

Catherine Wells

Alumni access to research databases

The time is now

A five-year review of the literature reveals exactly three articles that discuss offering remote access to proprietary research databases for alumni. A survey of 102 top schools reveals that only 18 currently offer this type of service. This is a large untapped market.

Proprietary research databases are some of the most valuable resources available to students on campuses around the country. During their tenure at a college or university, they use them regularly. Upon graduation they are suddenly cut off from accessing these resources. Are libraries missing an opportunity in not providing access to these types of resources? In my opinion, we are.

Barbara Quint recognizes this need and, in a March 2005 article, states "...upon graduation students have the strongest content awareness and searching skills."¹ She pushes vendors to market their products to graduates and suggest that they are ignoring a large potential market.

Universities are all looking to maintain ties to alums and to encourage them to support their alma maters and libraries after graduation. Wouldn't it make sense to make a suite of databases available to graduates along with other library resources and services? This type of program not only would result in goodwill but could pay off in increased donations and other support from alumni. If vendors heed Quint's call, we may see our potential audience eroded before we have a chance to respond to the need.

Background

Since Kelvin Smith Library is planning to develop such a service ourselves, I decided to

survey what was going on in the academic world. I began with a few posts to relevant discussion lists to solicit responses and followed up with phone calls. To broaden the scope, I ended up checking Web sites for over 100 schools for existing programs. If there was some indication that they had alumni access, I followed up with e-mails and phone calls to get more information. While I found that the vast majority of schools and libraries do not offer this type of service, the ones that do had almost uniformly positive things to say. All thought it was a worthwhile service that pays off in goodwill and will possibly increase donations to the school and library.

Universities and libraries are just beginning to realize that this is a valuable service. Students' use of online databases and full-text journals is a relatively new occurrence. Students graduating 10 or even 5 years ago would not have felt the absence of this type of resource so acutely. Today's information-savvy graduates will miss the seamless access to quality resources, full-text articles and reports, and the research support and advice provided by their library alma maters.

Vendors have only recently made these resources available to alumni on a widespread scale. Traditionally, license agreements for research databases restrict access to current faculty, students, and staff.

Many vendors do not make these resources available to alums at all for various reasons:

- first, there has not been a great demand until recently.

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- second, is the publisher's fear that they will be used for commercial purposes by the alums in their workplace, thereby reducing the sales to corporate customers as well as individual subscriptions to journals.

A quick survey of four large vendors revealed the following:

EBSCO has developed alumni versions of two of their most popular databases, Academic Search Premier and Business Source Premier. They include essentially the same journals as the regular editions but with less full-text access. It is also possible for an institution to add access to any of the other databases they subscribe to (abstracts only) to your alumni package for a nominal fee. Fee structure at the time of this writing is based on the number of users, although I understand from a recent conversation with a sales representative that they are moving to a flat pricing structure.

ProQuest has been offering alumni access for about two years. It is offered on the ProQuest classic databases such as ABI/Inform, Wall Street Journal Full Text, Research Library, and about a dozen other databases on the same search interface. Note that some content may be blocked due to publisher restrictions. To take part in this service, the school or library must already purchase regular access to one of ProQuest's classic databases. The fee structure for alumni access is 15% of the institution's total purchase price for the databases they purchase.

Alumni access is not available for some third-party databases such as Safari, historical newspapers, or Chadwyck Healey.

Thomson did not reply.

Gale does not have alumni focused products at this time.

Experiences from the field

Hard data is not plentiful since most institutions that do offer this service have not been doing so for very long. I carried out a survey of 102 libraries and alumni offices (see chart at end of article). I based my survey on the list of the top public schools listed in the latest issue of *U.S. News and World Report*² and

the list of top private research universities from the Lombardi Program On Measuring University Performance.⁵

Of the 102 places surveyed, only 18 currently have off-campus alumni access. In some cases, access is limited to alums from certain schools or colleges such as Business or Education. I must note that my first pass at gathering information consisted of visiting both the alumni Web page and main library Web page for each school. If I was fairly certain that this service was not offered, that is what I recorded. If it was unclear or if they did offer the service, I followed up with calls and e-mails to get further information. I apologize to any programs that I overlooked since I cannot be 100% certain that a program does not exist based on Web page information.

Comments from the field

Dartmouth began their service in 2002, making it one of the longest established programs. Adam Corson-Finnerty, Dartmouth's director of library development and external affairs, says that such service offers libraries a great opportunity to gain support from alumni. "Immediately, the library web site can be a great place to build a membership or constituency base."⁴

Johns Hopkins began service to alumni in March 2004. After an initial breaking-in period, they marketed their service aggressively and have, in their opinion, a very successful program. At this time they have about 300 subscribers. According to Phil Tang, assistant director for alumni relations, and Elizabeth Kirk, head, Entrepreneurial Library Program, they attribute much of their success to the fact that they are closely tied to the alumni association. They were able to piggyback on the resources and channels of communication already established by the association, greatly increasing awareness of the program.

