

# Public Service Issues of U.S. Government Information in North Carolina

by Megan Dreger

**T**he United States Government produces an enormous amount of information that is useful to businesses, scholars, and scientists, as well as the general public.

It is critical that this important information be accessible to the public, and the Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP) was established to this end. The mission of this program is to provide equitable, efficient, timely, and dependable public access to the federal government information within the scope of the program at no cost to the user. There are depository libraries in almost every Congressional District across the country.

Depository libraries are required to meet certain standards in order to be part of the FDLP. Selective depository libraries are those that elect to receive only a portion of what is available from the government and to keep these materials for a minimum of five years. Regional depository libraries are required to receive 100% of everything that comes through the FDLP.

Recently technology has brought changes to government publishing and the FDLP. Federal agencies increasingly are using new formats such as magnetic tape, computer disks, CD-ROMs, and the Internet for their publications. The Government Printing Office now is preparing to move materials in the FDLP to electronic formats. Because federal depository libraries are required by law to support this material, it is unclear what services should be offered, in terms of addressing technical difficulties, demands on staff and equipment, and other issues relating to electronic formats. Unless libraries are in a position

to furnish this equipment and staffing, it will be very difficult for them to fulfill their mission as depository libraries. Thus, the advent of electronic formats has greatly affected the FDLP and the public services traditionally offered in depository libraries. This article describes the results of a survey of North Carolina selective depository libraries regarding these issues.

## Methodology

The survey was sent out in December 1996 to the thirty-three selective depository libraries in North Carolina. It was designed to gather information that represents the current state of public access to electronic government information in those libraries. Thirty-one of the 33 returned the survey for a 94% response rate.

## Selective Depository Library Profile

The majority of the selective depository libraries in North Carolina that responded to this survey are in academic institutions (N=28, 90%). This is further broken down by public academic institutions (N=12, 39%), private academic institutions (N=12, 39%), and law libraries within academic institutions (N=4, 13%). Other types of libraries include public libraries (N=2, 6%), and court libraries (N=1, 3%).

The collections of selective depository libraries vary greatly, since these libraries can choose from the thousands of items in the FDLP to meet the needs of their users. The percentage of federal depository items selected by the libraries in the survey ranges from 2% to about 86%, with the majority selecting less than 50%.

The arrangement of a documents collection can have an impact on its use and accessibility. The majority of libraries responding (N=25, 81%) have a separate documents collection. That is, at least 75% of the documents collection is kept together physically and kept separate from the rest of the collection. Four libraries (13%) have partially integrated collections, which means that a portion of the documents collection is kept separate and a portion is integrated into the rest of the collection. The two remaining libraries (6%) responding have an integrated collection, meaning that at least 75% of the documents collection is integrated with the rest of the collection.

## Equipment

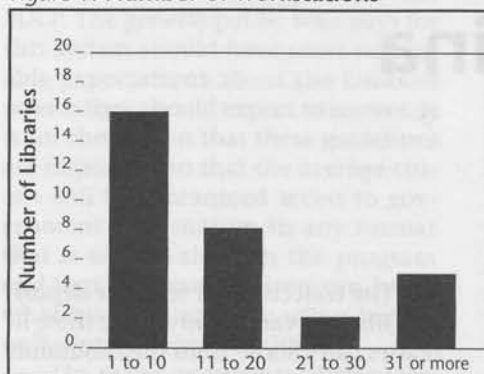
For questions regarding equipment, respondents were asked to include all machines (except Online Public Access Computers) available in the library for public use of government information,

*The percentage of federal depository items selected by the libraries in the survey ranges from 2% to about 86%, with the majority selecting less than 50%.*

including any staff machines used for mediated assistance to patrons. Because of the wide variety of library arrangements these instructions do not apply to all libraries, producing some inconsistencies in the answers given.

