

**CCL-EAR Committee Review
Of OCLC 'FirstSearch'
October, 2000**

The California Community College Libraries, Electronic Access to Information Resources Committee (CCL-EAR) undertook a two-week "hands-on" study of OCLC 'FirstSearch', a menu-driven online reference service designed for novice use.

The OCLC FirstSearch service offers online access, through the Internet, to bibliographic records and library holdings from OCLC WorldCat, electronic journals from 'Electronic Collections Online', and access to over 75 databases on a pay-per-search or subscription (fixed fee for unlimited use) basis. Certain databases are available only through subscription pricing. Databases include familiar names from leading information providers as well as resources provided exclusively by OCLC. Some of these databases, mentioned in a recent survey of databases that CCC libraries would like to see offered by the CCL-EAR consortium, include PsycINFO, Ethnic NewsWatch and, CINAHL. Others of importance to CCC libraries are Health Reference Center, Facts on File, DataTimes, WorldCat, GPO Monthly Catalog, FactSearch, Wilson Select and, Select Plus, Books in Print, The World Almanac, ABI/INFORM and, OCLC NetFirst.

Each CCL-EAR committee member independently, or in concert with other qualified professionals on their campus library staff, reviewed and evaluated OCLC FirstSearch. 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 only and not transferred to another. 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: (3, 4, 4, 4, 4)

FirstSearch offers an amazing number of databases covering a wide variety of topics. It represents the "supermarket" concept of providing one interface for many products. The breadth of its coverage is a strength. However, its strength is also a weakness, in that it can be very confusing to navigate through the maze of databases to find relevant information. The vendor has attempted to address this need with special search features that help the user develop a search strategy, but many students will not be able to use these databases to their full capability. Level of information stretches from consumer-type information to scholarly. Many of the databases are citation or abstract only, not full-text, a negative

for our "want-it-now" clientele; and it is not obvious from the initial screen which databases have full-text and which do not. However, FirstSearch includes databases not available elsewhere, e.g. OCLC NetFirst, which provides access to high-quality websites.

Content for search on the topic of acid rain provided results from 11 databases, including 6 full-text databases. In further refining the search results by selecting three full-text databases, Periodical Abstracts (712), ArticleFirst (527), and WilsonSelectPlus (67), 1306 records were retrieved. Coverage was adequate and included both retrospective and current content. Although the coverage consisted of articles primarily focusing on the United States, some articles focused on Europe and individual countries in Europe, UK, Canada, China, Japan and Poland. The content includes articles from many popular, professional and technical journals, e.g., Nature, Ecology, Environmental Pollution, Geographical, Environmental Science and Technology, Journal of the Japan Society of Color Material, Conference record of the IEEE International Symposium on Electrical Insulation and newspapers like U.S.A.Today, Wall Street Journal, and New York Times. If OCLC FirstSearch Electronic Collections Online (ECO) stopped offering ECO, their full-text electronic journals with original content and images of articles in the journals cover to cover, each library would keep the journals to which they subscribe. By clicking on 'I' button for each database, a description is provided with a section on why select the database, database details (subjects, sources, # of records, dates covered, updated, and producer information, including address, hours, phones, fax, Web URL and e-mail, and copyright). All of these descriptions include Help Topics, News, Find Help Topics, and glossary. Periodical Abstracts (PersAbs) includes over 2,040 titles on business, current affairs, economics, literature, psychology, religion and women's studies, with a list of all of the titles and 1000 full-text titles from 1987 to the present. The database is updated weekly. The list of titles includes the ISSN, citation starts, citation ends, full-text start and full-text end. The beginning date of the citation Articles First includes over 12,000 sources from 1990 to present and is updated daily. WilsonSelectPlus has 1300 sources from 1994 to present and is updated weekly. You do not have to go to the vendor's web site to view the source list for the above databases. Selecting World Book Encyclopedia from the menu at the topic of the page of related articles includes the following 10 entries: acid rain, air pollution, ecology, energy supply, forest, hazardous wastes, nitric acid, oxide, rain, and sulphur. The source materials are appropriate for a wide variety of community college students because they include articles for all reading levels as well as in-depth coverage of topics in, ASCII text, HTML, and PDF full-text formats. In addition to English, records are available in Spanish, and French. For OCLC database Periodical Abstracts, subject specialists select titles, and WilsonSelectPlus, selects periodicals by subscriber vote, subject specialists, and ALA's Reference and User Services. I like the glossaries for Medline, PsycINFO, ABI-Inform, and WilsonSelectPlus.

