

CCL-EAR Committee Review of STAT-USA December, 1999

The California Community College Libraries, Electronic Access to Information Resources Committee (CCL-EAR) undertook a "hands-on" study of Stat-USA. An agency in the U.S. Department of Commerce's Economics and Statistics Administration, Stat-USA bills its product as "one-stop Internet browsing for business, trade and economic information." Its mission is to gather selected economic, business, and international trade reports produced by the U.S. Government from the hundreds of separate offices and divisions of the government that produce them and to deliver them to the public in one location. Each CCL-EAR committee member independently, or in concert with other qualified professionals on their campus library staff, reviewed and evaluated Stat-USA. 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 helpline 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 - 1, 2, 3, 4, 3, 4, 2

Stat-USA/Internet is composed of two main parts. "State of the Nation" includes information about the U.S. economy. Reports include general economic indicators (Consumer Price Index, Gross Domestic Product, etc.), housing and construction reports (housing starts and building permits, new construction, new home sales), employment (Employment Cost Index, employment and unemployment statistics), manufacturing & industry (retail sales, current industry reports, etc.), monetary statistics (interest rates, foreign exchange rates, money stock) and economic policy (Treasury statements, Humphrey-Hawkins testimony by the FRB chairman, etc.). ** -
----- The second part, GLOBUS (Global Business Opportunities), offers current and historical trade-related releases, international market research, trade opportunities, and country analysis. It offers daily trade leads from the Trade Opportunities Program (TOPS), as well as the Department of Agriculture. GLOBUS also offers daily procurement activity from the Defense Logistics Agency, the United Nations, and the Commerce Business Daily leads. The NTDB (National Trade Data Bank) provides access to Country Commercial Guides, Market Research reports, Best Market reports. The NTDB also provides U.S. import and export statistics, as well as over 75 other various reports and programs. The International Trade library is a comprehensive collection of over 40,000 documents related to international trade. All are full text searchable, as well as key word searchable by country or product. ** ----- As can be seen, STAT-USA offers a *wealth* of reports on business, trade and the economy. However, most of the data in this database seems *way* beyond the needs of most community college students I've worked with. The level of information presented seems more appropriate for four-year college or university students and for business professionals. Aside from readily available business and economic data such as the Consumer Price Index, the Gross National Product, and so forth, our students are more often looking for demographic and *social* statistics (population, teen pregnancies, one-parent families, smoking, drug use, ethnic and cultural differences, etc.) than for business data. Furthermore, what many of them would *really* like is a selection from or a digested form of statistical reports rather than the entire report. My score is based not on the quality of the database content as much as on its appropriateness for community college students.

The two databases that I see available upon login are State of the Nation and GLOBUS & National Trade Data Bank. These would be excellent databases for researchers needing in-depth economic analysis of the United States and other countries. Examples include: Economic Indicators Summary, Housing Starts and Building Permits, and Unemployment Insurance Weekly Claims Report. These are excellent reports but our students don't do enough research in this area to warrant paying \$1638 per year. These reports are discussed in recent issues of

the Wall Street Journal to which we have a subscription.

Stat_USA contains a wealth of full-text information for students of business and economics. Because the information comes from a variety of sources and is available in multiple formats, it may be difficult for many community college students to use. The coverage is somewhat uneven with extremely detailed reports in some areas and little information in others. Likewise, the information is very current in areas such as foreign exchange rates, and somewhat dated in the Country Commercial Guides. Overall, the data is of sufficient importance that I expect students will overlook the difficulties and learn to use this databases to acquire current information for research and current awareness.