All 31 depository libraries in the survey have workstations available for public use. The number of workstations ranges from 1 to 153, yet most libraries do not have more than 20 workstations (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Number of workstations

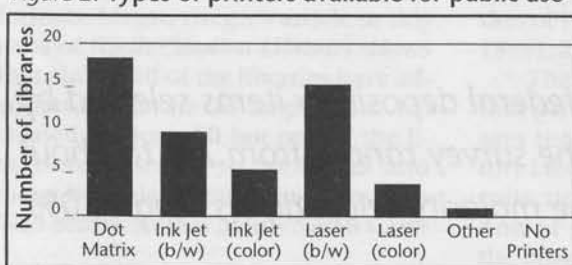


The majority of the libraries in the survey have workstations that are a version of Windows (N=29, 94%). There are also a small number of libraries with DOS (N=6, 15%) or Macintosh (N= 2, 5%) machines. In addition, most libraries (N=27, 87%) have at least one workstation that is networked in some way. In fact, there are only 3 libraries (10%) that have exclusively stand-alone workstations (i.e., not networked).

As might be expected, the majority of libraries (N=24, 77%) have at least one shared workstation for use with both government documents and resources from other departments within the library. Seventeen libraries (55%) have one or more designated documents department workstations that are primarily for use with government information.

Printers are important for use with electronic information. All libraries in the survey have printers available for public use. They include dot matrix, ink jet, and laser printers. Because many libraries provide more than one type of

Figure 2: Types of printers available for public use



printer, the breakdown shows the number of libraries with at least one printer in the following categories: dot matrix, black and white ink jet printers, color ink jet printers, black and white laser printers, and color laser printers (see figure 2). It is interesting to see that laser printers are almost as prevalent as dot matrix printers.

Because of the demands on the workstation, it is important to have adequate equipment. In 1996 Library Programs Service of the Government Printing Office published "Recommended Minimum Specifications for Public Access Workstations in Federal Depository Libraries," stating that "computer equipment in depository libraries must be sufficient to allow timely and equitable public access to the government information products available via Internet, CD-ROMs, and should allow printing or downloading information selected by the user."<sup>1</sup> These specifications do not attempt to describe a universal standard or the ideal workstation. Instead, they are

"intended to assist in the purchase of new public access work stations capable of using most text-based FDL electronic information products."<sup>2</sup> It is important to remember that the guidelines are not intended to be applied retroactively and much of this equipment may have been purchased before the guidelines were issued. Budget limitations also may have affected the libraries' decisions regarding equipment.

The survey included questions regarding the number of workstations meeting the minimum guidelines for memory, hard disk drive, and processor speed.<sup>3</sup> Although more than half of the libraries (N=19, 61%) met the minimum specification for memory, fewer met the specifications for processor speed and hard disk drive. Only 8 libraries (26%) have one or more workstations that meet all 3 specifications. It is not clear whether there are any single workstations that meet all 3 specifications since the questions were asked separately. Although the survey did not address the specifications for printers, the results do show that 24 libraries (77%) potentially meet the minimum recommended guideline for

printers because they have either an ink jet or a laser printer.<sup>4</sup>

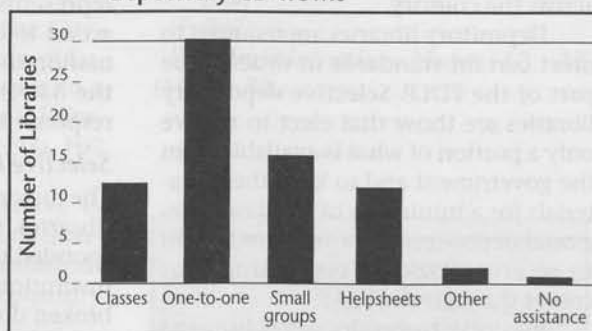
## CD-ROM Resources

All but two of the libraries currently hold federal depository CD-ROM titles. The reported number of CD-ROM titles held ranges from 2 to 1200. Because fewer than 400 CD-ROM titles are available through the FDL, some of the answers obviously have included the number of CD-ROM pieces rather than the number of CD-ROM titles. By eliminating the answers exceeding the number of possible titles (4 responses), the range is 2 to 253 CD-ROM titles.