This is really a great database. Since its introduction in 1991, FirstSearch has continued to expand its offerings and improve the access exponentially. The databases and the library holdings are integrated and displayed at the very beginning and students can easily find items within the electronic databases or from the library shelves. Many of our community college students will need time and detailed help to make the most valuable use of this resource. It is so extensive that students could get hung up in having to make reasonable choices that are the most useful to their needs.

FirstSearch has it all. It's one stop shopping for databases. FirstSearch incorporates many different databases, covering all topics, in formats from bibliographic records to full-text articles. The information is definitely geared towards college students and researchers. A benefit of First Search is that it can bring together many different subject-databases under one cohesive search interface.

FirstSearch has both bibliographic and full-text information from over 80 databases covering a wide range of subjects. Full-text articles are integrated very nicely into the databases. For example, many of the databases only offer abstracts on their own (PsycINFO, Sociological Abstracts, Reader's Guide Abstracts etc.). But, if the full-text for a citation is available in another database, you can easily link to that text with the click of your mouse. You can also see which libraries have the item you want.

SEARCH INTERFACE: (4, 3, 4, 3, 3)

FirstSearch has an extremely powerful and adaptable search interface. I loved its flexibility. Search options range from basic to complex to truly expert modes. It offers very sophisticated search options, such as true Boolean searching, proximity searching, phrase searches, truncation and wildcards, browsing indexes, thesauri (in some databases), limits, and sort options. There are also language options for Spanish and French screens, and a no-frames version of the screen. OCLC has added several features to help the user develop a search strategy. The "Suggest Best" option lets the user input a search term, and the system will return a list of databases with the number of hits for that subject. The user can then click on the link to institute a search in that database. The "Find Related" buttons were also useful in searching across databases. These links are very easy and intuitive for the novice searcher to use. Links to ILL functions are available in some databases.

The Search Interface is clear, with simple, uncluttered, and visually appealing design an layout. It is fairly easy to follow but may be too complex for some students (e.g., computer novices and ESL students). The navigational links are excellent, and include Top of Page, Home, and graphics, in different colors and icons. The number of clicks is appropriate to functions, and retrieval options of print, e-mail and save all have separate buttons. The screens do not include product advertising, except with information and links to the database vendors. There are recommended browsers and plugins/viewers that include Internet Explorer 4.0 or higher, Netscape Navigator 4.0 or higher and text-only access. Essentially you are using OCLC FirstSearch interface to search different content from different databases. You can customize and reset the defaults search type, (i.e, basic, advanced or expert). Java applets are used, and there are directions to enable JavaScript. There are three different levels or search types available: Basic, Expert and Advanced. You search by keyword. Natural language queries are not included. Full Boolean is available in the Advanced Search. In the Expert Search you can use + for plurals, * for truncation, # for wildcard character and adjacent terms (proximity). It is possible to limit the search by year, author, and titles in your library, sort by author, date, source and title, expand by selecting + sign to display terms ranked by frequency or select a specific term to find all records containing that term. In advanced search you may select keyword, issue, author, author affiliation, abstract, identifier, identifier phrase, language and select all publishers collection, all subject collection, year with format XXXX-XXXX, and limit to full-text and holdings in your library. You can see subject headings only if the database vendor includes them. Table of

Contents in Articles First may not have subject verification. Subject authority is available for ABI Inform, Medline, PsycINFO and all OCLC databases. You can specify the order, and the results are listed by relevance or date. You can expand and limit search results. You can search PsycINFO backfiles separately, but soon all of the backfiles will be integrated into one PsycINFO database. If you use OCLC to catalog, then all of your holdings will appear in First Search.

The search interface is more than adequate. One can do a simple or advanced search with very clear information and guidelines. The initial screen has very clear directions with many options that the students will find very easy to follow. I do, though, suggest that novice users be given lots of help to make the best use of all the possible features. The help screens are quite complete and FirstSearch is trying to be as user friendly as possible.

