

**Selected Members of the CCL-EAR Committee Review
Of Research Library
Spring, 2002**

During Spring, 2002, selected members of the California Community College Libraries Electronic and Resources Committee (CCL-EAR) undertook a "hands-on" study of Research Library database.

ProQuest's Research Library is a general subject research database that provides abstracts and indexing for over 2,500 titles from 1989-current and full text of over 1,700 titles from 1992– current. It is a good bargain, although not as strong in date coverage and scholarly peer- reviewed journals as some of its rivals.

Proquest 5.1 (ProQuest's online information service) was reviewed in *Library Journal*, 3/15/2002, Vol. 127 no.4, p120

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 Research Library. 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, 3

As a general-purpose, largely full-text database, ProQuest will deliver for a community college campus. It is VERY general, however. Each campus must decide what other database products will complete the "product mix" necessary for its students' needs. For example, the poor coverage of health topics in Research Library requires supplementation from Gale's Health & Wellness Reference Center. We also use digested services such as Congressional Quarterly and FACTS.com, which help less-sophisticated users who are put off by ProQuest.

ProQuest Research Library is a comprehensive database comprised of both general and scholarly sources. It provides indexing, full-text and graphics on a broad range of topics. The interface is fairly intuitive and easy to use. Subject coverage is good with an adequate back file for most publications. ProQuest indicates that this database contains over 2670 publications with some indexing as far back as 1970. Abstracts begin in 1971 with 1277 titles available in abstract form prior to 1990. The majority of the full text is post 1990 with only 9 titles available prior to that date. One benefit of ProQuest is that the subscriber is able to customize to some extent, adding a variety of components to enhance the subject breadth and depth as well as a newspaper component with an exceptionally deep back file. These add on's are at additional cost.

It is difficult to evaluate a large aggregated database title by title against a similar product. One can do a tedious, time-consuming mathematical comparison and/or one can do an intuitive appraisal when you know your own student base and have spent hours exploring the strengths and weaknesses of the trial database. Intuitively speaking, I think Research Library is certainly adequate as a general-purpose database for most community colleges. It will almost certainly need to be supplemented for more subject specific information tailored to each individual campus' needs. It is important to check availability and coverage on individual titles that you consider essential from past experience.

Although the marketing literature states that full-text is available from 1992 to current, many of the full text titles were

added during the late 1990s, so the coverage is actually only for a few years. Information prior to 1986 is almost exclusively supplied by the Wall Street Journal (I couldn't find another source for early articles).

Many of the current articles have images imbedded in the article. The images can be enlarged by 200-400%. Many full image articles are displayed using PDF format. The articles that I opened in PDF format were high contrast black and white, and thus easy to read - but the photos varied in quality, some being barely decipherable. It took me awhile to figure out that the page control buttons are used for moving between pages in the article. There is an "enlarge image" link that opens the article on a page with the thumbnail and bookmark reduced in size and other display options and functions hidden.

Research Library has some "bells and whistles" in the form of IntelliDocs, CrossLinks, ProQuest SiteBuilder and Durable Links, and the ability to link MARC records. I consider most of these features to be somewhat esoteric, that is, I would never have time to figure them out or use them, and I doubt if even full-time instructors would use them without extensive coaching. Other databases have the "bells and whistles" (such as a dictionary, an image collection, company directory, translator, etc.) fully visible and available for student use from every search screen.

I feel that the simplicity of Research Library's clean, uncluttered look, while being visually pleasing, is actually a negative, as too many choices and possibilities (such as the thesaurus) are hidden from the user.

Search Interface: 3, 2, 2

The search screen is clear and uncluttered with a top banner, containing five buttons each listing a variety of options. The "Collections" button links to a page where the user may select from all the accessible databases and modules. There is some variation in how this page displays. In Internet Explorer the broad categories with subsets are compressed and the user must click the "plus or minus button" to expand or condense the list. In Netscape such lists are always expanded. This page also links to a title list, including full text availability, of each database or module. "Search Methods" is the second button on the banner and using a mouse-over, lists the types of searches available. The "Topic Finder" links to a subject category tree that begins with 10 broad categories and through a limiting process leads the user to a list of specific articles. "Browse Lists" provides four subject lists (Personal names, Locations and Places, Companies, and Subjects) that can be browsed or searched. Each subject list selection links directly to a list of articles. The "Results" button allows the user to return to marked lists, the last search or recent searches. The "Search Guide" opens a new window with general information and links to assist the searcher. There is also a context sensitive "?help" link in the upper right corner of the screen. ?Help is much more detailed and useful than the Search Guide and deserves greater prominence. Probably the two should be combined. A text version is available with the option to remove any articles with images and display text-only articles. This text version contains the same information as the graphical version with two additions Accessibility Help and a Site Map. Substantial effort has been made to clarify the interface using explanatory text and mouse-overs.

