Selected Members of the CCL-EAR Committee Review Of McGraw-Hill 'AccessScience' May, 2001

During Spring, 2001, selected members of the California Community College Libraries, Electronic Access to Information Resources Committee (CCL-EAR) undertook a "hands-on" study of the AccessScience database.AccessScience, from McGraw-Hill, is a value-added online version of the McGraw-Hill Encyclopedia of Science and Technology, long a standard reference work in U.S. academic libraries. The database offers the full searchable text of the Encyclopedia, supplemented by news and research developments, links to related web sites and a number of featues designed to be used in an academic setting. The database is updated daily.

Selected members of the CCL-EAR Committee, independently or in concert with other qualified professionals on their campus library staffs, reviewed and evaluated AccessScience. 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 resource 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 for 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 - 4
Rationale for rating:

In addition to the full contents of McGraw Hill's Encyclopedia of Science and Technology (8th ed) updated regularly, AccessScience offers over 115,000 dictionary terms; research updates in all areas of science and technology (updated daily); over 2,000 biographies of leading scientists throughout history, with links to the articles relevant to their work and their theories; weekly updates from "Science News" on breakthroughs in science and technology ; a "Student Center" with study guide outlines which link to "the articles you should read to study or review a topic, or to prepare for talks and papers," suggestions for essay topics, with links to the relevant articles on each topic, bibliographies and the opportunity to submit science questions for the AccessScience staff; links to related web sites; and a suggestion box for improvements or additions to the database. Content is updated daily, thus many of the original encyclopedia articles include significantly more and/or more current information than articles in the print volumes. (See, for example, the article on Eating Disorders.)

Libraries which currently find the print McGraw-Hill Encyclopedia of Science and Technology useful, will probably welcome this value-added, online version. While we might be inclined to think of this database and its print counterpart as a tool for students of chemistry, biology and physics, it's good to remember that it also includes many articles in psychiatry and psychology, mathematics, agriculture

and environmental science, and that it is also potentially useful for students in Voc Ed programs such as allied health, fire science, welding and automotive programs.

(Sample content pages can be viewed at the AccessScience website: www.accessscience.com)

SEARCH INTERFACE - 3
Rationale for rating:

A wide range of search options is available, from a quick keyword search of the entire site to full Boolean search with several limits. Under "More Search Options," searches may be limited to titles, titles and text, bibliographies, contributors, encyclopedia articles, biographies, research updates and/or news articles, as well as to any of the 20 broad disciplines referred to as "main topics" (Agriculture, Forestry and Soils; Chemistry, Mathematics, Physics, Psychiatry and Psychology, etc.). The "Browse" link on the homepage offers users the option of either browsing all content via a menu of the 20 "main topics" or of browsing only the articles, research updates or dictionary entries.

Each choice from the menu bar on the left side of the screen offers its own submenu of choices. For example the "Biographies" link leads to a page where users can either search alphabetically for a specific name, browse biographies in any of the 20 "main topics" areas, or select from lists of Nobel Prize winners and winners of the Fields Medals in Mathematics." Biography entries include links to encyclopedia articles related to the person's work.

Thanks to its interface, AccessScience is a browser's paradise. Selecting one of the 20 main topics offered in the Browse menu, leads to another page which offers links to a number of subtopics within that discipline, as well as links to biographies of notable people in the field, study guides, a historical review of the field, bibliographies and other reading materials, suggestions for essay topics, with links to relevant articles, selected questions submitted in the field, answered by AccessScience staff, news articles, and related web sites. One could lose hours "surfing" here, as easily as one does on the Web, but here you're reading substantive articles (and, of course, you also have the option of keyword searching instead of browsing).

McGraw-Hill has done its best to make most of the search options available from almost any page. For example, when viewing an article on biological carcinogens, the menu bar at the left offers its usual 12 choices, the top of the page offers two icon links (to "Further Study" and the "AccessScience Wizard") as well as a pull-down menu linking to different sections of this article, and the bottom of the page offers another 5 links to research updates, biographies, news, etc. in the field of Medicine. And, of course, there are words and phrases within the article which are hotlinked to other articles. The number of choices could actually feel overwhelming to new or infrequent users, but with some use, the user should begin to get the lay of the land and feel more comfortable.

