

**Selected Members of the CCL-EAR Committee Review  
Of Expanded Academic ASAP  
Spring, 2002**

During Spring, 2002, selected members of the California Community College Libraries Electronic Access and Resources Committee (CCL-EAR) undertook a "hands-on" study of the *Expanded Academic ASAP* database. Originally developed by Information Access Company as one of its InfoTrac products, the database is now available via the InfoTrac Web service from the Gale Group.

*Expanded Academic ASAP* is a large, general interest periodicals database with a college and university focus. The database covers a wide variety of topics in the social sciences, humanities and sciences as well as general interest, news and current events. As of May 15, 2002, the database includes indexing or indexing plus abstracts for 3,074 titles. Full text or full text plus image is provided for 1,872 titles. 1,754 of the titles in the database are refereed publications. Database coverage begins in 1980, with the bulk of the full text beginning in 1990. The database is updated daily, seven days a week.

The most current list of journal titles included in the database as well as monthly updates to it can be viewed on the Gale Group's corporate website ( <http://www.galegroup.com> ) by selecting "Title Lists" in the menu at the left. In addition, the most recent counts for number of titles, full text titles and refereed publications in the database are posted there.

A product fact sheet for *Expanded Academic ASAP* is available at <http://www.galegroup.com/pdf/facts/expacad.pdf> A comprehensive FAQ about the Gale Group's general reference products, including *Expanded Academic ASAP*, is at [http://www.galegroup.com/customer\\_service/product\\_information/faq1/general\\_faq1.htm](http://www.galegroup.com/customer_service/product_information/faq1/general_faq1.htm) though it is not clear when this document was last updated.

The database was reviewed in *Library Journal*, February 1, 1999, v. 124 no.2, p. 130.

### 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 InfoTrac Expanded Academic ASAP. Assessments were submitted on a Review Reply Form specifically designed by the Committee for this purpose.

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 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 - 3, 3, 4**

Rationale for rating:

*Expanded Academic ASAP* provides high quality content--a good mix of scholarly materials (57% peer reviewed journals) with more popular level magazines. Titles range from Time, Newsweek and Psychology Today and other popular titles to much more specialized titles such as Accounting Technology, Journal of Perinatal & Neonatal Nursing and Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. Also included is indexing (but not text) for the New York Times. The range of topics is broad enough to be useful in most community college courses, even some vocational areas, though its strength, like that of most general periodical products, is in the social sciences, humanities and news and current events. Some libraries will want to supplement this general periodicals database with more specialized products in subject

disciplines which are particularly active at their campuses.

An enormous increase has been made in the full text content in *Expanded Academic ASAP* in recent years, and its full text content is on a par with that of competitors. Full text coverage is strongest starting in 1990, with fewer than 1,000 titles being full text before that date.

The database also includes a hotlinked version of the *Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary*. A student reading an article can highlight an unfamiliar word in the article, then click the "Dictionary" link in the navigation bar at the left, and the dictionary automatically searches the highlighted word and provides its definition and pronunciation, as well as date first used and in some cases etymology.

One recently added feature is a link to the database's titles list from within the database itself (a menu item in the navigation bar at the left side of the screen). The titles list pops up in separate browser window (which is a bit too small unless you resize it). The list shows dates of inclusion for each title as well as dates of full text coverage. (It would also be useful to have a separate list of \*full text\* titles available.)

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*Academic ASAP* is a full service database with broad subject and retrospective coverage. It includes both popular and scholarly magazines and journals as well as some newspapers. A note at the bottom of the search screen shows the current number of included articles and the date of the last revision of the database. It appears to be updated daily. Articles are often very current and have a back file to 1980. One difficulty I found in searching for current information is that the New York Times, which is frequently the most current source on a topic is only available as a citation. This means that the user must scroll through a number of citations to eventually reach the articles with full-text, or must reformulate the search to full-text only.

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The *Expanded Academic ASAP* database offers a balanced coverage of indexed and full- text refereed journals, magazines, newspapers archived from 1980 and covers a wide variety of disciplines including: social sciences, humanities, sciences, and technology. Full-text coverage begins more fully in 1990. The earlier indexing refers mainly to citations with some abstracts.

### **SEARCH INTERFACE - 4, 3, 3**

Rationale for rating:

*Expanded Academic ASAP* via InfoTrac Web has something for everyone, from librarian search wizards to the least sophisticated student searcher. Its interface combines tremendous power with ease of use.