The Search Guide is displayed on a new window and provides a great deal of basic information. It describes the truncation and wildcard characters that may be used and provides links to additional description information on Boolean Operators, the ProQuest Thesaurus, Classification Codes, Stop Words, Basic & Other Search Fields, Article Types and Dates. ?help is a link to context sensitive help. It includes options to search help, with links to the Contents, Index and the Glossary. The default screen assists the user in how to search. There are also links to the Quick Print Guides that can be used as training handouts. The Training Resource Center provides valuable information for users and librarians. It provides an additional access to search information as well as help with ProQuest in Spanish and information on using SiteBuilder, a service that allows faculty to create dynamic links to articles for their students.

Technical support is excellent! The staff is well trained and very competent. They have always been prompt to respond to questions and are able to provide answers and solutions in a timely manner.

Research Library uses the same interface as other ProQuest products. All products that a library subscribes to from ProQuest are integrated under this interface. In order to search just Research Library the user must first go to the Collections Button at the top of the screen and make that choice. This will not be an obvious step for the new user. Once "the collection" is chosen the user can choose among the following types of searches: Topic Finder, Browse Lists, as well as Search Methods which has basic, advanced, guided, publisher and natural language search options.

The Topic Finder button is a useful way to browse through general subjects. If the user doesn't have a clear idea of their topic then Topic Finder could be useful. With a broad topic in mind the user could get down to the specific topic or leaf that would get them to a list of articles on that topic. Topic Finder is less successful as a search tool. The difficulty arises when working through the "topic trees" looking for the "leaves" that lead you to the subject you are interested in. Global warming can be an example. There was a lot of trial and error in picking the path to follow to arrive at the leaf that had to do with global warming. For a new user this could be very difficult. That doesn't mean that the result list isn't valid once you get it, it just means that the process is cumbersome.

The ProQuest help "Topic Finder and Browse Lists both provide a method for finding articles by browsing subjects and selecting subject terms from the ProQuest thesaurus." Because of this statement I thought that when using the same terms in Topic Finder and Browse Lists would yield the same results list. So I used the subject of AIDS with Topic Browse and then with Browse List. The results lists were very different. Under the Browse List I found some articles that had to do with personal grooming aids while the results from the Topic List was much more relevant.

The Search Methods button has five different searching choices. The basic search allows you to enter a word, words or a phrase and limit your search by date range (current, backfile and deep backfile), publication type, and whether you want to search within the full-text of the article or just in the citations and abstracts. The Date range option is very cumbersome. The idea of the user having to identify a specific time period is awkward because it presupposes that the user knows what time period that they want to search. If they have made the wrong decision about the date range then they have to go through more than one search. Another glitch is that the date range choice the user makes from the Basic search screen "migrates" into the other search types. There needs to be a fourth option in the date range that allows the user to use all of the time periods in one search.

The words "advanced" search can be intimidating to a new user. The advanced search looks exactly like the basic search except that there is an area at the bottom of the screens with a mish-mash of expanders and limiters, and a thesaurus that serves as a kind of subject index. The thesaurus is not searchable, rather you have to take the "related" or "use instead" term and enter it into your advanced search. I found the thesaurus an interesting option. The thesaurus provides the user with other subjects that are related to the search term. I used global warming as my generic search term. As I used the basic, and natural language searches I found that I came up with a lot of articles about the current policy of the Bush's administration but not much up-to-date information about the problem. However, when I looked at the possible related words in the thesaurus I was able to use them and come closer to a result list that I was looking for with the term global warming. This type of tool should be on the basic screen for the beginning user to use.

The guided search is a fill-in the boxes search, that is, a where you can search using Boolean logic in many different fields. Right-handed truncation ("?") and wildcard ("*") functions are supported in any type of search.

Publication search allows you to search by publication, then by issue, and then the user can arrange the results by article title or page number. This search feature works very well.

