Tony Horava

Licensing e-resources for alumni

Reflections from a pilot project

Remote access to licensed electronic resources for alumni is a recent phenomenon. The classes of graduating students since the mid-1990s have become increasingly familiar with digital resources provided by the library. After graduating, however, they no longer have access to their institution's portfolio of online research tools, such as full-text e-journals and newspapers, specialized research databases, and reference tools. This is becoming more pressing as former students develop new interests and wish to rely upon the digital resources they were accustomed to using in their student days. A few schools have responded to the demand for providing continuing access to alumni. A survey of 102 top U.S. schools by Catherine Wells revealed, however, that "only 18 currently offer this type of service."[1]

There has been paucity in the literature addressing this issue. It is a complex matter since each institution has its own approach and strategy for fostering alumni relationships to the school. Jean Sykes notes that "Looking after alumni now, making them feel welcome and encouraging them to feel involved with their alma mater beyond graduation and throughout their lives can pay off later through sponsorship during their careers and bequests on their deaths."[2] Alumni have played an important role in supporting libraries and even organizing to save a library school, such as University of Southern California in 1984.[3] The library's approach needs to be harmonized with the broader organizational strategy, and this will depend on many factors, such as the historical relationship between the alumni association and the library, the degree of collaboration between the alumni relations office and the library, the strategy of the library towards different user communities, and the perceived value and impact of developing alumni relations within the university. It is a fundamentally political issue and the drivers will vary enormously from one campus to another.

The library's role

What should be the library's role in providing services to alumni? The core constituency of any academic library is the faculty and students for whom services and collections are developed. Sykes notes that "alumni will want to use the library as a means of supporting their continuing professional development and their desire/need to learn new skills."[4] Many libraries permit limited borrowing of items from the print collection, as well as reference assistance in various forms (in-person, e-mail, chat), and on-site access to licensed electronic resources (considered as walk-in users). Interlibrary loans are offered in some cases. Christine Smith conducted a survey of 20 U.K. universities in 1998. She reports that "Five of the institutions only offer reference access (four of these made no charge for this). The remaining 15 libraries allowed limited loans to alumni members, from 2 to 6 items, with short loans usually excluded."[5]

While most schools provide reference service and loans to alumni, remote access to digital resources is a very different matter. Vendors and publishers have only recently offered institutions the ability to license their products on behalf of alumni. They have been

Tony Horava is collections and information resources coordinator at the University of Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, e-mail: thorava@uottawa.ca

concerned about the possible uses of their material for commercial purposes, or use by an employee in the context of his or her work, thereby eroding revenue in the corporate and the individual market. Sensitizing alumni to appropriate conditions of use is a challenge as well as an obligation.

Schools that have provided this service to alumni report a high level of satisfaction. Testimonials from Rice University, Johns Hopkins, Rochester Institute of Technology, and Case Western Reserve are overwhelmingly positive.[6] At Columbia, "online library access is the 'No. 1 benefit' that Illinois alumni have requested from the university."[7] At the University of Minnesota, the new service has resulted in "inquiries about joining the alumni association."[8] There are various Canadian schools that have implemented this service, such as University of Toronto, University of Western Ontario, University of Calgary, and University of New Brunswick.

Key issues

There are a number of key issues. Who should pay for remote access for alumni—the library, the alumni relations office, the alumni association, the alumni themselves, or a combination of the above? Sixteen of the eighteen U.S. schools in the above-mentioned survey provide free access or fees rolled into alumni association dues. However this raises the philosophical and practical issue of the impact on the library budget. As Tony Ferguson says, "If we want to provide 'free' access someone will have to pay for it: today's students who will get less, publishers who will raise their prices, or the private or public groups that make our work possible."[9] Sustainability of such a service needs to be addressed at the outset. How will the service be funded over the long term? Cost-recovery via fees charged to alumni, or cost-sharing between the library and the alumni association, or a university-mandated allocation for the alumni relations office that is incorporated into the base budget? A one-time grant or seed money may jump-start the service, but a longer-term business plan is essential. It goes without say-

ing that the impact on the library's collection budget needs to be kept in full view.