Overall, the interface is easy to use. One giant benefit is the single search interface for all the different databases included in FirstSearch. The search screens are easy to use and the layout is good. One nice feature on the expert search screen was the explanation of Boolean, wildcards, and truncation. It would be a benefit if those explanations were added to the advanced search screen too. The entire search process can be a bit complex and cumbersome with an excessive amount of steps involved. From the main FirstSearch screen one chooses a database or topic and search terms. Then one is brought to the "list databases by topic" screen with each database and number of results listed. One then chooses a database from the list and is taken to the "basic search" screen. Next comes the "list of results" screen, then a detailed record. From the detailed record there is a link to the full-text of the article. Six steps are a bit much to go through to get to a full-text article. There are some cumbersome aspects to the interface. One is the use of the "return" button, which functions as a "back" button. It is present from the search screen to the detailed record screen. However, it disappears on the detailed record screen. So, the only way to get back to the previous screens is to use the links on the left-hand side of the page.

The search screen is very basic and clean and can be viewed in English, Spanish or French. The search box appears in the middle of the screen and there is a navigation menu on the left. There are three types of searches available: basic, advanced and expert. Boolean searching is supported although it's not obvious when you're in the basic search mode. Students may have a difficult time choosing a database with so many options available, but FirstSearch does offer some help. You can select the "suggest best" link to see which databases are best for a given topic. You can also search up to three databases at one time. There are many options for limiting your search results and there's also an option for expanding your results if you don't find enough information. There is no limit option on the basic search screen, but you can limit after you've performed your search. The advanced and expert search screens allow you to limit at the beginning of your search. In the advanced and expert searches, you can browse an index of descriptors, subjects, keywords, authors and more. The browse index screen will show you how many times your word or phrase appears in the database you're searching. In order to use the three different types of searches available a novice would need to use the help button to learn about the specific search techniques. Directions for the different type of searches given under the help button are clear and easy to follow. In order to start a new search it takes a bit of looking to figure out that you need to click back on the searching button to start a new search. The expand and limit button provide excellent help when working through a search. The options given under the limit

button, i.e., subject headings, year, are clear and easy to use. The same is true for the expand button. The Control Panel provides the patron with relevant information about the subject being searched. Seeing what is being searched for and how it is being searched can help the patron to further define the search.

USER SUPPORT SERVICES: (3, 4, 4, 2, 3)

FirstSearch has excellent help screens that are easy to use, but very comprehensive. The pop-up help screens are numerous and informative. Help is context-sensitive, but one can also search for other topics from any help screen.

Online help is available. Online help is context-sensitive, directly related to the task you are trying to perform. It is easy to locate. Instructions are clear and easy to follow and include examples. Help opens in a separate browser window. There are educational materials with searching tips, a section on how to create effective searches, a guided tour, and an overview. There is an FAQ, documentation and support. The amount of help is excellent and there is both a glossary for OCLC technical terminology. All of the contact information is available for database publisher and it is easily located. Toll-free help is available to professional staff, but not to end users. I was able to get immediate help from the help desk and additional help from Technical services. E-mail support is available. I do not know what the response time is for e-mail help. Staff training is available. Statistical reports are provided on a monthly basis and the reports include the number of logins for each database. You have separate logins for faculty. Trainers are available to train professional staff who are responsible for bibliographic instruction for students, faculty and staff.

The support services are outstanding. With e-mail and phone available and the clear explanations on support pages, one should be able to reach a real person with answers to those vexing questions that can frustrate students and librarians alike. There is even Saturday support by telephone for hardware questions.

One feature that I did like on the help screens was the keyboard commands for common browser functions, like print, forward, back, etc. I had a hard time locating technical support information. What I did find was under "Comments". In "Comments" users are given two tech support options. First, contact your local reference department for help. Second, for library staff, to contact your OCLC-affiliated representative or to email tech support. There is no telephone support for FirstSearch.

