SPEC Kit 316

Evaluating E-resources

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Richard Bleiler

Humanities Librarian

University of Connecticut

Jill Livingston

Liaison to Allied Health, Kinesiology, and Physical Therapy

University of Connecticut

ASSOCIATION OF RESEARCH LIBRARIES

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Introduction

SPEC Kit 253, *Networked Information Resources,* was published by the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) only a little more than 10 years ago, but it appeared in a vastly different world, one in which the majority of academic and research libraries still operated on a growth economy. The developments in the ensuing 10 years have included the rise to ubiquitous preeminence of Google and its various offerings, economic recessions in 2000 and 2008, and the significant administrative and organizational restructuring of the majority of academic research libraries. Accompanying all of these changes, and perhaps changing to accommodate them, has been the way in which electronic resources are acquired, assessed, and served to library users.

This survey on Evaluating E-resources was designed to re-examine the ways in which ARL member libraries have (re)structured themselves to identify the availability of new e-resources in the market; evaluate them for acquisition; decide to acquire/purchase them; evaluate them prior to renewal; and publicize or market them. Nearly identical questions were posed regarding purchasing/licensing by consortia and by individual libraries, enabling comparisons in process to be made. For the purposes of this survey, networked information resources were defined as "commercially available electronic information resources (databases, e-texts, e-journals, datasets, and information resources) funded or enabled by the library, which are made available to authorized users through a pre-existing network."

The survey was conducted between 1 February and 8 March 2010. Seventy-three of the 124 ARL member institutions (63 US academic, 9 Canadian academic, and 1 nonacademic) completed the survey for a response rate of 59%.

The survey began by asking respondents if their libraries had policies specifically addressing commercially available e-resources. Of the 72 respondents, slightly more than half (38 or 53%) reported they had such a collection development policy. The comments indicated that the answer may really be yes and no. Several respondents explained that e-resources are broadly addressed by or integrated into either an overall or discipline-specific policy. Others reported that the collection policy is format neutral, though there may be guidelines that address e-resources. A number commented on their preference for selecting electronic or e-only modes of access. A few respondents are in the process of developing policies or plan to do so.

The responses were more clear-cut with regards to use of an Electronic Resource Management system (ERM); 68% of the respondents (49 of 72) use an ERM. A significant percentage of these indicated the ERM is used for all components of the e-resources process, including licensing, holdings management, usage tracking, overlap analysis, cost data, data feeds, link resolvers, automated reminders, OPAC features, vendor statistics, and contact information. A number of comments indicated a preference for Ex Libris's Verde ERM. One respondent indicated that the ERM received minimal use because it is "time consuming and labor intensive."

Purchasing/Licensing E-resources through Consortia

The survey next asked about the process for purchasing or licensing e-resources through a consortium. The 73 respondents indicated that they belong to between one and five different kinds of consortia to acquire or license commercially available e-resources. The vast majority (90%) belongs to a research library consortium, such as GWLA, NERL, OCUL, etc. Most also belong to a state-wide/province-wide multi-type library consortium (73%) or a regional multi-type library consortium (70%). Fewer belong to a university system consortium (32%) or a national consortium (19%). Three respondents also work through a law or medical library consortium.

All but two of 72 respondents belong to at least one consortium "for the primary purpose of acquiring commercially available e-resources." The mean number of memberships per institution is 3.18.

Number of Consortia	Responses
1	8
2	15
3	22
4	11
5	5
6	7
7	2

Consortia Purchasing/Licensing: Identifying and Evaluating New E-resources

For the next set of questions the survey asked respondents to base their answers on the one consortium through which their library spends the most on e-resources. Respondents indicated that they use a mixture of methods to identify new e-resources for purchase or licensing within the consortium. Most frequently, a consortium member suggests a product or vendors submit proposals. It is also common that a consortium manager or consortium group/committee identifies prospects. One respondent described an annual bibliographer survey that is vetted by one or more system-wide committees.

Likewise, a mixture of individuals and groups are responsible for evaluating new e-resource(s) for purchase or licensing. In most cases, it is the joint responsibility of individual consortium members and consortium staff, frequently in conjunction with a group of consortium members dedicated to the evaluation of potential purchases. In a few cases, it is solely the role of a dedicated evaluation group or consortium staff.