This is a database produced by StatUSA an agency of the U.S.Department of Commerce. It labels itself as "one stop browsing for business, trade and economic information" both domestic and foreign. There are two databases to search, "State of the Nation" and GLOBUS&NTSD. These are full-text databases of government, documents and reports covering Economic Indicators, Housing and Construction, Manufacturing and Industry, Monetary Statistics and Economic Policy in the State of the Nation. In GLOBUS&NTSD broad topics covered include Current and Historical Trade Leads, International Trade Statistics and Market, and Country Research. Current documents,many updated daily, along with previous dates of these documents are available. It also contains daily news releases,testimonies and full documents such as the U.S. Department of State briefings, The Beige Book, and "How to start in exporting". and many more. It is a straightforward interface, with documents to select under each of the broad headings or you can so 3000 more by using their "State of the Nation library" or the "International Trade Library. In these two libraries one can search by keywords. This database contains many important documents dealing with economic and trade issues, foreign and domestic

A wide range of current and historical data related to domestic and international finance and trade is available.

This is a very valuable product that pulls together many sources that students have a difficult time finding and searching. For community college students that need full text now and that also need sites with some authority and currency, it is very time saving. it is also very easy to explain and use.

The U.S. Department of Commerce's online database StatUSA offers a broad variety of full-text resources covering the domestic and international business, trade and economic arenas. The database is divided into two parts: State of the Nation covers the domestic business scene and Globus (Global Business Opportunities) deals with the international aspects of business. The presentation of material in both databases is the same. The opening page presents a list of the newest and most current releases of business and economic information, followed by the possibility of finding archived reports using the available search engine.

SEARCH INTERFACE - 2, 4, 2, 3, 2, 3, 2

The user interface is clean and pleasant in appearance, and the site is blessedly advertisement-free. Both "State of the Nation" and "GLOBUS" offer selection via a series of menus. Both also allow keyword searching, however to use the keyword searching option for (all or part?) of "State of the Nation," the user must know to scroll clear to the bottom of the "State of the Nation" menu page, click on "State of the Nation Library" then click the tiny "Search" link near the top of the next page. Why not have the "Search" button displayed on the first "State of the Nation" menu page? Does the search feature search only past copies of the reports and not current ones? ** -----
Though the menu screens are clear and easy to read, reports and tables are inconsistent in format and are often difficult to read. Some are in straight ASCII text format. Because of the width of the tables, many of these go off the edge of the monitor screen, and users must either scroll back and forth to read the entire table or reset the font

size in their web browsers. Other tables are in MS Word or some other format which must be downloaded to be viewed at all. (And if the user doesn't have Word on his/her computer?...) This feature alone makes this database unsuitable for use at public workstations in many community college libraries, and makes using the database time consuming and annoying for even the most dedicated user. I'd have to want a document *VERY* badly to spend time downloading an MS-Word file while I was using a web database then fire up Word to read the document. (Our public workstations do not have Word on them, the computers don't have enough memory to run a web browser and Word at the same time anyway, and our students, of course, want something quick and easy from the get-go.) Understood that the documents are coming from many different government agencies (thus the different formats), but to make this database really useful, they should all be converted to either pdf or HTML files for ease of access and viewing. ** ----- GLOBUS and NTDB (National Trade Databank), though the databases are presented on the same page, seem to use different search procedures and different search indices . There are also a number of exceptions to the search instructions here due, presumably, to the fact that the items being searched came from different agencies and offer different search fields. ** ----- The product really suffers from trying to merge reports from many different agencies and systems without having a common format and search engine. ** ----- It would be extremely helpful to have a "New Search" button on the page with each document. As it is, users must use their web browser's "Back" button (sometimes back several screens) or "Go" menu to return to the main search or menu screen when they're finished reading a document. ** ----- One blessing: The site has no spinning, whirling or dancing icons, and no apparent Javascript applets waiting to crash older computers and browsers.

Reports are listed in easy to use lists and archives are easily navigated in clear menus. The search engine is rather rudimentary, but does its job if the keyword is close enough to the title of a report. Boolean operators seem to find keywords in the ascii text, a novel and pleasant surprise.

The multiple databases with different search criteria make the interface less than ideal. The new user must spend considerable time exploring the database and its components. This user must learn what kinds of data are contained in each of the areas: "The State of the Nation," "The Trade Library," "GLOBUS," and the "National Trade Data Bank". Then he/she must confront the issue of slightly different search engines for each. Another potential frustration is that some data is automatically shown as text, while other files must be downloaded and may be available in either a MS Word format or Adobe Acrobat. The uninitiated computer user, or one using a public workstation with security software may not be able to access some of these files.

