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A-Z Database List review

Getting started and keeping the momentum

Libraries have multiple portals to access their electronic resources. At Queens College, the two access portals are the catalog, Ex-Libris' Primo, and Springshare's A-Z Database List.[1] The most recent comprehensive review of the A-Z Database List was conducted five years ago by the previous electronic resources librarian. As such, the list had multiple formats for displaying information and lacked consistency. The supporting information for the overall layout of the list was not helpful to users nor library staff. Users should be able to search for the resources they want without getting bogged down by unnecessary jargon, inconsistencies, and fluff.

It was not difficult to get buy in for a comprehensive review. Librarians agreed that the list lacked consistency and a review would be beneficial. Beyond that there was little consensus. Where do we start? How do we approach this?

Literature review

A-Z Database Lists are popular tools. While there are articles, conference reports, and posters on the subject, each library employs what best suits their needs. Kailey Brisbin, Melanie S. Parlette-Stewart, and Randy Oldham of the University of Guelph McLauglin Library noted that libraries tend to operate in silos and those silos created categories of organization of resources that may not be clear to users. This made it difficult for librarians to effectively market their resources to users. Guelph McLauglin librarians claimed that a lack of coordination led to inconsistencies in naming conventions and tagging. Astutely, they recommended having a working group, project plan, collaboration among all required parties, communication, and documentation.[2]

Jeffrey Mortimore and Jessica Minihan discussed the importance of proactive management and regular audits.[3] At Queens College, we applied our own take to what the authors suggested to meet our local needs.

Getting started with the A-Z Database List Review

Queens College is an institution in the City University of New York (CUNY) System, which uses Alma for its Library Management System. Parallel to this review, librarians of the consortium began reviewing collections in Alma. They decided that collections, includ-

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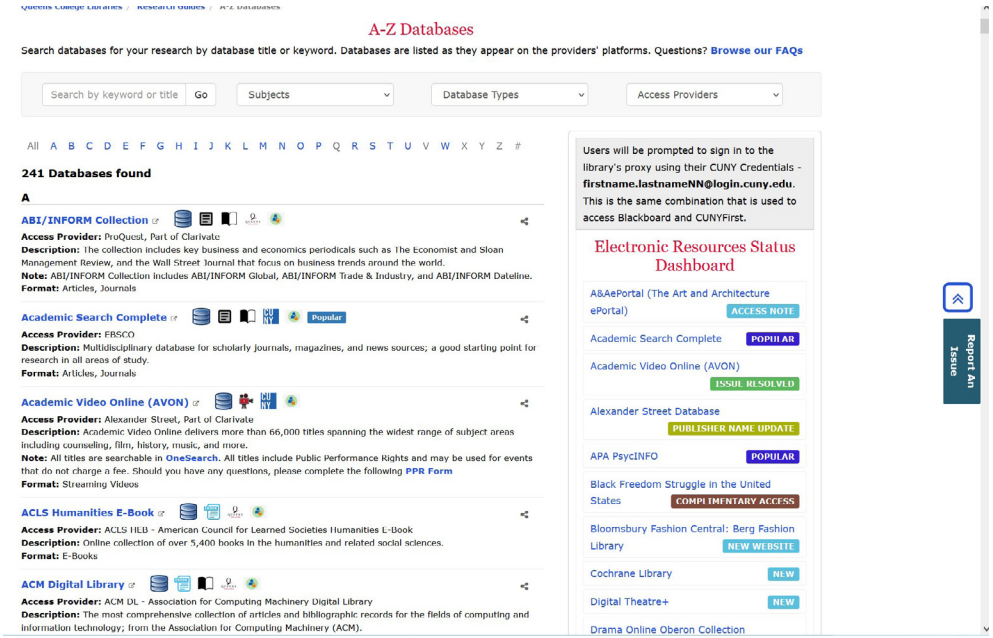

Figure 1: A-Z Database List highlighting the Electronic Resources Status Dashboard widget.

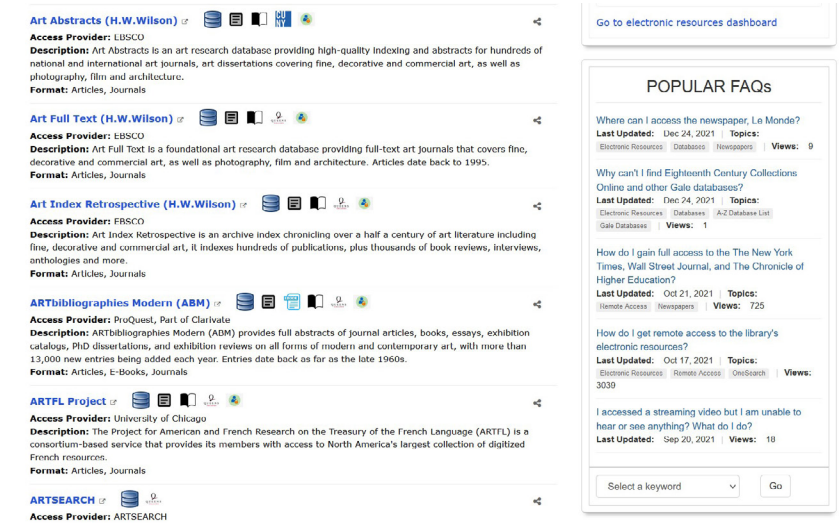

Figure 2: A-Z Database List highlighting the Popular FAQs widget.