Whereas some of its competitors have been in primarily the content providing business (selling print periodicals, microfilm, etc.) until recent years and then added a search engine to their content, Information Access Co., the original developers of the *Expanded Academic* databases, has been in the business of building periodicals \*databases\* for over 20 years, when they first introduced *Academic Index*, and it shows. Unlike competitors, who depend almost entirely on keyword searching or whose nod to subject indexing consists of a list of broad topics, the *Expanded Academic ASAP* database is \*extensively\* indexed. Each article is assigned between two and six subject headings from a controlled vocabulary. Subject headings are precise and specific ("global warming--causes of," "global warming--economic aspects," "global warming-- environmental aspects," "global warming--history," etc.) not broad and general ("global warming"). It is this well mapped base, along with the excellent InfoTrac search engine which forms the basis for *Expanded Academic's* very effective search interface. It accounts for two things:

1) A larger subject index - Even students recognize the problem of false hits associated with straight keyword searching. In many cases, the solution to the problem of numerous false hits is to look for search words as a "subject" rather than as simple keywords. What makes *Expanded Academic ASAP* stand out in this respect is the sheer number of words in its subject index or subject authority database. Since each article receives two to six very precise subject headings, there are many, many more words in the subject index than in the broad "topics lists" of its competitors; therefore there is a much greater likelihood that a word or phrase searched as a "subject" will actually be in the subject index and that the search will retrieve useful results. .p. 2) An extensive display of subtopics - Community college students usually need help shaping a topic when they begin their research, often beginning with a topic that is either as way too broad or way too narrow. The extensive and precise subject indexing of the *Expanded Academic ASAP* database allows for a very detailed display of subtopics. A "Subject Guide" search for "global warming" in *Expanded Academic ASAP* offers the choice of viewing all 3,388 articles in one list (similar to what you would find with a Web search engine or in *ProQuest* search results) or of narrowing the search by viewing a detailed list of subtopics. This lengthy display of subtopics often helps students narrow the focus of their search. Sure, they could have done a "Keyword" search on "global warming" and "antarctic regions" or "global warming" and "forecasts" if they'd thought of it in the first place, but in many cases all they know is that they want "something on global warming."

On the other hand, a student who knows ahead of time that s/he wants information on a very narrowly defined and multi-faceted topic or who wants a specific journal article whose title, date, and author s/he already knows, can use EA ASAP's powerful "Advanced Search" option to build a custom search for specific author(s), title(s), subject heading(s), keyword(s), journal title and so forth.

*Expanded Academic ASAP* also offers two other search modes: a simple "keyword search" and a "relevance search" which lists results in order of relevance rather than in reverse chronological order, but its strength really lies in the Subject Guide and Advanced search modes.

Other noteworthy features:

\* Integrated backfile. Users of Gale InfoTrac products can search the entire range of years in the database with one search. No need to search the backfile(s) separately.

\* If a student does a Subject Guide search for a word or phrase which turns out not to be in the subject index, *Expanded Academic* automatically performs a keyword search for the phrase, without the student ever needing to know the difference between the two kinds of searches or needing to retype the search. If the keyword search has results, it displays these results rather than simply indicating that there are no hits for the original search.

\* A Search History displays all previous searches below the current search box. (Libraries have the option of turning this feature on or off.) In the Keyword and Advanced search modes, users can easily combine previous searches with new ones by referring to the results set number of the previous search (e.g. R2 and children) to redo a previous search R2 and add the word children or R2 and R5 to combine the results of two previous searches rather than retyping both searches).

\* Hotlinked subject headings - Click on any of the subject headings listed at the bottom of an article, and *Expanded Academic ASAP* automatically performs a search on that heading.

\* InfoMarks - Each article is assigned a specific URL (an "InfoMark" in InfoTrac jargon) which allows users to incorporate this URL in a web page and have it link directly to the article. This is useful for compiling class reading lists, student reports, and library web projects which are linked directly to the articles listed on them.

\* Marked lists - Searchers may mark articles of interest, then view their marked list (i.e. create a customized bibliography on their topics) separate from the other articles. Both individual articles and entire marked lists may be e-mailed or printed, along with the full text of the articles which are full text in the database.

\* Link to holdings - Links to holdings information in a library's online catalog may be added for journal titles if desired and if the library's catalog software is recent enough to support it.