Within the library, responsibility for the evaluation of new e-resources is broadly distributed, with a slight distinction between multidisciplinary vs. discipline/subject-specific purchases. The evaluation of multidisciplinary products is most often the responsibility of all selectors and/or the chief collection development officer (67% of respondents). For evaluation of discipline/subject-specific resources, the primary parties shift to selectors with relevant subject expertise/responsibility (90%) and the chief collection development officer (62%). Lesser involvement was indicated for an e-resources working group/team/committee (34 respondents) and only 18 respondents have dedicated selector(s) for e-resources. One respondent noted that "we have not had an 'e-resource evaluation team' in years. This is probably unfortunate."

Twenty-nine respondents identified another individual or group from virtually all organizational areas of academic research libraries, including reference librarians, academic liaisons, bibliographers, technical services resource librarians, deans, and directors. In addition, faculty and students also have a part in the decision-making processes.

Consortia Purchasing/Licensing: Selection Criteria

This section of the survey addressed the importance to libraries of various selection criteria and licensing terms when evaluating e-resources for consortial purchase/licensing. It also covered the activities that are part of the assessment process.

Respondents were asked to rate a list of 17 selection criteria on a five-point scale ranging from Not at All Important to Deal Breaker. Cost was chosen as a deal breaker by half of the respondents and as very important or important by the other half. Apart from cost, there was little consensus on what constituted a deal breaker. Only compatibility with library systems, chosen by 17 respondents (24%), was rated as a deal breaker by more than 5% of respondents. The next

most highly rated criteria were uniqueness/completeness of content, anticipated usage rate, user-friendly interface, and relevance to faculty research. The least important criteria were whether all or most consortia members were likely to subscribe and the e-resource's potential accessibility through such mobile devices as BlackBerry, iPhone, Kindle, etc.

Sixteen comments listed other selection criteria for the purchase and licensing of a consortial e-resource. Four indicated the importance of perpetual access and interlibrary loan rights. Additional criteria included the capacity to swap and/or cancel material and stable pricing. One respondent stated in part that, "…some aspects that are very important to users (bibliographic export, interface) do not normally play a large role in making an acquisition decision, which is driven most strongly by content relevance so long as cost or access are not prohibitive aspects."

Sixty respondents (83%) reported that the consortium uses standard licensing terms or model licenses for e-resources. Only 15 (22%) reported that the consortium has used the National Information Standards Organization Shared E-Resource Understanding (NISO SERU) for any e-resources. Respondents commented that few publishers have accepted SERU, yet. They also indicated that use of SERU is more a local, rather than a consortial, practice.

As with selection criteria, respondents were asked to rate a list of 14 licensing terms on a five-point scale ranging from Not at All Important to Deal Breaker. Applicable law was rated a deal breaker by 23 respondents (32%) and 41 others (56%) rated it very important or important. Walk-in users was rated a deal breaker by 21 respondents (29%) and very important or important by 47 others (64%). No other licensing term garnered more than 5% of responses as a deal breaker. The next most important licensing issues were electronic reserves, level of support, cancellation restrictions, and interlibrary loan (86% to 89% of respondents). Seventy percent of respondents rated consequences of unauthorized access to the database and consequences of unauthorized use of the database content as important, very important, or deal breaker. A number of these reiterated in their comments that any requirement for the library to indemnify the licensor is a deal breaker. Other very

important license terms include archival and perpetual access rights, access by IP, and use of licensed content in course packs. Compensation for service failures and obligation of the library to train users were the least important issues.

The survey asked respondents to indicate how frequently specific activities were performed as part of the assessment process for new consortial e-resources. The top five activities that most respondents (74% to 90%) report are always or usually part of the process include comparing the title or other content to e-resource products already held by the library, reviewing the vendor/publisher preservation arrangement, conducting a trial use of the e-resource, checking the e-resource's compatibility with library systems (e.g., link resolver), and reviewing the product license against pre-existing organizational criteria. Only three respondents report usually contacting existing subscribing institutions for evaluations.

Consortia Purchasing/Licensing: Acquisition Decision

In all but a few cases, the decision to enter into a contract with a vendor is made by consortium staff or committee based on feedback from members. Feedback may be in the form of a vote or it may simply be a decision to opt in or out of the deal.