ing ebook or journal collections and databases shared by all members, will be listed by the vendors' official names. The idea was that the name displayed when a user is on the site should match the listed name of the resource. The CUNY initiative applied to collections in Alma only with the recommendation to consider using the vendors' official names for resources listed on member libraries' A-Z Database Lists. This naming convention was adopted locally at Queens College and included in the A-Z Database List policy.

The policy incorporated the following:

1. Who makes changes to the list? For us, it is the electronic resources librarian.
2. Who are the stakeholders? Every librarian is a subject specialist and is responsible for collection development, reference, and instruction. The subject specialists are the biggest stakeholder group. Other areas that were consulted included the resource development committee, the chief librarian, and the web librarian.
3. How often are changes made? Vendor changes such as URL changes, name changes, or transfer to a new vendor are made immediately with other enhancements scheduled for an annual basis. This is subject to change, should all stakeholders deem it necessary.
4. What changes to make to each record? Do we cater for exceptions? Each record includes the following:
   a. Listed under current vendor's official name—the name displayed on the platform.
   b. Previous name (if applicable)

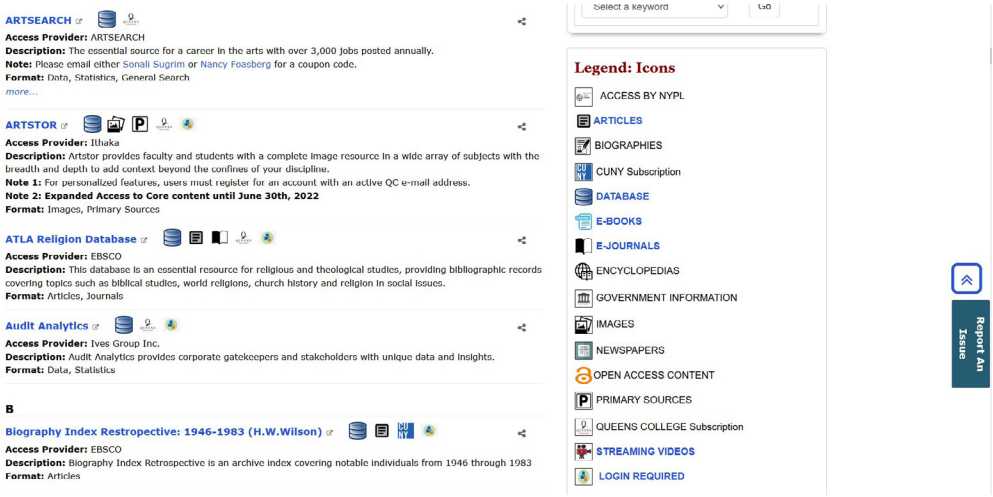

Figure 3: A-Z Database List highlighting the Legend widget.

c. Access provider (platform name)

d. Description (1 or 2 sentences)

e. Note (if applicable)—additional information on how to access, indicate if the database is for a limited time and so forth.

f. Format of resources within the databases (articles, ebooks, etc.)

g. Each record has icons next to it to include format and subscriber (Queens College Library or CUNY).

5. Should the vendor change the name of a database, then the database will be listed under the new name. The previous name will be included in the record. No placeholder record will be listed unless as an exception for heavily used items.

a. The use of the search bar is advised, as it retrieves anything listed on the A-Z Database List. For example: Nexis Uni, previously referred to as Lexis Nexis Academic, can be located by searching for Nexis Uni or Lexis Nexis Academic, in addition to toggling to N to find Nexis Uni.

6. Subcategories will not be listed unless as exceptions. Subject specialists will provide justification for exceptions. Some considerations for exceptions include used exclusively by certain departments, incorporated into course work, and projects. The full scope of exceptions is still to be determined. Gale made changes to its databases names. Some subcategories of Gale are included on the list as exceptions.

7. Descriptions will be limited to 1 or 2 sentences supplied by the vendor sites or vendors, unless the subject specialists have an alternative description with additional relevant information.

8. Each record will be assigned a vendor, type(s), and subject(s).

9. Subjects are supplied by subject specialists during the annual review process.

10. What changes to make to the webpage layout? The page now includes the "Report an Issue" form, electronic resources status dashboard, FAQ widget, and legend. Springshare allows for the creation of an Electronic Resources Status Dashboard, a feature within the LibAnswers module. That dashboard is on the A-Z Database list and provides updates on name changes, trials, popular resources, and any information deemed necessary to report to users regarding electronic databases.

