
Cooperative online searching: The Emporia/Kansas State experience

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Long distance searching can be another way to share resources.

Subject specialization is a continuing problem for small to medium-sized academic libraries. Typically, librarians in these institutions often have social sciences or humanities backgrounds. Science is an area usually found lacking for several reasons.

First, it is almost impossible to compete in the job market for the few persons in physical or biological science who also have library training.

Second, the diversity of the usual library faculty member's job is often far removed from his special interests and also involves general supervisory, office, or campus committee assignments.

Third, a great many science specialists are geared toward research, and little of this is inherent in many academic library positions.

Finally, the few librarians who do have major interests and training, whether in chemistry or music, often prefer to apply for the positions in special libraries which more closely parallel their interests; of course, salaries and working conditions are usually better in special libraries, and these are added incentives to steer away from the all-purpose generalist librarian who may give library tours, keep reference desk hours, have collection development responsibilities and participate in online search functions.

As a supervisor of interlibrary loan services and head of the online search service, as well as a participant in all the other areas mentioned above, it

occurred to me that a cooperative venture might be possible in online searching. Why not lend online expertise, in addition to books or periodical articles? I knew that Kansas State University's Farrell Library, an area sister institution, had several librarians who shared searching responsibilities, so I decided to discuss my plan with Glenn Remelts, head of their search service. After communicating with his supervisor, Glenn agreed to assist Emporia State, as time allowed, with the more difficult science searches, particularly those in the physical sciences.

Although the William Allen White Library at Emporia was only asked infrequently to do science searches, it became increasingly clear that I was not well equipped to handle anything but the most general topics. The classification codes, the terminology, and the basic knowledge needed to understand my faculty colleagues was difficult, if not impossible. Yet, the biologists and chemists on the faculty needed and deserved the same online search opportunities as other faculty members. Database workshops and seminars offered periodically in the area are beneficial, of course, but nothing ever quite takes the place of subject knowledge.

The actual process of "long distance searching" began when a contact was made for an online search in an area of science where it was determined through the interview process that addi-

tional expertise would be needed. Three intervals during the next day or two were identified when the library patron could return to be interviewed over the telephone. Glenn Remelts was contacted in the same way, and chose one of the suggested times. Using me as the intermediary, the patron was contacted and told when to appear in my office for the 10–15 minute telephone interview. Information regarding charges and expectations of the search had already been given to our patron.

Glenn asked the usual questions regarding format, language, publication years, number of citations needed and other pertinent information. Print citations could be obtained either online or offline, with the time elapsed being approximately 8–10 days if offline. The Emporia patron was called when the search results arrived in Emporia either by mail or university courier system. A check for the amount due was sent to Kansas State by return courier or mail. Five searches were done in this manner the first year, and all library patrons, students and faculty members, seemed to be pleased with the results.

Although this process may sound complicated, it actually was done with relative ease, and the most positive aspect of the “long distance search” was the specific information obtained, since intricacies of each database were fully utilized. Another advantage to this online method was the possible availability of several database vendors which are often most accessible in large academic libraries. Many small libraries subscribe to only one database vendor, the most common being DIALOG.

The negatives encountered were those typical of

such a process:

- the inability of the patron to be present during the search session;
- difficulty in pinpointing search costs;
- the inability to see “samples” of citations during the search;
- and the additional 3–5 days delay before the search results were received.

It is evident that such a cooperative service would need to be used sparingly since large libraries usually have active online departments, and cannot perform many additional searches. However, this venture can be reciprocal, because during the same period of time, two searches were done at Emporia State for students enrolled at Kansas State University. For students who commute, the advantage of having online facilities available in their own cities is often an important consideration in choosing the site for online search service.

In order to try shared online searching, it would be best to have an informal institutional arrangement such as this for approximately one year. If results are satisfactory, a formal agreement or contract stipulating such terms as the maximum number of searches available each month, search charges, and types of library patrons to be served should be considered. Large libraries would have the least to gain, just as is true in interlibrary loan services; therefore it would be important that they not be used excessively. If cooperation and consideration among all participating members were components of a shared online search program, regional or even state networks might become a reality.

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With end user programs becoming available, "long distance searches" may not be so attractive, but faced with the present economic conditions in higher education, resource sharing in all forms

seems worthy of consideration. The ability of the small academic library to offer the latest information techniques will depend heavily upon creative and imaginative library programs. ■■

Training online catalog assistants: Creating a friendly interface

By Harvey Sager

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The design and implementation of a staff training program for online catalog assistants at ASU.

The use of library assistants to provide on-demand assistance to users of Online Public Access Catalogs (OPACs) has been a successful component of OPAC instructional programs at several academic libraries. This article suggests the benefits that can accrue to the individual participants as well as to the library as a whole when such a program is implemented, and describes the staff training program developed at Arizona State University Libraries to prepare staff volunteers to serve as PAC assistants.

More than a year prior to "going public" with our Libraries' ALIS III online catalog, indeed while the online catalog was still in its design stage, a committee of seven librarians representing a cross section from public services and the branch libraries was appointed by the assistant university librarian for automated systems and charged with the task of designing and implementing an orientation and training program in the use of our new online catalog for our library staff and public. Specifically, the committee was charged with finding a solution to the anticipated instructional "crunch" which, it was feared, would inevitably affect the

public service staff in the main and science library reference service areas where the online catalog terminals would be located.

In other words, we had to find a way to meet the anticipated need for online catalog instruction in our reference areas without sacrificing the quantity and quality of existing reference and informational services already being provided to our students and faculty—and we had to do it with existing library staff.

The committee agreed that one component of such a program should include a corps of trained volunteers recruited from the existing library staff to be stationed in the main and science library reference areas during our busiest hours to provide patron assistance in the use of the new online catalog, thereby freeing the reference librarians and information desk personnel to carry on business as usual. Such a program, we speculated, would provide benefits to the trainee participants as well as to the library. Specifically, it would provide opportunities for motivated and outgoing staff (and every library has such employees) to:

- 1) receive some special recognition and visibility