University of Ottawa pilot project

The University of Ottawa is a comprehensive doctoral university in Canada's capital, Ottawa, located in Ontario. It offers 230 programs in ten faculties (arts, social sciences, education, management, engineering, science, law, medicine, health sciences, and graduate studies). In 2005–06, there were 33,576 students including 29,567 undergraduates and 4,009 at the master's and PhD level. Instruction is offered in both French and English in virtually all programs, and the collection development strategy reflects this reality. There are approximately 140,000 alumni.

Product selection

One of our objectives was to establish a closer collaboration with our alumni relations office. In meeting with the director, we found a keen interest in developing a closer partnership with the library. To select a product, we considered resources that offered a significant amount of full-text, and that would have a broad enough appeal to a cross-section of alumni. After discussion, we decided upon ABI/Inform. This was seen as appealing to those alumni who worked in the areas of business, management, economics, and public administration, as well as providing information on current events that would appeal to everyone. The fact that there was some French content was important as well. We wrestled with the question of payment, and decided for two reasons that we could not offer this as a free service to alumni: 1) it would set a precedent for future services that incurred a cost; and 2) there wasn't a dedicated budget for this service. We agreed upon a cost-sharing agreement with the alumni relations office for year one. Monies were taken from the acquisitions budget, meaning that these dollars would be used for a purpose normally intended to serve students and faculty. This raises an important philosophical and pragmatic issue regarding the clientele of the library—is it the role of the

library to spend collections money on a group that is not the primary clientele? As this was a pilot project for one database, the costs incurred didn't jeopardize our ability to meet our commitments to support the research and teaching of the faculty and students. Alumni would be charged $60 as a yearly membership fee for this service (prorated during the year). It was hoped that there would be sufficient interest for us to break even after the first year.

Setup and publicity

Our systems department provided assistance in setting up the alumni Webmaster as the account administrator for this service, to manage passwords and account questions. The alumni relations office Web site publicized the service. There was an automated checkout process that allowed alumni to buy their membership for ABI/Inform as if they were buying merchandise or gifts. We knew early on that publicity and marketing would be critical to the outcome. The alumni office advertised the new service on several occasions in their e-newsletter that was sent to 20,000 alumni. And a targeted approach to reach the School of Management alumni was made via the faculty alumni association.

The library created a new Web page describing services to alumni, and the ABI/Inform service was prominently featured with a link to the alumni office site, where registration was available. This page also explained the licensing terms of use, which clearly stated that the database was to be used for personal research only.

Outcome

The pilot lasted from July 2005 to June 2006. Despite our best efforts, there were less than 20 alumni who registered for the service. Our hopes that the service could operate on a cost-recovery basis were not realized, and we did not expect a major up-take in the following year. Also, during the year there were alumni (recent graduates) who inquired about remote access to e-journal collections and index databases in a variety of subject areas not covered by ABI/Inform.

The long tail phenomenon is applicable here—while a few digital resources would be of interest to some alumni, there would be many resources required to satisfy the vast majority of these interests. There are now many quality resources freely available on the Web. With this being the Google era, alumni expect remote access to everything and don't understand why they would be limited to one or just a few resources. Moreover, they don't know that licensing commercial information is expensive and that there are added costs for extending institutional access to alumni (when available). It is a truism that the Web has created the expectation of open and seamless access to information, but this has major consequences for how a database service is perceived by alumni.

Google has dramatically raised the visibility and profile of Web resources, while social networking software (such as MySpace, Flickr, and Connotea) has transformed the ways in which individuals share information, collaborate, and build communities of interest and new knowledge. Are universities and libraries using Web 2.0 tools like blogs and wikis to strengthen relationships with alumni?

There are many valuable licensed resources available via local public libraries and other local libraries. We didn't want to offer resources that a majority of alumni could access by virtue of being a resident of the City of Ottawa. The budget issue, service expectations, and the substantial investment of energy and resources made us reflect upon our experience in a new light. We came to the realization that alumni interests and needs were as diverse as the society in which we live; therefore, licensing one particular resource (or even two or three) would not have met this demand. It became clear that a new strategy was needed. We decided to not renew the ABI/Inform project, and the subscribing alumni were informed.

New approaches

We decided to promote quality resources that were free (such as Public Library of Science,

BioMedCentral, and HighWire Press) and our ability to provide assistance when and where it was needed, using various forms of reference service.