11. All changes are subject to a one-year trial period to test the effectiveness of those decisions. Amendments will be made to best support the needs of the library and users.

12. All related documentation will be shared in the central location accessible by everyone.

The A-Z Database List policy is subject to change as the stakeholders see fit. The policy set the framework for what needed to be done, which was further laid out in the project

plan. After the policy, a project plan was drafted by the electronic resources librarian. The plan included areas that would be covered and who was responsible for each task. The entirety of the list was retrieved as an Excel workbook. Recommendations were added by the electronic resources librarian and the subject specialists. Discussions occurred as needed to reach a consensus. After a general agreement, the changes were implemented by the electronic resources librarian.

The goal is to streamline internal processes so that there is a consistent format and layout of the A-Z Database List to improve navigation of the list and overall user experience. Items that were considered during the review were:

- Policy and workflows
- What the library considers a database. Ultimately single title ebooks and journals, and most subcategories were removed.
- Layout and add-ons (such as the report-an-issue form), status dashboard, FAQs widget, and legend of icons. Icons were added to identify types of materials found in the databases, such as articles and streaming videos.
- Review current listed information.

Challenges

For a project that had not been done in a comprehensive, collaborative manner for at least five years, the biggest challenges stemmed from lack of effective communication in ensuring each party had a say and that compromises can be made to move the project forward.

Another challenge was to put the users first. As librarians it seems obvious that we would put users first, however, we may be guilty at times of using librarian lingo that highlights the silos within libraries, all of which unconsciously create barriers for our users.[4] During the review, we forced ourselves to ask questions as to why we needed a certain change. Was this change going to help users? How? We needed to remove the trap that we sometimes set for ourselves in considering ourselves as end users. Due to COVID-19, we were not able to conduct proper usability tests. However, student interns were asked how they use the A-Z Database List. We will need to revisit usability tests in the future to ensure that changes meet the end users' needs.

Successes

This review was very bare bones in setting the stage for future reviews that will tackle enhancements. It resolved issues that hindered consistency and uniformity on the list. It also provided an updated working policy and workflows. The subjects, types, and access provider lists were updated. A new enhanced layout focuses on the search bar to help users find items seamlessly without the need to scroll up or down. The Electronic Resources Status Dashboard became a fixture on the list, highlighting changes to our databases. For the first time, we were able to include the subscription provider icon on the list. This feature is mostly for the librarians and some interested faculty. However, as a new electronic resources librarian to the college, this helps to reduce troubleshooting time, as it is easier to have the needed information to provide to vendors thereby paving the way for improved services to our users and reiterating Ranganathan's law to save time for the users.[5]

Recommendations and final thoughts

Communication can make or break a project. It is essential to continuously communicate

concerns, updates, and the like so that everyone is on the same page. People tend to work better when they know the purpose and the deliverables. Hence, a project plan, and a policy are highly recommended. Policies are frequently considered static and unchangeable, but we should consider policies as subject to change more often. This allows for flexibility and potential improvements to workflows and user experience. It is important for us as librarians to adapt to changes. A project summary is very important to have as it concisely informs all parties of what was successfully completed, what is still a work in progress, and what needs to be addressed in the future. Finally, all documentation should be shared with everyone involved, named so that it can be easily retrieved, and stored in a central location for reference and future reviews. Microsoft Teams is currently employed as the storage and communication platform.

Looking ahead

Everyone is encouraged to review all documentation and consider what is working and isn't working to provide feedback for the next review. Library personnel are asked to consider using a live document to update as needed to keep track of their recommendations and not rely on getting everything together in a short period of time. To make the A-Z Database list work for everyone, periodic reviews are necessary. Not only would it allow for links and displayed information to be up to date, but it also allows the library team to proactively strive to better serve users by working together to meet their needs. In so doing, workflows and policies are amended to reflect current expectations and future goals.

Notes

1. R. A. Leiter, "Reflections on Ranganathan's five laws of library science," *Law Library Journal* 95, 4 (2003): 411–418, https://search-ebscohost-com.queens.ezproxy.cuny.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lgs&AN=502491406&site=ehost-live.
2. Kailey Brisbin, Melanie S. Parlette-Stewart, and Randy Oldham, "A-Z List Migration: Employing Collaborative Project Management at the University of Guelph McLaughlin-Library," *Collaborative Librarianship* 10, iss. 4, article 4 (March 2019): 234-250, https://digitalcommons.du.edu/collaborativelibrarianship/vol10/iss4/4.
3. M. Mortimore Jeffery, and Jessica M. Minihan, "Essential audits for proactive electronic resources troubleshooting and support," *Library Hi Tech News* 35, no. 1 (2018): 6-10, https://doi.org/10.1108/LHTN-11-2017-0085.
4. Brisbin, Parlette-Stewart, and Oldham, "A-Z List Migration."
5. R.A. Leiter, "Reflections."