Rice University began its program in May 2005. Mark Davis from the Rice Alumni Office says it has been very well received. The office gets positive comments at least once a week. It is hoping to expand their service with additional databases in the future.

Rochester Institute of Technology just began service in fall 2005. Shirley Bower, head of the Digital Assets Team at Wallace Library, says they began offering access because they “constantly got requests” from alumni for such a service. She judges that it has been a success, based on the fact that approximately 5,500 searches have been carried out between September 2005 and January 2006.

Our experience

We have had many requests from graduates over the years for off-campus access to online resources. These requests have increased in the last five years as recent grads have become more familiar with and reliant on these types of resources. Our primary stumbling block was lack of funds to supply this service. Our university alumni office did not offer a paid membership to an alumni organization on which we could piggyback such a service. We needed a funding source and tried for approximately two years to identify one. Library development officer Nancy Uddelson at last found our “angel” in Dr. Fred Geisler (a 1967 graduate from the Case Institute of Technology). His gift of \$15,000 allowed us to purchase the initial subscription to a group of EBSCO databases including alumni editions of Academic Search and Business Source.

In addition to research database access, the library includes a suite of other services to support research, access to materials, and lifelong learning:

- Expert Assistance from KSL reference professionals
 - Ask A Librarian—E-mail, Live Chat, consultations in person or by phone
 - Tutorials, guidelines for databases, Web searching
 - A collection of hundreds of librarian-selected free Web resources arranged by topic
- ILLIAD Electronic Document Delivery
 - Desktop delivery of articles you can’t find online from libraries around the world (a service normally valued at \$18–\$25 per article)

— Web-based real-time tracking on your personalized ILLIAD account—log on anytime anywhere to request, track, or read your articles

- Borrowing privileges from KSL
 - A Case library account offers circulation and online renewal for KSL’s 1.6-million-item research collection
- OhioLINK borrowing privileges
 - Request items online from the 44-million-item OhioLINK Central Catalog and specify delivery to any OhioLINK Library in the state for pickup.
 - With your Case KSL library card, enjoy direct onsite borrowing from any OhioLINK library

Getting up and running

We had the money, but we faced several nuts-and-bolts issues before we could proceed. We needed to authenticate the status of people who registered for the service. The university has an official database of graduates that could be used for this purpose; however, the library did not have access to this database. We worked with the alumni office staff to create a registration form and authentication process. The alumni office’s Web site was configured to accept electronic payment—another service the library did not have. The capability to pay online was essential for convenience and a fast turnaround time. We will accept payment by check if the patron does not wish to pay online.

Once alums register, are approved, and pay the fee through the alumni office site, their names are forwarded to EBSCO. EBSCO has been very cooperative and supportive of our efforts. They agreed to create and send them passwords for use in logging to the database site. They will maintain a database of registrants, and the library will have access to this information. The library staff will send out renewal notices, answer questions, and provide research and reference support.

The library hired a case student-owned company, O-WebTechnologies ([July/August 2006](http://www.owebt-</p></div><div data-bbox=)

ech.com) to design a library alumni portal that brings together information about and access to the whole range of services that we are offering our alumni in this program. See <http://library.case.edu/ksl/alumni>.

With this service, we went live in April of 2006. Our initial promotion included an article in the winter issue of the Case alumni magazine and an article in the spring issue of *On Reserve*, the KSL alumni newsletter. Flyers will be handed out at spring graduation. Notices and announcements will be placed on the KSL Web pages and on the university alumni office Web page.

We are confident this new suite of services will contribute to the intellectual enrichment and lifelong learning goals of Case alumni

and will strengthen future ties among alumni, the library, and the university. Time will tell how successful we are.

Notes

1. Quint, Barbara. "Not for Love or Money." *Information Today* 22, no. 3 (March 2005).
2. Albanese, Andrew. "Digital Libraries Reach Out to Alumni." *Library Journal* 127, no. 12 (2002).
3. "America's Best Colleges: Top Public National Universities," *U.S. News and World Report*. (2006), http://www.usnews.com/usnews/edu/college/rankings/brief/natudoc/natudoc_pub_brief.php.
4. "Top American Research Universities," The Center <http://thecenter.ufl.edu/TableIntroTopAmResUniv.html>.

Survey results online

For a table showing the complete results of the survey conducted, see the online article at www.acrl.org/c&rlnews.

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"Columbia Reactivates School of Library Service Alumni Association." *College and Research Libraries News*. 65, no. 8 (September 2004). *z*

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