This is a very clean and straightforward interface. From the main page you choose which database you want (U.S. or International documents) and then you can either pick the documents listed under the broad categories or go to one of the libraries. From here the searcher can pick a subject from a list and a whole array of documents relating to that subject comes up. Or the searcher can click on a search and do a keyword search using the and operator or just a phrase (with NO quotation marks!)It was a little irritating that you had to click on the arrow next to the title instead of the title for the document to come up. When I clicked on some of the documents under the Broad categories they required you to download the file and when I did I got code. Another document was in LOTUS. But the majority came up as the documents. This is an interface with no bells and whistles, it goes with the information, just the facts.

Initially, I found this site very confusing visually. (One reason for that is that I know were to review "Stat-USA" and I kept clicking on "Stat-USA" icon expecting something to happen. ** ----- The typical undergraduate community college student wanting a few statistics for a research paper will have a hard time determining where to look for information. This database will require a great deal of assistance to end users. ** ----- In some cases table headings were absent from charts and graphs making it impossible to interpret the data presented.

Some training is needed but it would not be excessive.

If the user is first and foremost particularly interested in the latest business and economic releases, the introductory web page for each of the two databases would be useful. Most users, I believe, would be most interested in being presented immediately with a search engine in order to construct a search. In the case of the State of the Nation database, the search engine option is not immediately available as a link from the top of the page. The user must scroll down to the bottom of the page to get to the State of the Nation Library link which then takes the user to a search interface. The Globus introductory web page does have a link to the search engine at the top of the page. Once at the search engine, there is not a great deal of information on how to construct a search. There is no discussion of boolean searching (although the search engine defaults to an AND in the search box), very little maneuver-ability with adjacency searching and no option for truncation. The searching tips help page is very brief. Most searched documents were available immediately in full-text. Some needed to be downloaded. Once into a searched document, I found I often needed to back out because there was no link from the document back to the search screen.

USER SUPPORT SERVICES - 3, 4, 2, 2, 2, 3, 3

Phone number and e-mail address for Stat-USA are given at the bottom of the main page. A link to contact information for the company is also available from this page. It's not clear if the phone number and e-mail address given here are for a Technical Support office or just a main office for Stat-USA. Online "Help," however, can only be accessed from within either the "State of the Nation" or "GLOBUS" parts of the database, and there it is hidden under the menu choice "Samples" rather than the more obvious phrase "Help." Contact information offered on the "Samples" page is different from that linked from the main page. Online help is pretty skeletal, but useful. The "Documentation" link leads to four clear & helpful search examples, but no indication is given concerning whether common techniques such as truncation, wildcard, nested Boolean searches, search limiting, etc. are allowed. Fuller documentation would be useful.

The interface is clean and very easy to use, so help documentation is not essential. The documentation that exists is to the point and useful.

Quite good descriptions of how to search each individual database are available. Unfortunately, these instructions are well hidden under the category "Samples" - "Documentation" - "Searching on the STAT-USA/Internet Web Site". Another helpful section of Samples is "Contacts" which includes the names with links, telephone numbers and/or addresses of government officials responsible for information on various commodities and countries.

Information about using the product and other things can be found by clicking on "sample"(why not help?)at the top of the screen. This brings up a list of other information. By clicking on general information one learns how to navigate within the product. This is how I found out about the searching mode and what the "Libraries" do. It is not clear how to get help. But once you figure it out, there is lots of information available on this page. No "Help" button. Documentation is available from "samples" link but I think that another term is needed to alert users to look there for help. ** ----- A direct link to "Program Descriptions" would help users know what types of programs might supply the information they seek. ** ----- It would be helpful for users to know that "HS" code descriptions are listed under "xclass" Everything that we tried and talked about seemed to work quite well. Only minor problems

As indicated above, the online help documentation for the search engine is very brief and rather limited. Under a

link oddly enough entitled "Samples" at the top of the page of each database, there are various links to contacts, documentation, product brochures, suggestions, etc. Both phone numbers and e-mail addresses were readily seen at the bottom of the introductory page for each database.

