Making Digital Collection Development a Reality: The CSU JACC Project

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The California State University (CSU) system is trying to take a page out of Star Trek (classic, of course) and "boldly go where no library or consortium has gone before." The CSU JACC (Journal Access Core Collection) initiative will try to wrest control for collection development of electronic resources back from publishers and into the hands of librarians, where — in this columnist's opinion — it has always belonged.

Academic librarians have long taken great pride in their collection development process.

Librarians have carefully selected books and journals that best suit their campus needs and curricula. In an era of budget reductions or niggardly budgetary growth and with the costs of journals spiraling upward, the decision to cut journal holdings has become a painstaking and agonizing process on campuses. Serials librarians pored over journal usage studies to determine which journals would be missed least.

During this same period, the emergence of the World Wide Web has also seen the emergence of electronic journals. Publishers producing electronic journals have been concerned about continuing revenue streams in this rapidly changing environment. Many major publishers began bundling all their electronic journals together and offering them at one flat-rate price. Clearly the publishers hoped that this approach would ensure the purchase (or licensing, as they now call it) of their publications and the continuation of their revenues, but this approach left librarians paying for subscriptions to journals for which they had presumably little or no need in the past. In tight economic times only the very richest academic libraries had a sufficient number of titles to justify such a purchase decision. Most academic librarians could not or did not want to add such packages unless they could also cancel the print and rely entirely on the electronic subscription. Concerns regarding perpetual access also kept many libraries cautious about buying such bundled subscriptions. Unlike print subscriptions, many electronic collections carried licensing contracts with clauses that stipulated any failure to renew eliminated the right to use the material already paid for.

With all-or-nothing packages, a library which had previously only bought and paid a subscription for maybe 200 titles from a publisher would now be forced into buying a bundle of 1,000 titles or more in order to access those same journals electronically. In the past, librarians had carefully picked the best titles to meet their campus needs from a publisher's catalog. Now they were asked to accept the entire offerings of one particular publisher. Publishers could dictate which subscriptions librarians would order, just because they ordered them in an electronic format.

I can not speak for the collection development policies, processes, and decision making at other libraries, but in my CSU (Northridge) library, we did not find those bundled electronic packages very appealing. While we needed and wanted electronic access to journals, we needed access to the journal literature our students asked for, not just the titles large publishers wanted to sell. If we hadn't bought a title in hard copy, why should we buy it in an electronic version? To pay for those expensive packages, we would have to cut into the budget for journals we did want or drastically alter the balance of books and periodicals in our library.

Background

In the CSU system, while journal costs have soared, library budgets have remained unchanged for years. Adding a new subscription was almost unheard of in any form. CSU library budgets remained essentially flat during the recession of the early 1990s, but with rapidly increasing subscription prices, this meant drastic cuts in print subscriptions. Full-text databases and sources were brought in as partial replacements.

The CSU libraries have operated a consortium for over 10 years, called the Academic Information Services Cooperative program (AISC). The AISC consortium is coordinated and managed by the Software and Electronic Information Resources (SEIR) group of
the Information Resources and Technology Division in the Office of the Chancellor. Evan Reader heads the SEIR group. [For more information about AISC and SEIR you can visit their Web site at http://www.co.calstate.edu/irt/seir/]

The AISC consortium has a standing Electronic Access to Information process. The EAR Committee decided to take up the challenge.

In developing the CSU Journal Access Core Collection, CSU's librarians seek to supply access to their most heavily demanded and used print journals through electronic versions, but only for those journals for which the librarians know a high demand exists.

CSU librarians have ventured to tell vendors what we can't and won't take....

Resources (EAR) Committee that reports to the CSU Council of Library Directors (COLD). The EAR Committee evaluates and recommends the selection, acquisition, and access of electronic information resources. Harold Schleifer of Cal Poly Pomona chairs the EAR Committee. The committee makes recommendations to CSU campus libraries based on clearly defined guidelines for the acquisition of electronic resources. Individual campuses all participate in the trial of a new product. Each campus has a committee that chooses the electronic resources to buy. Each campus is free to buy the electronic resources it desires and thinks most useful for its campus. Usually, the more campuses that license an electronic resource, the cheaper the price to individual libraries, as volume discounts increase when the total number of users goes up.

The idea for the Journal Access Core Collection (JACC) came from a report by Jim Coleman to the CSU Council of Library Directors (COLD), entitled "Collaboration in a Network Environment: Opportunities for Cooperative Collection Development Among the Libraries of the California State University." Written for COLD in early 1998, the report suggested that CSU identify a core collection of electronic resources and pursue a more aggressive acquisi-

ists. The EAR Committee determined and defined the core collection as those to which at least 15 CSU campuses (out of the current 22) now subscribe. Fifteen campuses have become the definition of critical mass that determines what the consortium considers to be "core."

After identifying core collection titles, the EAR committee determined that CSU libraries often paid for access to the same electronic subscriptions from different suppliers, sometimes two, three, or even four times. They found where such overlaps existed and tried, wherever possible, to eliminate duplication, but with aggregators making the decisions as to what they bundled into their packages, unbundling to eliminate duplicates was not possible. Therefore, the CSU consortium concluded that they did not want aggregators in control of the collection development process in the electronic arena. Vendors never controlled the development of the libraries' print collections, after all.