Twenty-eight of the 29 libraries with depository CD-ROMs make the majority of their CD-ROMs available, through installation, installation by request, circulation, or some combination of these methods. Due to the differences in platforms, hardware and software requirements, and other inconsistencies between CD-ROM titles, it can be very difficult to maintain access to all titles. This is particularly true of libraries that hold a large number of CD-ROMs or do not have adequate technical support. With this in mind, it is encouraging to see that almost all libraries that have depository CD-ROMs are providing access to them.

The differences between the various CD-ROM titles also makes it difficult to provide assistance to patrons for all of the CD-ROM products. The librarians

Figure 3: How users are given assistance with depository CD-ROMs



ian first must learn the contents and features in order to teach others or create help sheets. This is a very time-consuming task that is made even more difficult when the CD-ROM has no documentation. The librarian then must learn to use the product as well as determine its contents.

All of the 29 libraries that have depository CD-ROMs provide assistance with them to users within the library, with the exception of one library which indicated that there was no assistance available for some CD-ROM titles. This

assistance is given through user instruction classes, on a one-on-one basis on demand, to small groups on demand, with help sheets, or some combination of these options. The most common method of assistance is on a one-on-one basis as needed. This is not surprising given the one-on-one nature of reference work.

### Internet Resources

The Internet has made enormous changes in the field of government information. In part, this is because it has made an enormous amount of government information easily accessible. The expense of equipment, keeping up with the technology, and the difficulties locating some information have brought new challenges to documents librarians however.

Four libraries (13%) do not provide Internet access. All of the 27 libraries (87%) that provide Internet access have WWW graphical access (e.g., Netscape, Mosaic, or Microsoft Explorer). In addition to graphical WWW, some libraries also provide WWW non-graphical access (e.g., Lynx). Other tools that are available include Telnet (an Internet protocol that allows users to log onto a remote computer), FTP (File Transfer Protocol, a tool for moving files from one computer to another), Gopher (a tool that allows users to access network resources through a menu system), WAIS (Wide Area Information Servers, allows users to search databases), and e-mail (see Figure 4).

All of the 27 libraries that provide access to the Internet also provide assistance. The majority of the assistance is done at the reference desk as needed. Other assistance includes help sheets, bookmarks, using the library's homepage, using other homepages, and "other." The "other" category included classes and workshops in the library (see Figure 5).

### Library Policies

All libraries have printers available for public use, though printing policies vary between libraries. Due to the cost of equipment and supplies, many libraries have page limits or charge fees for printing. Interestingly, well over half of the libraries (N=19, 61%) reported that printing was free with no page limit. Three libraries (10%) provide free printing but with a page limit that ranged from 10 to 50 pages. Four libraries (13%) provide free printing up to a page limit and then charge a fee for all printing above that limit. For these libraries,

the page limit is between 5 and 8 pages and then there is a fee of \$.02 to \$.20 per page. Three libraries (10%) charge a fee for any printing, and library (3%) answered "other," indicating that printing is done for free in the nearby computer lab. One library (3%) did not respond to this question.

Another important policy issue involves the options available for use with electronic files. All but one library provide some options. The majority (N=28, 93%) of libraries in the survey allow files to be saved to a floppy disk. Slightly more than half of the libraries allow the files to be e-mailed (N=16, 53%). Many

libraries also allow files to be FTPed to a patron's account (N=9, 30%). A small number of libraries allow files to be saved to a machine's hard drive (N=2, 7%) and files to be compressed (N=2, 7%). No libraries reported allowing files to be copied to a removable cartridge drive or allowing files to be split using a file splitter.

Finally, commercial

software frequently is used in conjunction with electronic government information. In some cases the commercial software actually is necessary to use the government documents, while at other times the software simply makes it more convenient. There is some type of commercial software available in 19 libraries (61%). (see Figure 6). This includes word processing software such as Word or WordPerfect, limited editing software such as Notepad or Write, statistical packages such as SAS or SPSS, database management tools such as dBASE, spreadsheet software such as Excel or Lotus, and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) software such as MapInfo.

