One promising student of indexing wrote with relish and incredulity:

Who would have thought the USDA offered a course on indexing books? Courses in farm management and tractor maintenance maybe, but indexing books...?

Surprise is not an unusual first reaction to learning that the United States Department of Agriculture, Graduate School's Correspondence Program offers not one, but two courses on indexing books: Basic Indexing and Applied Indexing. For those who still think this adult education program focuses mainly on earth-related sciences, Norma Harwood, director of the Correspondence Program for the last 19 years, responds: "The USDA Graduate School is a continuing education school offering career-related courses to all adults regardless of education or place of employment. The Graduate School (GS) annually provides more than 1,500 different courses for career development and personal enrichment. More than 1,200 part-time faculty are drawn from government and academia. As practitioners of the skills they teach, the GS instructors bring a practical focus to the courses."

the background

Continuing education is not a new trend, and the USDA school has been involved with post-graduate learning for several decades. The GS was created in 1921 by Secretary of Agriculture Henry C. Wallace, who believed the school would serve people who had already completed a formal education. Harwood explains: "Shortly after World War I, the demand for qualified personnel was acute. Secretary Wallace perceived that a 'graduate school' would help attract and retain qualified personnel."

Over 75 years later and responding to the needs of these times, Harwood confirms a more modern change in outlook: "Today, the name 'Graduate School' reflects who we are rather than what we do. The school continues to serve adults who have 'graduated' from full-time schooling." In order to fill another need recognized as early as the '30s, the Correspondence Program was initiated in 1935.

The Basic Indexing course first appeared in the 1980-82 USDA GS Correspondence Program catalog, and the Applied Indexing course first appeared in the 1982-84 catalog. BevAnne Ross, a name respected by ASI members, designed and taught both courses. The two courses have undergone several revisions since Ross's development more than 15 years ago. Nancy Mulvany, who began teaching the basic course in 1988 and still teaches it today, revised and developed the current version of Basic Indexing in 1996. Shirley Manley took over for Ross in 1992 and still teaches the applied course today; she revised and developed the current version of the Applied Indexing course in 1997. Mulvany and Manley credit Ross with considerable influence on their commitment to indexing scholarship.

Once the indexing courses were offered, enrolment increased steadily. Since their origin, some 2,512 students have enrolled in the Basic Indexing course, and 150 students have enrolled in the Applied Indexing course. Completion rates for the courses should be interpreted in light of the nature of the indexing process, the analytical demands of index creation, and the temperaments suitable for the tasks involved in indexing. Records confirm that 567 students have completed the basic course for a completion rate of 23%, and 42 students have completed the applied course for a completion rate of 28%.

The school year for the Correspondence Program extends from August through July, and Harwood's records for recent enrolments document a dramatic increase in interest for indexing.

At the time of writing, current 1997 enrolment for the Basic Indexing course is 486, with 16 students enrolled in the Applied Indexing course. To handle the soaring demand for the first course, the number of instructors for Basic Indexing increased to two in 1991 with the addition of Jane Maddocks. Today seven
Bringing it home: learning to index books by correspondence

instructors assist Mulvany in providing the basics of indexing instruction: Victoria Agee, Hazel Blumberg-McKee, Jean Mann, Carolyn McGovern, Alexandra Nickerson, Jan Wright, and Pilar Wyman. Manley is the sole instructor for the Applied Indexing course.

Although the majority of indexing students come from the United States, enrollment is not geographically limited. Students from Canada, Japan, Israel, and Saudi Arabia have participated in the courses, providing a richer dimension to the meaning of distance education.

the courses

Content for both courses is varied and comprehensive. Basic Indexing covers indexing techniques in the style used by the University of Chicago Press. Topics include alphabetizing; headings, subheadings, and cross-references; index preparation methods; submission formats and typographic considerations; problems incurred in the indexing of personal names, place names, abbreviations, acronyms, and numerals as entries; introduction to the business of freelance indexing; and current information regarding indexing software. Students create indexes as well as respond to short-answer and essay questions for this ten-lesson course. There is also a final examination.

The Applied Indexing course is a short-form simulation (as closely as possible in a learning environment) of the experiences of a freelance indexer. Students are expected to apply the techniques from the Basic Indexing course when indexing significant excerpts from books, and respond to business management problems that a freelance indexer might experience. Students analyze a book index, propose and justify bids; submit invoices; estimate length of time for specific projects; produce indexes according to specific project requirements and size specifications; explain how to handle misrepresented projects; and design indexes that satisfy diverse readers, fastidious editors, and frugal publishers. There are eight lessons in the course, the last one being the final examination.