Defining the critical electronic resources became particularly important as the CSU librarians built the Pharos system. Regular readers of my column may remember the piece on the UIAS System entitled "The Trend in Academia: One-Stop Shopping for Students" [November/December 1997 issue, Volume 5, no. 10, pgs. 12-15]. In that article I talked about the UIAS system the CSU system was developing. UIAS is now called Pharos. It is a Z39.50 gateway that provides campus access to the catalogs of the CSU libraries, traditional library databases, and digital resources located on the Web. For students this means they can use one search to tap their campus library catalog, all the other CSU libraries, online databases, and digital resources. A Pharos search will turn up books in their library or in other CSU libraries, find online resources where available, and journal article citations, when online is not available.

The Project

The EAR Committee identified 1,279 titles as having core status for the CSU libraries. This list formed the basis for the Journal Access Core Collection. In August 1998, Evan Reader, director of Software and Electronic Information Resources at California State University, hired Leigh Watson Healy as a consultant to help the CSU develop its JACC acquisition strategy. She helped SEIR develop a Request for Proposal (RFP) to send out to aggregators, subscription agents, and publishers.

Healy stayed in touch with the vendor community about the potential RFP. CSU branches did not want to send out an RFP that no vendor could fulfill. The CSU consortium knew that the final RFP would challenge vendors, so they tested some of their assumptions on key vendors. Working with the vendor community also helped educate the vendors as to why their models for electronic journal delivery didn't work for the CSU libraries, why those models might have to change, what CSU had in mind in issuing the RFP, and what response from vendors CSU might realistically expect.

In order to ensure a smooth interface and integration with the Pharos system, the RFP also required Z39.50 compliance for any vendor competing for this project.
Ranking the vendor responses would apply criteria taken from the "Request for Proposal for the Journal Access Core Collection Proposal 98160":

- Journal Core Collection Titles – Overall value of e-journal titles database offered which included:
  - Vendor package of designated core collection of titles
  - Vendor solution for archiving and perpetual access
  - Quality, completeness, and currency of e-journal content
  - Availability of e-journals in multiple formats
  - Quantity of e-journals provided
  - Cost value of e-journal title level
  - Estimated investment by CSU to implement vendor's proposed solution
  - Technical compliance
  - Specialized knowledge, expertise, and customer references
  - Organization capability and commitment


Vendor Response

Seven vendors responded to the RFP, but not a single major publisher. The primary respondents were aggregators and subscription agents. One thing became immediately clear from the responses: No one vendor could supply everything on the list; over 350 had no current electronic equivalents. (So much for the theory that "everything is available online.") At press time, Reader told us, "While no one vendor could provide us with all of the 1,281 titles included in the JACC list, between the two finalists we are presently negotiating with, we can license a total of 907 titles. What we will take from each provider will be determined in the next few weeks. It's likely that we will conclude by licensing less than the 907, possibly between 600-700. This is due to two factors; one, the amount of funds available for this project, and; two, the fact that certain publishers are, currently, not willing to go along with several of our major requirements. In our view we will be able to obtain the 'critical mass.' This is, indeed, the foundation upon which we may build in the future. We believe that through this project, we will have genuine influence upon the marketplace and that it's only a matter of time before those who will not deal with us now are willing to do so."

The CSUs sent letters to OCLC and EBSCO indicating their intent to continue working with both vendors with a goal of awarding them future contracts. These vendors remain candidates by demonstrating a willingness to work with publishers, because this project aligns with their business strategy and their stated corporate goals, because they passed the technical tests with the Pharaoh interface, and because both vendors have an acceptable content base to offer the CSUs. The selection process has required a lot of negotiation. According to consultant Healy, "The level of awareness and understanding has been raised on both sides." She adds that while the CSUs won't get all of their requirements met, "the CSR and the vendors will both get moved forward and get some of the answers in place."

According to Evan Reader the JACC has made "lots of progress in breaking down publishers' way of thinking. Some publishers are not going along." Reader believes the resistance stems from publishers staying directly linked to retaining print revenue. "We see all different types of models from publishers, when it comes to the electronic version of a print subscription," Reader explains. "Some give the print at no extra cost, some at a small extra cost from 10 to 25 percent over the print-only cost; some require the library to take the print version. There is no standard pricing model. The CSU's JACC RFP proposes, instead of buying print equivalent, the CSU retain two archival copies, one in Northern and the other in Southern California, but setting up these archives may be exorbitant, even if we could find two libraries willing to house them." Notes Reader, "Commercial document delivery services might actually cost the CSU less to deliver."

There is also the issue of perpetual access to the online subscription archives if the library cancels a current subscription. Again there is no standard model in existence, but the RFP has tried to address those issues and concerns.

The Future

Clearly CSU libraries have broken new ground with the Journal Access Core Collection policy. CSU librarians have ventured to tell vendors what we can't and won't take and, though we may be the first, I believe we will not be the last. Many other consortia and libraries have begun looking at JACC as a model. Vendors must wonder when a flood of similar RFPs will start coming their way. Evan Reader has received many inquiries and expects to see others follow the CSU model.

Libraries have finite resources and librarians must spend their budgets on the materials required to support their curricula, fulfill their missions, and meet the needs of their clients. Librarians who buy everything vendors want to sell concede their role as collection developers. Traditional journal models are changing rapidly. Electronic formats can support journals that fill a small but necessary niche, for which the cost of traditional print publication may be prohibitive. Electronic formats can also support the selling of packets of articles taken from many journal titles. Electronic formats can lower the cost of publication, and publishers should expect knowledgeable librarians to want those cost savings passed through to their libraries. More libraries may turn to the CSU model and other librarian-driven policies designed to best meet user needs in a rapidly changing electronic publishing world.