### Conclusion

As government documents are increas-

Figure 4: Internet tools made available to the public

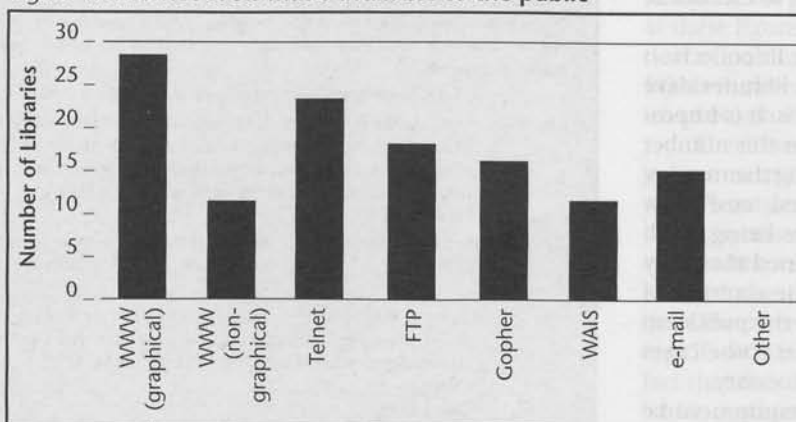


Figure 5: How users are given assistance with the Internet

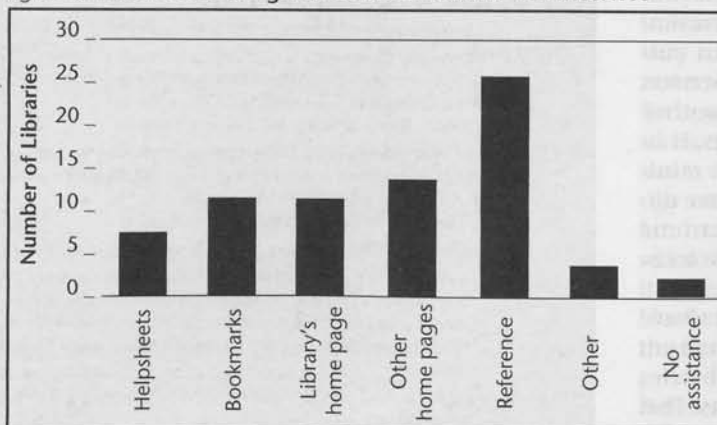
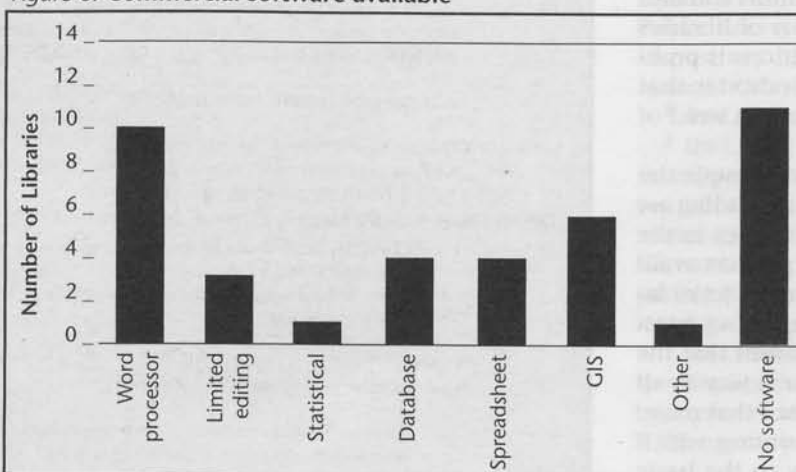


Figure 6: Commercial software available





ingly being made available in electronic format, public access to electronic materials is a critical issue. In fact, many documents are available solely in electronic format, which forces libraries to have the necessary equipment and staff if they are going to be able to provide access to the information.