When users search by keyword rather than browse, entries in the search results are given relevancy scores and are marked with icons indicating what type of resource they are (news update, dictionary

term, encyclopedia article, biography, etc.).

A Few Interface Problems:

The relevancy rankings assigned to search results don't always seem to be on target. For example, a search on "eating disorders" ranks the article section on "binge eating disorder" as more relevant (and therefore first on the list) than the main article on "eating disorders" which appears second in the results list.

Search results include an icon next to each item indicating what type of entry it is (dictionary term, encyclopedia article, research update, etc.). However, a complete list of these categories also appears across the top of the search results list, whether items are available in each of the categories for the topic which was searched or not. So for example, a search on "oxyacetylene welding" brings only two dictionary entries as its search results, but the list of categories across the top of the page *appears* to indicate that encyclopedia articles, research updates, biographies, etc. are available for that topic when they aren't.

Although a few articles have "see also" links to directly related articles, the "Related Topics" and "For Further Study" links offered with articles are too often to much broader topics which have no direct relation to the topic searched.

While the database contains overview articles on many popular topics (eating disorders, food irradiation, biodiversity, cryptography, electronic mail, ...), overview articles are not available for other popular topics, such as "cloning." And in quite a few cases the relevancy ranked keyword search results do not make up for the absence of a subject authority search which would have given a student a clue where his/her topic fit into the scheme of all these related articles which are listed in the search results.

USER SUPPORT SERVICES - 3
Rationale for rating:

Context sensitive Help is available by clicking the icon for the "AccessScience Wizard" from any page where it appears. Online help, when summoned, appears in a new browser window, very handy for searchers savvy enough to know how to navigate back and forth between windows while they're following the online help instructions, but potentially confusing to the uninitiated who will discover that their browser's "Back" button does not return them to their original page. (A note at the top of the screen tells users to close window to return to browsing, but doesn't tell them how.) "Presumably science students will be savvy browser users, but science students will not be the only ones using this database.

It would be very helpful if the "Help" option on the left menu bar lead to a *detailed* table of contents for the online help which is available through the AccessScience Wizard so that users would have the

option of looking directly for a specific Help topic. It took me too long to find out what wildcard character to use since neither the "Help" button in the menu bar on the left nor the "AccessScience Wizard" icon on the home page lead to this information, and the site search searches only the subject content, not the Help screens. (I finally found it by doing a search, then clicking in the search box, *then* clicking on the AccessScience Wizard. These search tips should be available from the top level page.)

Kudos to McGraw-Hill developers for including instructions for both PC and Mac platforms when needed (for example when instructing users to copy and paste a word into the dictionary box where PC users must use the Control key and Mac users the Command key to perform the copy and paste functions).

Tech support is available via e-mail, FAX, or telephone. In Pacific time zones, telephone support is available Mon - Fri , 4:00 A.M. - 10:00 P.M., and Sat - Sun, 5:00 A.M. - 5:00 P.M. With the possible exception of Sunday evenings, this should cover open hours of most California community college libraries.

COST - 3
Rationale for rating:

No consortial pricing has been negotiated at the time of this review. Regular pricing for an unlimited site license is based on FTES, ranging from $695 for institutions with under 500 FTES to $8,095 + $.36 per user over 20,000 FTES for institutions with 20,001 to 50,000 FTES. Single simultaneous user licenses are also available at $595 per user. One or more single user licenses could be a viable option for libraries which need access but do not expect heavy use of the database.

ACCESSIBILITY OF SERVICE - 4
Rationale for rating:

The database was accessible without fail, from both on- and off-campus locations. Connection seems solid and reliable.

OVERALL ASSESSMENT - 3

COMMENTS:

AccessScience combines quality content, written at a level appropriate for most community college users, with a zealously helpful search interface. It contains information useful across many disciplines in the community college curriculum, and it seems a good choice for libraries needing a general science database (though not a replacement for a science periodicals database).

Further information about AccessScience can be found at the company's website:

www.accessscience.com The database was extensively reviewed shortly after its release. (See "Booklist," Nov. 1, 2000, p. 562+, "Reference and User Services Quarterly," Winter 2000, p. 180+, "Library Journal," September 1, 2000, p. 259.)

What would your rating be if product was evaluated based on utility for your home campus only? - 4

COMMENTS: Our library already subscribes to AccessScience via several simultaneous user licenses.

Last Updated: December 4, 2001