Within the library, responsibility for the final acquisition decision is somewhat different than the responsibility for e-resource evaluation. While the chief collection development officer and selectors have equal responsibility for evaluating multidisciplinary e-resources, the chief collection development officer is twice as likely to make the final acquisition decision in consultation with selectors and an e-resources working group/team/committee. Subject selectors have primary responsibility for evaluating discipline/subject-specific resources, but the chief collection development officer is the primary final decision maker in consultation with selectors and others. Other individuals or groups who make or contribute to the final acquisition decision include the University Librarian/Dean/Director, AUL, Acquisitions Team Leader, Collection Development Council, Administrative Council, Licensing and Negotiation Librarian, consortial staff, and Provost.

Consortia Purchasing/Licensing: Evaluating E-resources for Renewal

Fifty-eight respondents (82%) reported that there is a routine review cycle for consortial e-resources. The comments generally stated that reviews occurred at renewal time. Depending on the length of the contract, that could be annually or every few years. In all but a few cases, consortium members—either individually or in a dedicated renewal evaluation group—have primary responsibility for evaluating consortial e-resources for renewal in conjunction with consortium staff. In seven cases, consortium staff and/or a renewal group have this responsibility. Other renewal evaluators include bibliographer groups, system-wide collection officers, and library directors.

Respondents were asked to rate the importance of 10 renewal criteria on a five-point scale. Overall cost was again the reigning issue; a deal breaker for more than half of the respondents and very important for the rest. A significant majority of the respondents rated each of the criteria very important or important. The highest rated were uniqueness of content, cost per use, relevance to current curricula and faculty research, and inflation history. Less important was the effect of institutional withdrawal on the consortial contract.

The survey asked respondents to indicate how frequently specific activities were performed as part of the renewal evaluation process for consortial e-resources. The activities that most respondents report are always or usually part of the process include evaluating the cost increase over the previous year, a review of past usage statistics, evaluating the inflation history, and comparing titles (or other content) to e-resource products already held. Least frequent was collecting opinions of users.

Half of the respondents indicated they record and maintain e-resource evaluations. Of these, all but one indicated there were circumstances under which an evaluation might be revisited. The comments about such circumstances primarily concerned price increases but also included changes in research patterns, previously undetected usage, and platform and curricular changes.

Library Direct Purchasing/Licensing: Identifying and Evaluating New E-resources

This section of the survey repeated many of the questions about e-resources acquired through consortia, but asked about the ways in which research libraries, using their own resources and staff, identify and evaluate new e-resources for direct purchase or licensing.

The survey distinguished between multi-disciplinary vs. discipline/subject-specific purchases; however, with a few exceptions, the library staff responsible for identifying new e-resources for direct purchasing/licensing is the same for both categories. Librarians with mixed collections, teaching, and/or reference responsibilities topped the list (93%), followed by those dedicated to collection development in all formats (66%), and a general collection development group (63%). Only 19 respondents (26%) reported having an e-resource group to identify new products. Other individual(s) or group(s) that identify new e-resources include faculty, students, staff, and other users, and the Head of Collection Development. The responses for who evaluates new e-resources were nearly identical. Library senior administrators are slightly less likely to evaluate than to identify new e-resources. An e-resource group is slightly more likely to evaluate than identify, particularly to determine "technical compatibility with the libraries' network."

The most frequently used method of identifying new e-resources is through requests from faculty (43 responses or 60% of usually or always). A distant second method is by requests from other library users (29 or 40%). Slightly more than a third of respondents usually or always identify new products through vendor visits to the library or at vendor exhibits at library conferences. The least used method is visiting other research libraries and discussing networked resources.

Direct Purchasing/Licensing: Selection Criteria

The most important criteria for directly purchased/licensed e-resources mirror those for consortial purchases. Thirty-eight respondents (52%) indicated that cost was a deal breaker and an additional 33 rated it as very important (45%). Compatibility with library systems was again a distant second deal breaker. The next most highly rated criteria were uniqueness/

completeness of content, relevance to faculty research, anticipated usage rate, and user-friendly interface. The least important criterion was the e-resource's potential accessibility through mobile devices.