COST - 2, 2, 3, 1, 3, 4, 3

The cost, while probably reasonable for the amount of data included in the database, would be difficult for most California community colleges to support, given the peripheral value of the database itself. The un-user-friendly and inconsistent document formats would make it even more difficult to justify the cost.

At this cost, I would like to see more integration of other federal government statistics, particularly those from the census. Our students are interested in primarily regional, state, or national demographic data. ** ----- I would love a database that integrates all of these federal statistics sources under one searchable interface. My memory from several years ago was that Stat-USA did combine all these difference sources. Maybe I'm remembering another database. Anyway, that is the database I would pay for.

Considering the quantity and quality of information the cost seems very reasonable.

The rate quoted seems very high for this product.

When one compares the price with the many sources in paper that one would have to subscribe to and you factor in the time and effort that using the free data bases, it is downright cheap. Though this is a U.S. Department of Commerce database and some might argue that the information should be accessible at no charge, I think the price per FTES is a fair enough price to pay.

ACCESSIBILITY OF SERVICE - 4, 4, 4, 4, 4, 4, 4

I had absolutely no problems connecting to or staying connected to Stat-USA. Response time was very quick and better than some of our current databases..

Login and response time was fast.

The product was available at each attempt to access it. Response time was good from both the campus network and modem access.

I did not have any trouble connecting and the response time was very good.

Never had any trouble connecting, response time very good.

The access was always reliable and quite fast.

I had no problem accessing the database quickly. The product appears to be reliable and stable.

OVERALL ASSESSMENT - 1, 2, 3, 3, 2, 4, 2

The database contents, while bringing together an abundance of good business and economic data, seem beyond the needs of most community college students. In addition, the database really suffers from trying to merge reports from many different agencies' systems without having a common format and search engine. The resulting product is too decentralized and cumbersome for successful use by many community college students,

Would like to see a broader spectrum of sources.

While there are some difficulties with the interface and uneven coverage of the general subject area, the overall content is of such importance to students in business and economics that this database clearly should be considered for purchase. ** ----- I would like to see more consistency in the interface, especially: 1. Buttons for ease of moving around the database 2. A link to the search help information from all screens 3. Identifiers to show the user the type of file being linked to i.e., text or to a file requiring a download and/or a PDF file.

I could not decide between 2 or 3. The product works fine and for those colleges who want/need this information I think it is good, but too much money. If they are charging this much money, the documents should look better!

A searchable index of HS and SIC codes needs to be easily accessible. ** ----- Would be helpful if descriptions of programs were more accessible. ** ----- Hard to find documentation and help on using the database ** ----- - Too difficult to navigate for the typical undergraduate at a two year institution who wants stats for term paper. ** ----- Clumsy inflexible search engine.

I would suggest this product as part of a core collection for community colleges.

In general, I feel that the amount of information is more than most community college business and economic classes would need. Most libraries would have access to much of the more essential information in other existing library resources. Furthermore, I found the search engine generally inadequate as indicated above.

What would your rating be if product was evaluated based on utility for your home campus only? - 1, 1, 3, 1, 2, 4, 1

Our students are rarely looking for the type of information included in this database. Stat-USA's pricing is based on FTES. In order for us to pay \$1,374 for a statistics database, it would have to be a much more all-purpose collection of data.

The Statistical Abstract works just fine for us.

Because of the interest in economics, business, and particularly import-export business, this appears to be an important resource for our campus.

Our students do not ask for this kind of information. If it was much, much less money we might consider it just to have it, but it would never be used on our campus.

Very poor user interface, search engine functionality and user support services.

This is a great product and we would love to have it.

For our campus, this product is overkill. There's far more information than our students would need. And accessing what they might need is limited by a search engine which is not very powerful. I do believe, however, that for those at the upper division and graduate level, especially business and economic majors, this product could be very useful.

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