The Trend in Academia: One Stop Shopping for Students

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When I started at California State University, Northridge (CSUN) in August 1996, the vast array of different types of library resources available on campus quite impressed me. With such a vast array of resources, however, I saw overwhelmed students coming to the reference desk, unsure of where to go to find the information needed to complete assignments or research a paper. At CSUN, there was (and there still is) access to a wide range of online sources (many with their own unique search engines), Web-based databases (also with their own and — of course — different search engines), CD-ROMs, and, for a few smaller disciplines, even traditional print indexes. Yet despite daily, free, ongoing classes teaching the use of online and Web indexes and databases, and guest lectures by librarians to large numbers of classes at the University, the numbers of students coming up to the reference desk confused about how to find the information seemed endless. The major source of confusion seemed to lie in identifying which database to use and verifying what each database covered. What should they search?

What could they expect to retrieve?

The World Wide Web only added to the confusion. It became one more place to look for information. Many a student in desperation would wander up to the reference desk and confess to spending hours trying to find either a bibliographic citation or an article on their topic using a Web search engine, only to retrieve nothing useful. This is still the situation many academic librarians encounter today: Students overwhelmed and not understanding which type of resource they need to find what type of information, and, most importantly, how to get the needed information quickly.

Some of the problems in this transitional environment must have driven the vision of people like Doug Davis, University Librarian, California State University, Los Angeles (ddavis@calstatela.edu) and Bill Post, Director of Academic Resources, California State University Chico (bpost@pavax.csuchico.edu). These two honcho-ed the Unified Information Access System (UIAS) project through the CSU system. Doug kindly gave me an interview. Much of the background information in this article comes from the interview and Doug’s writings posted on the UIAS Web site [http://uias.calstate.edu/UIAS.html].

UIAS — Help on the Way

The Unified Information Access System (UIAS) started as one of the strategic planning objectives generated during a retreat held in Tiburon, California, in the early summer of 1994. Under the strategic plan, entitled “Transforming CSU Libraries for the 21st Century,” the California State University’s Council of Library Directors (COLD) made universal online bibliographic access a top priority. To implement this strategy RMG Consultants, and in particular Howard Harris, worked with an internal subgroup of COLD to develop the plan for a Unified Information Access System. The consultants and the teams looked at other consortia’s RFPs for the same type of project (e.g., the Ohio consortium) to gain insights into what the UIAS could include.

In general, they envisioned UIAS as a single, integrated, coherent computer-based user interface providing indexing to and direct online access to or delivery of:

- Resources provided through the CSU Libraries’ Online Public Access Catalogs and in selected catalogs of libraries beyond CSU
- Digital Resources, including both online and CD-ROM indexing and abstract databases which cover journal literature
- CSU text, image, video, and multimedia resources available via CSUNet
- Internet based resources from within and beyond CSU

Integrated access to all forms of material has become a necessity. Such access maximizes faculty, staff, and student use of existing materials in CSU Libraries, while assisting them to become literate, knowledgeable, and critical users of a wide array of information sources. As envisioned, UIAS allows users (all students, faculty, and staff of the 23 campuses comprising the California State University system) to access a broad spectrum of information resources in print, networked, electronic, and other relevant formats, ideal-
David Ernst gave the combined group a presentation on "First Wave" Instructional Technology Strategic Initiatives at that meeting. In order to qualify for the Initiatives, a project must include an inclusive planning model that links proposed initiatives to institutional mission; a graphic representation of the ITSI (Integrated Technology Strategies Initiative) that clarifies the essential relationship between prerequisites, initiatives and outcomes; broad exposure to and feedback from stakeholder groups, including the Executive Council and the Board of Trustees; and a set of initiatives and an implementation structure to carry them out. The UIAS Project subsequently qualified as one of the "First Wave" initiatives and received funding. COLD decided to acquire a project manager and UIAS liaisons at each campus to ensure the completion of the project and to help roll out the system onto the campuses.

In June 1996 the Chairs of COLD and the Review Group met to discuss the next steps to be taken. The Review Group evolved into two implementation teams: a Management Team to plan for ongoing operation of the UIAS and an Evaluation Team to select the UIAS vendor. COLD members have appointed liaisons at each campus. In a further effort to provide campus support, the Management Team asked each COLD member to appoint additional UIAS cohorts. Cohorts will train and implement the UIAS system on campuses.