Beginning and learning indexers are often dismayed at the financial commitments necessary to begin a business, or to set up a system compatible with their workplace system. Adding the cost of continuing education to the cost of purchasing hardware, software, furniture, and supplies leaves many new indexers somewhat dazed.

While experienced indexers in ASI recognize fees for national and chapter ASI meetings are a "bargain" in continuing education, beginning and learning indexers frequently see distance education as the only accessible and appropriate way to learn. But potential students flinch at the cost of correspondence courses, erroneously thinking, according to Harwood, that a correspondence course is that "a lot of students have difficulty figuring out what correspondence education is really like. They don't get to see their instructor in the flesh, so they often don't know how to respond to lessons."

Shirley Manley concurs for students in the Applied Indexing course: "At first some students expect the same levels of teacher participation in individualized instruction [correspondence courses] that they would find in classroom education, mentor experiences, and consulting situations."

The challenges facing instructors are equally complex, maintains Manley. "Correspondence teachers have 15 to 50 students or more, all turning in assignments at their own pace, and all expecting immediate evaluation and response. But correspondence teachers have only one mode of response: individual but time-consuming written evaluation."

Alexandra Nickerson agrees that "providing comprehensive feedback on indexing assignments in written form" is her greatest challenge as a Basic Indexing instructor. Her second challenge is "keeping lessons flowing back to students in a timely manner. With uneven flow to instructors, it is not always possible to return lessons as quickly as we might." Manley adds a consequential factor: "If we contend that a major strength of the USDA indexing courses is that teachers are also working professionals, it unfortunately follows that teachers with professional indexing commitments cannot always stop midway through a project to correct indexing lessons."

Adult education instructors frequently take on the role of counselors as well. Nickerson sees this challenge in the correspondence environment: "Counseling students who are clearly not on the right track that they should perhaps reconsider indexing as a professional pursuit in writing is difficult."

the strengths

Out of the challenges of teaching indexing well by correspondence arise the strengths of the two courses. USDA's objective is to provide practical training from instructors who are still functioning in their fields. Nickerson specifies for the indexing courses: "Instructors who are working freelancers can provide a real-world perspective on both the process of indexing and on indexing as a profession."

Blumberg-McKee clarifies the strength of individualized instruction: "Unlike the typical classroom environment in which I'd be dealing with heaven knows how many students at once, every student I have gets true one-on-one instruction. Some students are on Lesson 1, some are about ready to finish the course, and others are anywhere in between."

Considering that students have a year to complete the course, with extensions available when necessary, Blumberg-McKee adds that "students have ample time to finish the course. The [USDA] correspondence program recognizes that students have lives outside the course. Therefore, students are free to work the course around their lives, rather than their lives around the course."

Nickerson adds that the Basic Indexing course is a good way for students "to try indexing on for size without a major commitment in terms of time or money." Blumberg-McKee agrees that "the course is really a good buy. It's rare to find a university-level course, whether at a state or a private university in the United States, that costs so little."
According to Manley, “The major strength of the Applied Indexing course is its format: a modified simulation of the freelance indexer’s experiences. Most students should be able to realize before they are very far into the course whether or not freelance indexing is a suitable profession for them. If students have difficulty producing effective indexes acceptable to press format and style specifications or are perplexed or discouraged by instructor evaluations, perhaps this highly competitive profession is impractical for them.” Manley commiserates with students faced with this realization: “It’s a difficult decision to make because of investments of time, energy, money, and heart made before the course. But better now than five years down the road after even more money, time, and energy have been spent trying to make a success of what was really an inappropriate career choice to begin with.”

The USDA Correspondence Program encourages questions concerning these indexing courses. If the “who-would-have-thought” student had dismissed USDA adult education as offering only tractor maintenance courses, she would not have discovered these two indexing courses. To those who do not ask, Blumberg-McKee offers this maxim: “No question is a dumb question, after all. It’s the unasked question that is dumb.”

In addition to teaching Applied Indexing and Proofreading for the USDA Correspondence Program, Shirley Manley is a freelance indexer. Email dashmanley@snowcrest.net
Norma Harwood is director of the Correspondence Study Program for the USDA Graduate School.

Questions about Basic Indexing (CEDIT360, $286, all course materials are included) and Applied Indexing (CEDIT361, $283, all course materials are included) can be directed to: Norma Harwood, Director of the Correspondence Program, Graduate School, USDA; STOP 9911, Room 112 South; 1400 Independence Ave SW; Washington DC 20250-9911. Phone 202-720-7123, fax 202-690-1516, email correspond@grad.usda.gov
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