

**Selected Members of the CCL-EAR Committee Review of
24/7 Virtual Reference Product
January 2004**

During the fall 2003, selected members of the California Council of Chief Librarians, Electronic Access and Resources Committee (CCL-EAR) undertook a “hands-on” review of 24/7, a virtual reference product.

REVIEW PROCESS

Selected members of the CCL-EAR Committee, independently or in concert with other qualified professionals on their campus library staffs, reviewed and evaluated 24/7, collaborative reference service. Though other staff may have helped in the review process, completion of the form was by the CCL-EAR committee member(s) only and not transferred to others. Ratings were based upon the potential value of the proposal to the California Community Colleges as a whole and not solely on the needs of any specific campus.

Attributes of the information resources were assessed on a scale of 1 to 4 with 1 representing the “least value” and 4 representing the “most value.” The following attributes were examined:

INFORMATION DATABASE

Consider its functionality, the appropriateness of format (bibliographic/full-text), the content of the information, the adequacy of coverage (retrospective, current), and its value to the California Community Colleges as a whole.

SEARCH INTERFACE

Consider the functionality and ease of use of the interface. Is it intuitive or is an excessive amount of training required? Are any crucial features missing from the search interface?

USER SUPPORT SERVICES

If documentation is required for successful use of product, is it available, comprehensive, and well written? Is online help adequate and user friendly? Does vendor supply training if it is needed? Is a telephone help line available?

COST

If cost is available, does it seem reasonable in terms of comparable products?

ACCESSIBILITY OF SERVICE

Is access/connection to product reliable and stable? Is response time adequate?

OVERALL ASSESSMENT

- #1 ---- No Support
- #2 ---- No Support at this time. Future support conditional upon enhancements noted below in Comments Section.
- #3 ---- Support and Recommend proposal be forwarded to California Community College libraries for their acceptance or rejection.
Would like to see enhancements in product noted below in Comments Section.
- #4 ---- Outstanding offer and opportunity. Recommend proposal be forwarded to California Community College campus libraries or their acceptance or rejection.

Following are the results of the CCL-EAR Committee's review as well as comments taken from the individual Review Reply Forms.

INFORMATION DATABASE – Rating: 4, 4, 4

Rationale for rating:

This product provides reference service using the Internet to chat and co-browse and/or push web pages. Through it library reference is available 24 hours per day and 7 days per week. Trained academic reference librarians and library students provide the service. It is potentially quite valuable allowing community college libraries to offer reference assistance during the hours they are closed.

The 24/7 virtual reference service can be configured in several ways. The customized set of software tools allows live reference assistance via the Internet anytime, day or night. There is no fee for California libraries if the subscribing library signs up to cover 4 hours per week of reference assistance. Currently, there is a need for late afternoon, evening, and weekend coverage. (Per representative: libraries willing to cover the less desirable hours may have their obligation reduced to 3 hours per week. No library would be turned down if unable to cover these less desirable hours). If several or all of the California Community Colleges subscribe, the total number of reference hours would be negotiated; not every college would have to do 4 hours per week.

A second option would be for libraries to purchase the software to provide virtual reference only for their own clientele. This could be a single library, district, or consortium. (Per representative: there may be interest in splitting off a separate service exclusively for community colleges nationwide).

Unlike a proprietary database product, there is no “database” as such to rate here. However, the potential for combining the “brain power” of many librarians in the service of community college students is intriguing. For that reason alone, the content deserves a high rating.

SEARCH INTERFACE- Rating: 3,3,3

Rationale for rating:

The interface is in two parts, one for the librarian and the second for the student or user. The librarian interface requires some setup and is multifaceted. The screen is compartmentalized with various banners, windows and sidebars. It requires some training and practice to use effectively. Several options are available for notifying the librarian that a new patron has arrived as well as library groups to monitor for patrons. Librarians have the option of accepting a patron. Icons also monitor the session to notify the librarian if the patron has been disconnected from the Internet. A sidebar reports the chat session with both the librarian’s and patron’s queries and responses. Other windows allow the librarian to have saved text responses and web pages to facilitate the session. Depending on the set up and connection the librarian can chat and push pages that show on the users screen or co-browse which allows the librarian to take control of the users screen to demonstrate searches. It allows the librarian to access the users home institutions licensed databases, which is important. The user interface is more streamlined with a chat window and another to access the web. These windows can be resized. While this is an acceptable means of providing off hours reference, it remains somewhat cumbersome and slow.

Proprietary database access is possible but is dependent on each library’s configuration. Libraries using EZ Proxy can do live co-browsing; libraries using passwords can share the passwords with 24/7 on a secure site which then allows the student and librarian to log into the student’s home suite of databases. Some configurations do not allow live co-browsing but the librarian could push pages, sites, etc. to the student for later follow-up. 24/7 also has agreements with Gale and OCLC that allow participating librarians to access and share certain databases (e.g. WorldCat).

Participating libraries can customize the service with their own policies, pathfinders, FAQs, etc. At the end of a session, the patron receives a transaction log and list of links used. Session transcripts and usage statistics are available to libraries. 24/7 staff provide on-site training.

This reviewer posed as a community college student and asked factual questions of a local public library. The interface worked very well. Using a T1 connection and Explorer 5.0, the remote librarian was indeed able to “push” suggested Web pages to me. Further testing with a dial-up connection (more realistic for many students) should be undertaken.

USER SUPPORT SERVICES - Rating: 3, no rating, no rating

Rationale for rating:

Manuals are available as well as face to face and web based training. Technical support is quick to respond and very helpful at solving problems.

COST- Rating: 4, 4, 4

Rationale for rating:

The cost is minimal and may be limited to providing librarians to offer the service.

Per representative: If a college doesn't want to participate in the nationwide cooperative, the cost is \$4,000 per year to have one librarian logged in at a time from your college, for as many hours as you wish to provide service. You will only have the hours of service that you are willing to provide.

In these tight economic times, offering additional services with time instead of money is definitely attractive.

ACCESSIBILITY OF SERVICE - Rating: 4, 3, 3

Rationale for rating:

The current 24/7 service that is available to Library of California members is accessible at all times; although there may be a wait for the user if too few librarians are available to meet the need if using the current service. If the California community college libraries were to start up their own service the accessibility would have to be determined by the participants.

Another aspect of accessibility: the 24/7 software is not currently ADA compliant because of its frames configuration.

This reviewer would be willing to give the top rating if the ADA compatibility problem were resolved.

OVERALL ASSESSMENT- Rating: 4, no rating, 4

Rationale for rating:

COMMENTS: This service appears to be a viable means for California community college libraries to provide off hours reference to their students. The user interface is easy to use and the librarian interface is usable with training. The service provides excellent usage statistics.

COMMENTS: This reviewer believes forming a nationwide pool of community college libraries would be in the best interest of our students. Having coverage from every time zone is essential to making this as close to a “round the clock” service as possible.

What would your rating be if product was evaluated based on utility for your home campus only?

Rating: 4, no rating, 4

Rationale for rating:

COMMENTS: My campus makes this service available although we currently do not participate in providing reference service.

COMMENTS: My campus does not currently make this service available. However, it is an attractive option for all smaller campuses such as ours.