Natural language search allows the user to type in sentences, and then the results are ranked by relevancy rather than by chronological order as they are in the other types of searches. When using the topic, The Great Depression, the results with the Basic search were very poor. The results were better with the Natural language search because it did bring up articles that were relevant to the search terms. In addition, when using the Natural language search the user can choose whether you want relevance or a recent result list.

Using any search you have to click a box to be shown the number of "hits" on your result list. It is important for the user to know how many hits a particular search yields so that he/she can broaden, narrow, add or even change search terms. Not only do you do not know how successful your search terms are, you also don't know how many pages of results you may have to go through. Sadly, there isn't a "jump to" function; rather the user has to move back page by page in increments of ten citations to reach earlier material. An improvement would be to be able choose how the search results were ordered and to be able to jump through the result list.

By clicking next to the article's title and number ProQuest adds the article to a Saved articles list. According to a ProQuest customer service representative the saved articles list is retained for 30 days or until the computer is shut down. Other students can add to the saved list. I didn't see much purpose for the feature, but the Durable links feature could definitely be useful for an instructor who has the time to learn how to use it. SiteBuilder wizards, Durable Links™ generation tools, SiteBuilder Link editor and other SiteBuilder tools enable an instructor to post articles (for example, required class readings) onto a website. Copyright clearance is provided by ProQuest.

Other reviewers have detailed the advantages and disadvantages of each Search Method, which I won't repeat. We have set our preferences to default to Guided Search, as we have found students get the best results with it. We have also set the defaults to search within the citations and abstracts only. A search for terms across the entire full-text spectrum usually retrieves thousands of irrelevant documents. (I haven't yet checked to see if a library can set a "full-text only" default for its students, although that would be a good idea. Young people are used to instant gratification elsewhere in our culture; there is no reason why their expectations of us would be any different.)

The user can select full-text hits only and/or peer-reviewed articles only (although no explanation of "peer-reviewed" is offered). In all Search Methods, the date selection defaults to Current (1999-present). Backfile (1986-1998) or Deep Backfile (<1970-1985) are also available, but must be entered as separate searches. There is no method available to create one search across these date ranges, for example: January 1997 through August 2000.

For our users, one of the biggest failings of this interface is surely the annoying retrieval of many book, film and music reviews. Unless a student is planning to borrow or purchase the source mentioned, the review of said material is likely to be irrelevant to him/her. On the Guided Search screen, there is a way to include "AND NOT media reviews", which improves the search set greatly. This should be a search limiter alongside the others on all search screens. Again, I would choose it as a default, if it were available.

User Support Services: 4, 4, 4

The Search Guide is displayed in a new window and provides a great deal of basic information. It describes the truncation and wildcard characters that may be used and provides links to additional description information on Boolean Operators, the ProQuest Thesaurus, Classification Codes, Stop Words, Basic & Other Search Fields, Article Types and Dates. ?help is a link to context sensitive help. It includes options to search help, with links to the Contents, Index and the Glossary. The default screen assists the user in how to search. There are also links to the Quick Print Guides that can be used as training handouts. The Training Resource Center provides valuable information for users and librarians. It provides an additional access to search information as well as help with ProQuest in Spanish and information on using SiteBuilder, a service that allows faculty to create dynamic links to articles for their students.

Technical support is excellent! The staff is well trained and very competent. They have always been prompt to respond to questions and are able to provide answers and solutions in a timely manner.

I found that the basic Search help menu was well done. Help is context sensitive on the screen level and also has a search help feature. The Help topics are brief but useful.

I worked through the Training Resource Center. This is a tutorial that takes the new user through ProQuest. I found the lessons quick, brief and helpful. The little "Test yourself" at the end of the lesson was a quick way to see if you "got it". I felt that the time spent on this was handy. The only part that did not seem to work as I expected was the "On your own". Rather than running you through a quick guided search you have to leave the lessons you are on, perform the search, then return to go on with the lessons.

Customer Service is available from 8:00 am to 6:00 pm, Monday through Friday, EST. The customer service representatives with whom I spoke were uniformly pleasant and informed. Technical Support is available from 7:00 to midnight, Monday through Friday, EST, with beeper support on the weekends.

We have found the 800 number representatives to be uniformly helpful and knowledgeable. E-mail inquiries have received prompt replies. It's important to note that ProQuest's customer service is meant to provide service to librarians on behalf of patrons, not to patrons directly.

Also for librarians, a ProQuest Administrator account can be set up to generate usage statistics and change some default settings for end-users.

For the patron, the online tutorial called Training Research Center gives good search tips and advice to the new user.