Individual institutions are somewhat less likely than consortia to use standard licensing terms or model licenses for e-resources (68% vs. 83%). They are more likely than consortia to be willing to use the NISO SERU agreement (37% vs. 22%), but comment that too few publishers and/or vendors are interested.

The important licensing terms for directly purchased/licensed and consortial e-resources are the same. Applicable law and walk-in users are the top two deal breakers. The next most important licensing issues are electronic reserves, interlibrary loan, level of support, and cancellation restrictions. Seventy-five percent of respondents rated consequences of unauthorized access to the database or use of the database content and consequences of withdrawal of content as important, very important, or a deal breaker. Respondents' comments reiterated that any requirement for the library to indemnify the licensor is a deal breaker. Other very important license terms include archival and perpetual access rights, access by IP, author rights for e-journals, and use of licensed content in course packs. Compensation for service failures and obligation of the library to train users were the least important issues.

The top five activities that are performed most frequently as part of the assessment process for new e-resources are the same for both libraries and consortia, though their order is somewhat different. Comparing the title or other content to e-resource products already held by the library is the most common activity for both. Libraries then check the e-resource's compatibility with library systems, review the product license against pre-existing organizational criteria, and conduct a trial use of the e-resource. Reviewing vendor/publisher preservation arrangements is less important for libraries than consortia. As with consortia, the least frequent activity for libraries is contacting existing subscribing institutions for evaluations.

Direct Purchasing/Licensing: Acquisition Decision

Though there are some differences in the responses by each institution, the pattern for who makes the final acquisition decision for consortial and directly purchased/licensed e-resources is the same: The chief collection development officer is the primary final decision maker in consultation with selectors, an e-resources group, and others, including committees and senior library administrators.

Direct Purchasing/Licensing: Evaluating E-resources for Renewal

Fifty of the 73 respondents (68%) report a routine review cycle for both consortial and directly purchased/licensed e-resources; the review frequency is the same regardless of the acquisition channel; typically annually. Seven institutions report there is a routine cycle for consortial products but not for directly purchased ones; five report the opposite.

A variety of library staff with collection responsibility review e-resources for renewal. With a few exceptions, the same staff are responsible for evaluating discipline/subject-specific and multidisciplinary e-resources. Reviewers are most often librarians with mixed collections and/or teaching and/or reference responsibilities (51 or 71%). Librarians dedicated to collection development in all formats are slightly more likely to review discipline/subject-specific e-resources (61% vs. 51%), while a general collection development group is more likely to review multidisciplinary e-resources (58% vs. 46%). Roughly a third of the respondents report that senior library administrators, dedicated e-resources librarians, and an e-resources group also review products for renewal. Other reviewers include the Head of Collection Development, the library's Business Services office, and faculty and students.

The renewal criteria rankings for directly purchased/licensed e-resources were almost exactly the same as for consortial products. The primary deal breaker remained overall cost (55%), followed distantly by compatibility with library systems (17%). Criteria most often rated very important or important were uniqueness of content, relevance to current curricula and faculty research, and inflation history. Cancellation restrictions and preservation arrangements are only somewhat important.

There were no surprises about the frequency of activities used by the library to evaluate directly

licensed e-resources for renewal. The most frequent activities were the same as for consortial products: evaluate cost increase over previous year, review past usage statistics, evaluate inflation history, and compare title (or other content) to e-resource products already held by the library. Least frequent was to collect opinions of users.

Just over half of the respondents indicated that evaluations were recorded and maintained. With only six exceptions, respondents had the same answer about whether an evaluation might be revisited by either the consortium or the library. Thirty-four reported that there were such circumstances (47%); thirty-three that there weren't (45%). The comments indicated that reevaluations would be necessary if funds, pricing, or budgets change.

Publicizing New E-resources

The last section of the survey asked about the methods libraries use to publicize new e-resources and which are most effective. All of the respondents have used a multitude of methods. The two most frequently used and deemed most effective are having e-resources records in the library's catalog and liaison meetings, consultations, or individual contacts with faculty and/or graduate students (99% used and 64% effective). Announcements on the library's Web site are used as often but were rated less effective (36%). Also frequently used and highly effective are targeted communications sent to relevant schools, department, faculty, and graduate students. Least used and rated least effective are announcements or links in social networking and Second Life sites. Several respondents indicated that Twitter and blogs are used to publicize and announce e-resources, and others use press releases, articles in campus newspapers, and RSS feeds. Several made use of video and flat screen television displays. One has used "door hangers, coasters/beer mats, book marks, handouts, [and] brochures." Nevertheless, a significant number of these comments indicated that successful publicizing of e-resources was a concern and remained an ongoing issue, one respondent going so far as to state, "Very difficult to reach users. Biggest challenge. We spend 10M a year and most do not know what we have."