We also decided upon novel ways of making the library attractive to the alumni, by bringing in an antiquarian book dealer to the library during Homecoming to assess books that might be hidden "gems." We also gave sessions on the use of Google, and used this opportunity to promote the library as an important complement to Google. These events were important in reaching out to alumni in ways that were meaningful to them. Our experience has shown us that library services to alumni need to be carefully tailored, and that remote access to licensed resources may work in some universities, but was not the right fit for ours.

Conclusion

How does one measure success for a remote access service to alumni? This is an important question. It can be seen in various ways—the numbers of alumni who use the service; the growth patterns in the service; an increase in registration for the alumni association; and the number of alumni that use the physical library. Other ways of judging the value of such a service include the level of satisfaction among alumni; growing the sense of belonging or attachment to the alma mater; survey results; and the impact on fundraising. The corporate culture and history of the institution, with its unique priorities, goals, and financial resources, will also influence the outcomes.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach. The opportunities and challenges will be specific to each institution, and licensing alumni access may or may not be appropriate. The historical activities of an alumni association, and the relationships forged between the library and the alumni community over many years, will play a significant role.

It will be interesting in five or ten years to examine whether such a service is adopted by more institutions or whether it remains confined

to a small number of schools, and what factors have contributed to this evolution.

What is the value proposition of a remote database service for alumni? This is a question that each school will need to address. The fact that a minority of U.S. and Canadian schools have adopted this approach indicates that it doesn't fit every reality. All of us strive to find innovative and effective ways of reaching out to alumni, and there will be many different approaches that can help us build a sense of community. The partnerships we develop on campus will be critical in this endeavor, as we reinvent the library in the wired world of the 21st century.

Notes

1. Catherine Wells, "Alumni Access to Research Databases: The Time is Now," *College & Research Libraries News* 67, (2006): 413.

2. Jean Sykes, "Look After Your Alumni," *Library + Information Update* 1, 2 (2002): 50.

3. "Alumni Mustering Support to Save USC Library School," *Library Journal* 109, 8 (1984): 847.

4. Sykes, 51.

5. Christine Smith, "Library and Information Services for Alumni." SCONUL Newsletter 24 (2001): 40.

6. Wells, 415–16.

7. Scott Carlson, "More Colleges Move to Offer Online Library Materials to Alumni," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 52, 34 (2006): A43.

8. Carlson, A43.

9. Anthony W. Ferguson, "Back Talk—Alumni Remote Access to Online Resources," *Against the Grain* 12, 4 (2000): 86.

Another option that NSSE staff are discussing is "the feasibility and utility of a modular approach by which additional survey items, tested and robust, could be selected by institutions and/or consortia to be included with their NSSE administration. This is also a possibility for the information literacy items."[7] Perhaps the final option is to do further testing of these items by editing them somewhat and running them again as experimental items in 2008, possibly including a regression analysis of several benchmark scales with the "active learning in information literacy" scale. There may even be an opportunity to work with institutional colleagues. As Gonyea mentioned, "I'm working now with the writing-across-the-curriculum (writing program administrators), who are interested in testing some experimental items in 2008. There may be a connection to your work."[8] The project group is interested in hearing your comments.

You may also want to request that these items be included in an upcoming NSSE survey at your institution. A subgroup of community college members from the project team is currently working to identify items for possible inclusion on the Community College Survey of Student Engagement.

Notes

1. Current Project Group members are Bonnie Gratch Lindauer, chair; Lisa Janicke Hinchliffe; Kwasi Sarkodie-Mensah; Polly Boruff-Jones; Margit Watts; Scottie Cochrane; Ann Roselle; Troy Swanson; Ellen Sutton; and MaryAnn Sheble.

2. "NSSE Facts," nsse.iub.edu/html/quick_facts.cfm The NSSE Web site provides a wealth of information and reports, including "Accreditation Toolkits," which map NSSE items to specific regional accreditation standards.

3. From a February 8, 2007, e-mail with Robert Gonyea.

4. If you would like a copy of the nine tables, request them from Bonnie Gratch Lindauer, bgratch@ccsf.edu.

5. "ILT Summary" attachment to January 17, 2007, e-mail from Gonyea. This article's "Findings" section is based almost entirely on this document of his comments and observations of the nine tables.

6. February 8, 2007, e-mail with Gonyea.

7. January. 27, 2006, e-mail with Gonyea.

8. February 8, 2007, e-mail with Gonyea.