Cost: 4, 4, 4

Cost is on a sliding scale according to FTE. The price available through CCL makes ProQuest Research Library a "best buy" especially when compared to similar databases (EBSCO's Masterfile Premier and Academic Elite, and Gale's Expanded Academic ASAP) that are several thousand dollars more expensive. However, it is essential to keep in mind that full text articles are available for only 10 years (1992-2002) with many titles available for much less than 10 years. Some other general research databases cover as almost 20 years, although with far fewer titles in the 1980s. Research Library is certainly adequate for a financially strapped college – especially one where the instructors and students are not as interested in historical coverage. For me, the great price produces a love/hate relationship: love the price, hate the interface and limited coverage.

The cost of the ProQuest Research Library is very reasonable compared to comparable aggregators' products.

Despite the shortcomings noted above, we will continue to subscribe to this service. Its major competitors are Expanded Academic ASAP and EBSCOHost. The former has a much better search interface, but much less full-text content. The latter has a good search interface, but is too expensive for our limited budget.

Accessibility of Service: 4, 4, 4

ProQuest is available at every attempt to access and usually provides quick response times both through the campus wide network T-1 line and at home using a modem. ProQuest is available remotely using several remote patron authentication

methods.

ProQuest claims that Research Library is ADA compliant. I tried using the database on a PC running JAWS and didn't have any problems.

ProQuest recently announced a Spanish language interface. When I looked for this choice in Research Library I couldn't find that option. Customer Service told me that the Spanish language interface had to be set up by the local site administrator as a customized URL, which then requires two separate URLs for what is basically the same product. Technical Service told me that although there is now a user interface in Spanish the result list would still be in English, and that there isn't translation software in Research Library as there is in EBSCO.

On occasion during the day (PST), I experienced long delays in connect time. There were also instances of freezing which required a reboot. During the evening, there were no problems with connect time.

Comparing title lists between similar databases is difficult – especially difficult because the title list for Research Library Complete is not easily accessible from ProQuest's site on the Web. To get the full title list you need to highlight the Research Library Core Collection, highlight all the additional modules and then print the list on legal size paper.

Despite some initial problems with IP address-based access, Research Library provides very reliable service. Password access is also available for off-campus use, which we used until a remote-user authentication system was installed. We employ wireless connections at our patron terminals. Hard-wired jacks and maximum RAM are definitely recommended. As patrons discover the ability to download articles in PDF format, demands on the system will inevitably increase and slow response time.

Overall Assessment: 3, 3, 3

Overall ProQuest Research Library is a good choice for community college libraries. The breadth and depth of information is sufficient for most general education level students. A big plus for ProQuest is their ability to enhance the product by adding greater depth in a number of special subject areas, as well as historical newspaper information. All this using a single interface makes it easier for both the library and the student by substantially cutting down on the time needed for explanations and training.

The CCL offer makes ProQuest Research Library a very good bargain at this point in time. I used ProQuest Research Library several times at the reference desk to answer questions for which the student and I weren't finding adequate articles in our current general research database. Although I don't like the search interface the results of the searches are a good match for the community college market.

The impression this reviewer comes away with is that Research Library is...well, "geeky". That is to say, it seems to have been created for sophisticated searchers who will take time to learn its quirks and use it effectively. If your campus purchases this service, plan to provide extensive training to all user groups.

Home Campus Only: 4, 3, 3

My campus has used ProQuest as its primary general periodical database for a number of years. Students seem to find the interface easy to use and are generally satisfied with the results they obtain from it. The ability to use a single interface for our general periodicals, special subject needs and newspapers has cut down on the time needed at the reference desk to help students learn a number of interfaces. This is particularly important as we find that more and more of our students are accessing these materials from home where they do not have the assistance of a librarian. The relatively low cost is also important to us.

We purchased Research Library largely because it provides the most full-text "bang for the buck" compared with other systems. The trade-off is that its search interface leaves much to be desired. During the upcoming fiscal year, we intend to match up Research Library against Expanded Academic ASAP and compare usage statistics. We seek an answer to the question: does the greater content of Research Library justify its poor search interface? Consultations with fellow faculty will be needed to answer this question. We'd like to determine whether and by how much the greater availability of sources has improved students' essays and term papers.

I would give ProQuest Research Library serious consideration for purchase if my budget for electronic resources were cut. Otherwise, I would not be very interested in purchasing ProQuest Research Library as I feel that the interface needs work.

Last Updated: June 14, 2002