The results of this survey indicate that the selective depository libraries in the state are making great strides in providing access to material in electronic format. This is no small accomplishment considering the variety among 31 libraries in terms of staff size, budget, technical support, and other factors. In fact, the libraries overall show a remarkable level of public access to electronic government documents.

There is a wide range in collection size and equipment. Most libraries have fewer than 20 workstations. It is impossible to determine whether this number is enough without knowing the number of patrons being served and how heavily the machines are being used. Some respondents explained that they have plans to expand the number of workstations available to the public, so this may indicate that in some cases more workstations are necessary.

It is critical that the equipment be adequate, yet this is also difficult to measure without examining each situation. One measure is the recommended minimum specifications outlined by the Library Programs Service. These are useful measures because they describe minimum requirements. If libraries cannot meet the current minimum requirements, they may have difficulty providing access to electronic material and keeping up with new technology.

In fact, many libraries do not have workstations meeting the minimum specifications. Only eight libraries (26%) met all three specifications. This survey did not address other hardware components such as monitors and modems, and so the number of libraries meeting all the specifications is probably much lower. This indicates that these libraries perhaps are in need of new equipment.

What is more encouraging is the fact that printing and downloading are allowed in most of the libraries in the survey. All libraries have printers available, and most even have ink jet or laser printers. The policy regarding printing varies, but it is significant that the service is provided in some way in all libraries. It should be noted that many libraries charge fees for printing, which can be seen as contrary to the basic

**Questionnaire:**  
**Public Service Issues of Selective Depository Libraries for Government Information in the Electronic Environment**

**Section 1: Selective Depository Library Profile**

1. What type is your library? (optional)  
☐ Private academic institution    ☐ Public academic institution  
☐ Law library (within an academic institution)  
☐ Public library    ☐ Court library    ☐ State library    ☐ State agency library  
☐ Other \_\_\_\_\_
2. What percentage of federal depository items is selected? \_\_\_\_\_ %
3. What is the size of the federal depository collection in volumes? \_\_\_\_\_
4. What is the physical arrangement of your documents collection?  
☐ Separate (i.e. at least 75% of the documents collection is kept together physically and kept separate from the rest of the collection)  
☐ Partially integrated (i.e. a portion of the document collection is kept separate and a portion is integrated into the rest of the collection)  
☐ Integrated (i.e. at least 75% of the documents collection is integrated with the rest of the collection)

**Section 2: Equipment**

*Note: For all questions relating to the number of public workstations and other equipment, please include all machines (except Online Public Access Catalogs) available in the library for public use of government information. This includes any staff machines used for mediated assistance to patrons. Please consult any technical support staff you may have for questions regarding equipment.*