By August 1996, 10 vendors responded with proposals to a Request for Proposal issued. The five finalists chosen for evaluation were Ameritech Library Services, KRI's CARL, Data Research Associates, Innovative Interfaces, and OCLC. The finalists participated in confidential discussions with the Evaluation Team in October 1996, and demonstration presentations to UIAS liaisons and cohorts took place at the UIAS Readiness Conference in Long Beach on November 21, 1996. A pilot server was made available to CU personnel involved in the project to test and evaluate. This was the first time liaisons and cohorts got together to see and discuss the finalist vendors' visions of what UIAS would look like. Liaisons and cohorts at each campus informed other staff on their campuses of the availability of the pilot servers. Hundreds of survey responses from almost every CU campus came into the Evaluation Team evaluating the finalists.

The Evaluation Team met in February 1997 and reviewed the finalists' best and final offers. They concluded that the proposal by Ameritech best envisioned a system based on the open standards of TCP/IP or telecommunication in the Internet environment, HTTP/HTML for Web client to Web server communications, USMARC for bibliographic records, and Z39.50 for computer-to-computer information search and retrieval. Ameritech's proposal represented the optimum technology for Universal Online Bibliographic Access called for in the RFP. Contract negotiations with Ameritech Library Services were finalized and signed at the American Library Association meeting in San Francisco in June 1997. Mr. Marvin Pollard took on a two-year appointment at CSU as UIAS Project Manager [mpollard@calstate.edu].

Where We're Going

From the end-user perspective a single search from a standard Web browser will retrieve information resources in books, periodicals, reference works, and online sources, including Web sites and government publications. A bibliographic search that would have taken a day or more to produce two decades ago in printed indexes will be completed in a few minutes. The response will optimize retrieval tools for each type of resource. Online sources will have hypertext links to the full document file. Local books and periodical sources will have call numbers and locations attached. Union catalog listings will support direct end-user borrowing, including interlibrary loan and document delivery request forms.

The CSU Libraries will link to other major regional and national resources using the same standard — for example, Melvyl at the University of California and major bibliographic utilities, such
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as OCLC and RLIN. Any CSU user working from a networked personal computer will be able to use a single technique for obtaining comprehensive bibliographic information on the topic of their inquiry. Search results could comprise a call number order list of books and journals at the local campus, an automatic request for similar materials available at another CSU campus, or the immediate interactive display or transfer of the text of materials available in digital formats. Successful system-wide adoption of a common automated search standard will make all CSU information resources easier to use. All of this will increase utilization.

A key component of the UIAS System will involve specialized Web servers directing user search requests to a wide array of database servers and returning search results in a single screen format. Ameritech’s system has the ability to accommodate different vendor systems currently in use in the CSU Libraries and to integrate various systems and services. Several vendors who bid on this system regarded the CSU UIAS project as the most advanced of its type, leading the way for other libraries.

Forward Thinking

As envisioned, the UIAS would provide invaluable support for a distributed learning environment and flexible degree programs by enabling the design and implementation of virtual library collections. It would enable new forms of digital library cooperation between CSU campuses and other major academic and public library systems within and outside California, as well as assist CSU libraries to meet user requirements for simultaneous, seamless, and integrated access to both print and digital forms of material. With the eventual addition of more and more full-text resources, the true digital library may finally become the reality many have worked for and dreamed of since shortly after the computer era began. The California State University Council of Library Directors needs to be applauded for the vision and insight to push forward a dramatic and much needed change in the status quo.

The planners expect to roll the UIAS system out to campuses by mid-1998. Considerable changes will occur as a result of the system, and I shall continue to keep you posted about UIAS’ impact, particularly its impact on the ways in which academic libraries and their parent institutions deliver services in the new millennium. When services can be delivered full text to the desktop, does it matter where that desktop lies? The implications for the changes are mind altering, but they fit nicely into the California State University’s mission to provide distance learning. If the UIAS system lives up to its potential, it could make the largest university in the nation’s largest state one of the nation’s leaders in providing library services.

[The Web address for more information and update on the complete project is at http://uias.calstate.edu/UIAS.html.]