### Customization Options

For libraries who wish to have greater control over what users see and how they search the database, InfoTrac Web allows libraries to customize various screens and features through the simple InfoTrac config process. For example, for each of the four types of searches available, a library can 1) decide to allow or not allow that type of search, 2) write/edit the search prompt for that type of search (e.g. "Click in the search box and enter your search terms" ) 3) write and edit the instructions or search tips given below the search box for that type of search (e.g. "Browse a list of subjects that contain the search words you entered. Narrow your search by viewing subdivisions of your topic. "), 4) decide whether or not to display a search history on the search screen; decide how to display it and where to put it on the page. The library can also determine which search limiting options to allow (e.g. full text, refereed journals, etc.) and determine how some search limit choices will be made. For example, will users indicate their date limits in a text box ("after 1987," "1998-1999", etc.), or via checkboxes for individual years or via pull-down menus for day, month and year. True to form, InfoTrac Web offers online Help screens for the InfoTrac config process, though it's pretty self-explanatory.

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The interface is quite usable and intuitive. It has a "frames" look with the search options in the left portion of the screen and the results in the larger right portion. Search options include "help-search", dictionary, title list, subject guide, relevance search, key word and advanced searches.

There is some lack of consistency in the results from these options. The help shows a full screen. The dictionary and title list both have pop-up windows superimposed on the search screen. The subject guide, relevance, key word and advanced searches all retain the faux frames mode, which contains the search options to the left and the results in the right frame. There is good consistency in four article search modes with each right frame following the same look and similar options. Each search box indicates the meaning of the search, i.e., subject search states "Browse listing of subjects, people, products, locations and organizations that contain words you entered". Each also provides a similar set of limit options that include: articles with text, referred publications, dates, journal titles and additional words.

The default search and premium feature with ASAP is its powerful controlled vocabulary subject search. The relevancy, key word and advanced search methods are relatively standard. Students will need to understand the differences among the various searches and may need to try different ones. For topics with a number of hits, the user is offered the choice to "narrow" which then lists the subdivisions for the topic. It also employs cross-references so a subject search for "ozone hole" shows the correct subject " ozone layer depletion" with a link.

In my sample searching for the very current topic (at the time) of the Jenin Refugee Camp violence, my search for "jenin" retrieved two subjects, a personal name and "Jenin, West Bank" 6 results. Searches for "Jenin Refugee" and "Jenin Refugee Camp" both retrieved five results. A search for "Jenin Refugee Camp violence" retrieved the same results as a search for "Jenin". A relevance search for "Jenin Refugee Camp Violence" retrieved 200 articles, all of which truly appeared to be relevant. A key word search for "jenin refugee camp violence" retrieved no results. The default for this type of search is to find words within 2 spaces of each other. Understandably "jenin refugee camp AND violence" did retrieve a good number of hits (42).

This illustrates some of the advantages and disadvantages of this interface. Its structured subject indexing can be very helpful for experienced and knowledgeable searchers. The number of options for searching almost requires that users be well-trained searchers. The search history, displayed at the bottom of the screen, lists in reverse chronological order all the searches done in a session. It includes the type of search, the number of results, the actual search terms and gives an

opportunity to modify the search. I found it interesting to learn that the relevance search for "jenin refugee camp violence" actually searched the following terms: jenin refugee camp violence, jenin, refugee, camp, violence, refugees, camping, camps.

Retrieved lists are comprised of citations that include the article title, publication title, date, volume, page, etc. with the number of words and an option to view. The user may select (mark) all items or specific ones from the lists. Once an article is retrieved the left "frame" changes to show the appropriate options, which include print, e-mail or retrieval, link and view marked list. One disappointment after retrieving a citation was the intrinsic expectation given by the mouse over, "reformat article and print in one click" that the entire article would magically be printed, which was not the case. This is somewhat mitigated for those who scroll to the bottom of the screen. They will find more detailed information on printing and e-mailing the citation or article.

A nice feature of the system is the "InfoMark" which allows a user to bookmark a particular article or set of articles for a bibliography or electronic reserves page of links for a class.

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The search interface is easy to use and the online help screens are very visible on the menu bar and furnish explanations of search strategies and search limit options among other topics.

Search strategies are clearly marked and allow users to search by subject, relevance, key word, and advanced search. The option to view all of the articles or to narrow by subdivision is especially helpful to novice users researching for papers. It is very helpful to have the notice that a user can view other articles linked to the subject as cross- references at the bottom of the screen.

The web interface is very easy to use and has been refined over the years to limit the searches by full-text articles, refereed articles, date, and journal title. Most students seem to find the interface intuitive and little training is required for the basic searches. This is a great advantage for the remote user and for students enrolled in the distance learning courses.

The advanced searching needs more instruction from the library reference staff for the less experience users. The "sorry" message is not very helpful as it is difficult to sort out, of all the possible mistakes made by the user, the particular one that needs to be addressed.