5. Do you have workstations available for public use? ☐ Yes    ☐ No (if no, please go to Section 3)
6. Please indicate the number of public workstations in the following categories:  
       \_\_\_\_\_ Documents department workstations (i.e. primarily for use with government documents)  
       \_\_\_\_\_ Shared workstations (i.e. workstations for use with both government documents and resources from other departments within the library)  
       \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_
7. Please indicate the number of dedicated public machines in each category:  
       \_\_\_\_\_ PC - DOS    \_\_\_\_\_ PC - Windows 3.x    \_\_\_\_\_ PC - Windows '95    \_\_\_\_\_ Macintosh \_\_\_\_\_  
       Other \_\_\_\_\_
8. Please indicate the number of public machines in each of the following categories:  
       \_\_\_\_\_ Stand alone workstation(s) (i.e. the workstations are not networked)  
       \_\_\_\_\_ Workstations which are connected by a network  
       \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_  
       \_\_\_\_\_ Don't know \_\_\_\_\_
9. Aside from any designated Geographic Information Systems (GIS) machines, please indicate the number of your public machines that meet the recommended minimum specifications for memory, defined as 16 megabytes (MB) of RAM.\*  
       \_\_\_\_\_ Workstations which meet this specification    \_\_\_\_\_ Don't know
10. Aside from any designated Geographic Information Systems (GIS) machines, please indicate the number of your public machines that meet the recommended minimum guidelines for the hard disk drive, defined as 1.2 gigabytes (GB) capacity.\*  
       \_\_\_\_\_ Workstations which meet this specification    \_\_\_\_\_ Don't know
11. Aside from any designated Geographic Information Systems (GIS) machines, please indicate the number of your public machines that meet the recommended minimum guidelines for processor speed, defined as a Pentium chip operating at 100 MHz.\*  
       \_\_\_\_\_ Workstations which meet this specification    \_\_\_\_\_ Don't know
12. How many CD-ROM drives are available via public machines? \_\_\_\_\_
13. Please indicate the number of workstations that fall into the following categories:  
       \_\_\_\_\_ Workstations that are dedicated for CD-ROM use only  
       \_\_\_\_\_ Workstations that are dedicated for Internet use only  
       \_\_\_\_\_ Workstations that are used for both Internet and CD-ROMs  
       \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_
14. Does the library own a CD-ROM recordable device? ☐ Yes    ☐ No  
       If yes, what do you use it for? \_\_\_\_\_
15. Do you have printers available for public use? ☐ Yes    ☐ No (If no, please go to Section 3)
16. Please indicate the number of printers available to the public in each category:  
       \_\_\_\_\_ Dot matrix printer    \_\_\_\_\_ Ink Jet printer (black and white)    \_\_\_\_\_ Ink Jet printer (color)  
       \_\_\_\_\_ Laser printer (black and white)    \_\_\_\_\_ Laser printer (color)  
       \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_  
       \_\_\_\_\_ No printers are available to the public

**Section 3: CD-ROM Resources**

17. Does your library currently select federal depository CD-ROMs?  
☐ Yes    ☐ No (If no, please go to Section 4)
18. How many federal depository CD-ROM titles do you hold? \_\_\_\_\_
19. How are the CD-ROMs made available for public use? Please indicate the percentage of CD-ROM titles that fall into the following categories:  
       \_\_\_\_\_ % are already loaded onto workstations or a network  
       \_\_\_\_\_ % are installed by request only  
       \_\_\_\_\_ % are circulated  
       \_\_\_\_\_ % Other \_\_\_\_\_  
       \_\_\_\_\_ % are not otherwise available to the public

\* Library Programs Services, "Recommended Minimum Specifications for Public Access Workstations in Federal Depository Libraries," *Administrative Notes* (May 15, 1996): 6-8.

20. How are users within the library given help with depository CD-ROMs? (check all that apply)
- ☐ Through user instruction classes    ☐ On a one-to-one basis on demand
- ☐ To small groups on demand    ☐ With help sheets
- ☐ Other \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ No assistance given

#### Section 4: Internet Resources

21. Do you provide Internet access in the Documents section?
- ☐ Yes    ☐ No (If no, please go on to Section 5)
22. What type of Internet connection do you have? (check all that apply)
- ☐ Direct connection    ☐ Dial up connection to the Internet via modem
- ☐ Other \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ Don't know
23. What Internet tools are available to the public? (check all that apply)
- ☐ WWW (graphical) e.g. Netscape, Mosaic, Microsoft Explorer
- ☐ WWW (non-graphical) e.g. Lynx
- ☐ Telnet (an Internet protocol that allows users to log onto a remote computer)
- ☐ FTP (File Transfer Protocol: a tool for moving files from one computer to another)
- ☐ Gopher (a tool that allows users to access network resources through a menu system)
- ☐ WAIS (Wide Area Information Servers: allows users to search databases)
- ☐ E-mail
- ☐ Other \_\_\_\_\_
24. How are users assisted with using the Internet? (check all that apply)
- ☐ With help sheets
- ☐ With bookmarks prepared for the most common sites
- ☐ The Documents Section has its own homepage with links to most common sites
- ☐ By using the homepages of other universities or organizations
- ☐ Reference assistance
- ☐ Other \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ No assistance is given