Additional Comments

Several respondents indicated that the ubiquity of e-resources had changed the acquisitions process. A number indicated a desire to find better methods or processes to acquire and publicize e-resources. Several made reference to the present economic climate, indicating that while identifying and evaluating e-resources for acquisition was relatively easy, identifying and evaluating e-resources for cancellation was not so simple.

Conclusion

Both consortia and libraries deploy large amounts of staff resources to build e-resource collections. Identification and assessment activities are not partitioned, rather they are conducted as communal activities. Consortial staff work in concert with member libraries. Librarians with collections, teaching, and reference responsibilities share duties with collection development groups, librarians dedicated to e-resource management, and/or library senior administrators. Final decisions about the acquisition of purchased or licensed e-resources, while most often performed by chief collection developers, are also the duty of individual selectors and teams.

There is a strong and somewhat surprising correlation between the ways in which research libraries use consortia to acquire and evaluate e-resources and the ways in which they directly acquire and evaluate e-resources. There is also a strong correlation in the ways in which these libraries are acquiring and evaluating highly specialized and multidisciplinary e-resources.

Yet, despite considerable and widespread involvement of staff, the survey uncovered weaknesses in the procurement processes, policies, and procedures. Consortial and library staff conduct a slate of activities and consider numerous criteria when examining resources, yet many libraries do not have collection development policies specifically addressing e-resources to guide their decisions. Evaluations, once complete, are often not recorded by either libraries or consortia for future reference. Further, about one-fifth of consortia and libraries do not have routine review cycles for resources once they are purchased.

Various licensing terms are considered important to libraries; however, seventeen percent of consortia and thirty-one percent of individual libraries do not use any standard licensing terms or model licenses for e-resources. Also, despite various legal and other considerations in licensing, cost was the only criterion considered a deal breaker by a significant percentage of survey respondents. Further, about one-third are not yet using an electronic resource management system and the majority of individual libraries do not use the National Information Standards Organization Shared E-Resource Understanding (NISO SERU), which could provide a valid alternative to a license agreement.

These shortcomings not only open the potential for wasted staff time and poor decision making, they also carry potential legal ramifications, due to the nature of contractual licensing.

If ARL member libraries' expenditures on e-resources were negligible, the deficiencies mentioned above might not be important or worth mentioning, but preliminary 2008–2009 data shows that the university libraries spent well in excess of $741,000,000 on e-resources. However, the lack of established policies, processes, and procedures for the overall assessment of e-resources puts libraries at risk for financial loss in terms of finances and staff time. Also, by entering into contracts without first negotiating and, if necessary, establishing and/or removing issues concerning applicable law, deal-breaking language, indemnification issues, renewal periods, and so forth, libraries are rendering themselves vulnerable and putting themselves at the mercy of vendors. Legal crises and lawsuits concerning contract violations do not appear to have occurred, but this should not let these libraries become complacent.

The findings of the *Evaluating E-resources* survey should be considered a call for concerted communication, organization, and action among those responsible for the acquisition of e-resources in ARL libraries. In order to improve operational efficiencies and to maximize their effectiveness, research libraries must recognize as essential – and establish as their highest priority – the need to:

- Develop and create policies for the acquisition of e-resources, both those acquired through consortia and those purchased directly;
- Create standardized methodologies that meaningfully accommodate the assessment of those resources described above;
- Train all library staff who manage and engage in contractual relations with vendors in the importance of contract negotiation;
- Share their assessment strategies with other research libraries;
- Collaborate and cooperate in sharing not only policies and strategies but also relevant operational and best practices data;
- Coordinate in the development of system-wide evaluative standards.

Should these tasks be undertaken successfully, it is hoped they will move research libraries to a future defined by a shared understanding and a consistent implementation of best practices in evaluating e-resources.