Citations and article displays are easy to understand and navigate and the help screens are very useful in dealing with the search results. The database clearly identifies which resources are available in abstract or full-text. Choices of e-mailing, printing or downloading are available depending upon the libraries' policy.

In order to better evaluate the database, our group searched ten topics that we felt were representative of the needs of our users. These were: campaign finance reform, terrorism and racial profiling, global warming, Windows XP, the Great Depression, kids in prison, Sula, by Toni Morrison, black holes, dropout rates for minority students, and George Bush's support for the Kyoto Treaty.

As one would expect from viewing the topics, there were various degrees of difficulty in trying to find material for a possible short paper such as a student might do.

Most of the topics were rather straightforward and were easily dealt with using the choice of searching by subject. One either found lots of citations under subject or InfoTrac went immediately to keyword and brought up a lot of citations. When one limited the articles by full text and/ or refereed journals, one still found enough material for a student paper.

For the three more difficult topics using the keyword function and looking at the related citations at the bottom of the

screen was the most successful method.

1. Kids in prison or trying teenagers as adults. There are really two topics here and a reference librarian would need to help the student decide which of the two topics was of the most interest.
2. Dropout rates for minority students was another topic was easier to search by keyword and related articles.
3. Bush and the Kyoto Treaty was the other topic that lent itself to keyword searching.

Users who were practiced on *Academic ASAP* and who had had some success in searching and had learned more about synonyms, relevant terms, and keywords would have found a great deal of relevant full text and referred journal articles to complete successful papers on all ten topics using this large aggregator. Other users would probably need more reference instruction to successfully complete the assignment.

## **USER SUPPORT SERVICES - 4, 2, 4**

Rationale for rating:

### User Support

Online Help is excellent. Context sensitive help provides links to instructions on whichever step a user is currently engaged in. In addition, a link to the Help Index leads to a list of Help topics ranging from how to look up a word in the dictionary to how to use various search techniques such as wildcard, nesting, date ranges, etc. in an advanced search. An "Introduction to InfoTrac Web," first item on the Help Index, offers a concise and clear overview for beginning users.

### Customer Support

Gale support staff are pleasant and helpful, and respond promptly. Tech support is available 24/7 via the Technical Support Inquiries webform ( [http://www.galegroup.com/customer\\_service/contact/technical.htm](http://www.galegroup.com/customer_service/contact/technical.htm) ), by phone, FAX or e-mail. Search assistance and content support are available by webform ( [http://www.galegroup.com/customer\\_service/contact/search.htm](http://www.galegroup.com/customer_service/contact/search.htm) ), e-mail or phone from 5:00 A.M. - 4:00 P.M. Pacific Time. Extended hours for search assistance would be useful for libraries on the West Coast, though this is not critical since the search interface is so easy to use.

The Gale Group's corporate website ( <http://www.galegroup.com> ) is clear, well organized and easy to navigate, so it is easy to find information there. A detailed FAQ ( [http://www.galegroup.com/customer\\_service/product\\_information/faq1/general\\_faq1.htm](http://www.galegroup.com/customer_service/product_information/faq1/general_faq1.htm) ) gives definitions (e.g. What does Gale mean by "refereed?") and explanations about Gale's indexing practices and updating schedules, though it's not clear how long ago the FAQ was written.

The Customer Service and Education section of the site ( [http://www.galegroup.com/customer\\_service](http://www.galegroup.com/customer_service) ) offers instructional modules which might be adapted by libraries, as well as a search tips sheet and several sample searches. The Technical Information Center ( [http://www.galegroup.com/customer\\_service/technical\\_information.htm](http://www.galegroup.com/customer_service/technical_information.htm) ) provides user manuals and guides for InfoTrac Web and its InfoTrac config setup, technical bulletins, information on how to join Gale product listservs, and various Web FAQs (How to get usage reports, general troubleshooting tips, troubleshooting tips for the Netscape and Internet Explorer browsers, etc.). The Content section offers access to journal titles lists for the various Gale Group products and to monthly title change updates. The most recent counts of titles and full text available in each Gale Group database will also be found here. (There are also a number of free resources on the corporate website such as biographies of famous women, Black and Hispanic Americans, and poets, drawn from various Gale products. Although this information is not part of *Expanded Academic ASAP*, it would be handy if it could be accessed from within InfoTrac since most users would never know to go to the corporate site for it.)

There are help screen links in the left frame that are somewhat context sensitive. One frustration was the lack of a link on each screen to the help index. Users must first go to the more contextual help before they are presented with a link to the help index.

