperative initiatives that result in enhanced and expedient service by libraries to all potential patrons.