The context-sensitive online help appears in a pop-up window which you can move or resize. The help instructions are clear and it's easy to navigate through the menus. Database specific examples are also provided. There is a link on the navigation menu to send comments to the company. I found an 800 number on the company website, but I didn't find one in the FirstSearch database. The help screens and the Using OCLC FirstSearch screen would provide a patron with excellent instruction on how to use the database. First time users will need additional help from the staff. The navigational bar on the left side of the screen could be friendlier. For example there could be a button for new search, or a back

button.

COST: (3, 2,)

Unable to evaluate at this point because cost data for community colleges was not available. Subscribers should carefully consider the overall provision of databases, and determine if a consistent interface is cost effective. They should also evaluate the flat-fee vs. per use fee options.

This will be a critical issue!

It is expensive but the product is a very good one that could be recommended to most libraries. One would have to carefully choose the most cost-effective parameters for each individual campus.

I had some technical issues opening the pricing document. But, from what information I could read pricing was expensive, yet reasonable. One pays more for the value-added by OCLC of aggregating many disparate databases under one umbrella product.

ACCESSIBILITY OF SERVICE: (4, 4, 4, 3, 3)

Access was reliable, stable and quick from library terminals. It was also good from my slower home computer. Response time was good in all cases. I had no error messages or connection problems or technical difficulties.

I had no trouble connecting and the response time was find for different times of days and weekends both over the network and modem. According to Sam at the Help Desk, the server is occasionally down. I did not encounter JavaScript problems. Libraries use the public web.

Access was easy and reliable and we never had a problem logging on or connecting. Response time was excellent.

I had no problems accessing or connecting to FirstSearch on various PC's at different times of day. The response time was always adequate and many times faster than many other databases we subscribe to. FirstSearch was stable using both Netscape and Internet Explorer.

Generally, FirstSearch was reliable, stable and quick during the review period. There were certain help topics that I couldn't access. When I tried to link to the help topic, I got a message that said "Service Temporarily Unavailable."

OVERALL ASSESSMENT: (3, 2, 4, 3, 3)

FirstSearch has an excellent search interface that is powerful, flexible and easy to use. Its broad subject

coverage is a strength that is also a weakness in that it can be difficult to develop an effective search strategy for a beginning user. Too many of the databases are citation only, not full-text, and it can be confusing (or frustrating) to the user who is looking for full-text. However, it does provide a common interface and a wealth of subject material that could be very attractive to many community college libraries.

Everything would depend upon pricing which I do not know at this time and I imagine may vary for each library. I've searched FirstSearch over the last five years and find the new and improved database to be outstanding. I agree with Mick O'Leary's comments in 'FirstSearch Revitalizes Supermarket Concept,' Information Today September 2000. O'Leary states, "The new FirstSearch unites the virtues of the classic online database collection with powerful connectivity of hypertext. The result is a powerful, disciplined information tool that surmounts the old, online limitations and chaos of the Web. The new FirstSearch is a supermarket service for the Web age." I have used Wilson databases and find them extremely helpful for general science and business topics. It would be interesting to compare price for FirstSearch with individual database prices for Wilson and other databases. There are certain advantages to having a one interface for community college students and Z39.50 capability. While searching is simpler there more complex search feature and refinements offered by each database may be lost.

If the price is right for the campus budget, this is a great offer that we should support. It is well conceived and has been thoughtfully improved over the years.

FirstSearch is a robust product with a good search interface. Barring local budgetary considerations, FirstSearch would be a welcome addition to an electronic information collection.

FirstSearch looks like a great product for community college libraries. I really like the variety of databases offered. I don't have any pricing information so I'm not sure if it is a product that is affordable for a community college.

Rating for home campus only: (2, 4, 3, 3)

At this point I would probably not purchase this database for my home campus-too much citation/abstract and not enough unique full-text. I have not seen a demonstrated need for additional scholarly material that might be available through FirstSearch.

This is definitely a competitive product. Budget would be the major constraint. We would need to help our faculty.

We subscribe individually to several of the databases included in FirstSearch. FirstSearch would allow us to aggregate several databases together. Our decision to subscribe to FirstSearch will come down to its cost effectiveness as compared to individually subscribing to databases.

We just started receiving per-search access to FirstSearch through a local consortium. We are going to use it as a librarian-moderated back up to our other databases. We don't have access to all of the databases offered so I'll be interested to see how much it will cost.

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