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*Academic ASAP* has excellent user support service. Its customer service and technical support are very courteous and respond quickly to telephone and e-mail inquiries. These services are available 24/7. The online help is clearly written and organized and the help screens are of above average quality. These services seem to be directed toward librarians, as they are not easily found from the online screens.

### **COST - 3, 2, 3**

Rationale for rating:

Cost is slightly higher than for some other general reference products, presumably due to the cost of the extensive indexing which makes the database so effective. Individual libraries should test all general periodicals databases during consortium trial periods and determine which features are of highest priority in their libraries. To some, the combined power and ease of use of the InfoTrac Web search interface, combined with its high quality content will justify the cost. "Bang for your buck" means more than just how much full text is in a database.

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It is difficult to ascertain the relative content of the various aggregated general research/full text databases because each aggregator includes different titles, with various access limitations including beginning of indexing and content, type of content available (citation, text, graphics or pdf), and "blackout" periods that limit current availability of content online. The cost of Academic Index ASAP is somewhat higher than comparable aggregated databases but may be justified by the content and controlled vocabulary subject access.

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The availability of full-text journals, magazines, and newspapers from remote access for our community college students cannot be over rated. These large aggregators have added a new dimension to library research. The cost is well worth it and it predicated on the number of students at the college.

### **ACCESSIBILITY OF SERVICE - 3, 4, 4**

Rationale for rating:

The InfoTrac databases are available 24/7. Planned maintenance is announced in advance via the customer listserv, and complete downtime is rare. Service is occasionally slow in the afternoon, though it is unclear whether the problem lies with Gale or elsewhere on the Net.

Gale's InfoTrac Web offers its own Remote Patron Authentication Service for libraries which wish to take advantage of it.

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The database was available at every attempt at use and had very usable interactivity speeds both on the campus wide network and from the home modem.

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Access is reliable and stable, with quick response time.

### **OVERALL ASSESSMENT - 4, 4, 3**

#### **COMMENTS:**

Students will generally find \*something\* on their topics in any database. The question is "What support does the database provide to \*guide\* them to relevant, high quality materials?" Are they able, despite skill level, to find high quality information in reputable journals easily or do they have to wade through a bunch of irrelevant or fluffy material to find a few good articles or worse yet, do they just settle for something that doesn't really answer their questions? What assistance does the database give them in understanding the scope of a topic and in focusing their research?

Of the many general periodicals databases I've explored, *Expanded Academic ASAP* does the best job of combining high quality general interest content appropriate for a community college level audience, plenty of full text, and an interface that is easily understood and provides powerful search tools at both the novice and advanced user level.

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This is a full-featured aggregated general periodical database. The subject access is particularly useful in the library environment where it is used in online public catalogs and is often taught to students as the premier information access method. This product certainly should be considered by most community college libraries.

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A community college library serving a diverse population needs a large periodical database with full-text that is accessible to the majority of its students; *Academic ASAP* fulfills this need and supplies access to journals and magazines that might strain the budget of many college libraries.

### **What would your rating be if product was evaluated based on utility for your home campus only? - 4, 3, 4**

**COMMENTS:** Due to its superior indexing structure and search interface, *Expanded Academic ASAP* is our database of first resort. It is the one librarians start students in for most periodical searches, it is the one faculty tell their students to go over to the library and use, and it is the one students are delighted to discover after they've been fumbling around with Web search engines or with our other large general periodicals database whose subject indexing is so inadequate and whose search interface is so frustrating that even the students complain about it. Throughout the earlier years when their level of full text did not meet that of other vendors, our library stuck with InfoTrac's *Expanded Academic* databases simply because the indexing structure and the InfoTrac search engine made it so much more likely that our students would find the information they needed.

Features of *Expanded Academic ASAP* via InfoTrac Web which our students find particularly useful are: 1) first and foremost, the hierarchical display of subtopics under a main topic (i.e. actual topic subdivisions which show them the structure of the topic, not simply see also references to topics which are related), which helps them focus their thoughts about the topic 2) the clear and easily understand search interface, 3) the ability to limit searches to refereed journals, and 4) full text articles in a supply adequate to meet their needs.

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This is a very usable general information database and the controlled vocabulary subject access is attractive. Our students are much more comfortable using key word searching and the additional cost would probably preclude our moving to this

product.

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We have used *Academic ASAP* since before its transition to Gale from Infotrac. We have always found it extraordinarily useful helpful and cost efficient. This is an assessment shared by our librarians, students, and the faculty on our campus.

Last Updated: June 3, 2002