#### Section 5: Library Policies

25. What is the policy regarding printing?
- ☐ Printing is free and without any page limit
- ☐ Printing is free, but with a limit of \_\_\_\_\_ pages
- ☐ Printing is free up to a limit of \_\_\_\_\_ pages and then there is a fee of \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ Printing is allowed with a fee of \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ No printing is allowed
- ☐ Other \_\_\_\_\_
26. What kind of public service is available to remote users? (check all that apply)
- ☐ Phone reference    ☐ Fax reference    ☐ E-mail reference
- ☐ Other \_\_\_\_\_
27. What options are available to patrons for electronic files? (check all that apply)
- ☐ Files may be saved to floppy disk
- ☐ Files may be saved to the machine's hard drive
- ☐ Files may be copied to a removable cartridge drive (e.g. a ZIP drive)
- ☐ Files may be FTPed to patron's account
- ☐ Files may be emailed to patrons
- ☐ Large files may be compressed
- ☐ Large files may be split using a file splitter
- ☐ Other \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ No options for electronic files
28. What statistics are kept of electronic documents? (check all that apply)
- ☐ User assistance statistics    ☐ Use statistics
- ☐ Other \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ No statistics are kept of electronic documents (if no, go to question 29)
- If statistics are kept, how are they gathered? (check all that apply)
- ☐ Using an electronic metering system e.g. SiteMeter, App Meter, etc.
- ☐ Recording by hand the number of questions
- ☐ Other \_\_\_\_\_
29. Do you have commercial software available in the documents section for patrons to use in conjunction with electronic documents? (check all that apply)
- ☐ Yes, word processing software such as Word or WordPerfect
- ☐ Yes, limited editing software such as Notepad or Write
- ☐ Yes, statistical packages such as SAS or SPSS
- ☐ Yes, database management tools such as dBASE
- ☐ Yes, spreadsheet software such as Excel or Lotus
- ☐ Yes, Geographic Information Systems (GIS) software such as MapInfo
- ☐ Yes, other \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ No, there is no commercial software available to patrons
30. What type of assistance with electronic resources and services do you expect from your regional? (check all that apply)
- ☐ Technical computer help
- ☐ Training
- ☐ Help sheets
- ☐ Help with downloading large files
- ☐ Help by making FTP sites available
- ☐ Other \_\_\_\_\_

\* Due to space constraints, part of the formatting of this questionnaire has been changed.

principle of no fee access to government documents. Another option, downloading to a floppy disk, is allowed in 93% of the libraries. The ability to print and download information is included in the recommended minimum specifications of the Library Programs Service, and almost all libraries in the survey meet this guideline.

Another strength is the high level of support for depository CD-ROM products. Twenty-nine libraries (94%) select depository CD-ROMs, and provide access and user assistance for them. This is an impressive 94% of the libraries. All of the libraries that participated in the survey have CD-ROM drives available on public machines. Looking at these figures together, there is a great deal of public access to depository CD-ROMs in the selective depository libraries of North Carolina.

There was also strong support of government information on the Internet. Twenty-seven libraries provide Internet access and all twenty-seven provide assistance with the Internet. This is 87% of the libraries, which is lower than the percentage of libraries supporting CD-ROMs. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the CD-ROMs are tangible electronic products that are formally part of the FDLP.

The depository library community in North Carolina obviously is working very hard to provide access to government information in electronic format. Because this is a relatively new area of service, it remains to be seen how these issues will be dealt with as new technology emerges. It is not yet clear what kind of service can or should be provided. In spite of these difficult changes, it is clear that the depository libraries in North Carolina will continue to offer the best service possible.

#### References

<sup>1</sup> Library Programs Service, "Recommended Minimum Specifications for Public Access Workstations in Federal Depository Libraries," *Administrative Notes* 17 (May 15, 1996): 6-8.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 7. The recommended minimum specifications included in the survey are "16 megabytes (Mb) of RAM" for memory, "1.2 gigabytes (Gb) capacity" for hard disk drive, and an "IBM-compatible Pentium chip operating at 100 mhz" for processor speed.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. The recommended minimum specification for printers is an "ink jet or laser printer which supports PostScript. 2 Mb memory. Consider color."