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Terry A. Jankowski

Elaine Russo Martin
University of Massachusetts Medical School, elaine.martin@umassmed.edu

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Database search services as a basic service in academic health sciences libraries

By Terry Ann Jankowski, M.L.S., AHIP
Acting Head, Information Services

Health Sciences Library and Information Center
University of Washington, SB-55
Seattle, Washington 98195

*Elaine R. Martin, M.A., M.S.L.S., AHIP**
Assistant University Librarian for the Health Sciences
and Director, NN/LM, Greater Midwest Region

University of Illinois at Chicago
Library of the Health Sciences, M/C 763
1750 West Polk Street
Chicago, Illinois 60612

Mediated search services, usually offered for a fee, are commonplace in academic health sciences libraries. At the same time, users of these services have numerous self-service options available to them; for example, CD-ROMs and locally mounted databases. In keeping with its philosophy of access to rather than ownership of information, the University of Washington Health Sciences Library and Information Center (HSLIC) changed its policy from charging clients for mediated searching to offering mediated searches as an essential service of the library. By taking this step, HSLIC moved closer to becoming a true "library without walls." This paper describes HSLIC's experience with changing its policy and examines the issues surrounding use of the collection budget to subsidize access to online information in academic health sciences libraries.

The University of Washington (UW) Health Sciences Library and Information Center (HSLIC), located in Seattle, is a national leader in terms of its progress toward becoming a library without physical boundaries. HSLIC currently provides several means of electronic information access. At present, the campus information network, the University of Washington Information Navigator (UWIN), provides UW faculty, staff, and students unlimited free access to several locally mounted databases (e.g., MEDLINE, PsycINFO, ERIC); campus information (e.g., personnel listings, course catalogs, the calendar of events); and Internet resources (e.g., gopher, library catalogs). In addition, HSLIC offers several CD-ROM products (HealthPlan, Health Reference Center, Nursing and Allied Health CD) for in-house use by all library patrons.

Since the early 1970s, UW HSLIC Information Services librarians have performed mediated searches for a fee. With the increasing availability of cost-free electronic information resources on campus, HSLIC librarians and administrators began questioning the policy of charging primary users for mediated search services. The library undertook an examination of the issues surrounding the recent shift from a system offering fee-based mediated search services to one in which some searches were provided as a basic service, subsidized by the materials budget.

HSLIC's rapid evolution into an electronic library stressing access to information prompted a thorough examination of the nature of reference and online services in academic libraries. The proliferation of prepaid, single-fee, locally mounted databases and CD-ROM products available to end users undoubtedly has changed the way in which reference services are provided. Electronic tools not only have become commonplace and, in some cases, are not a substitute for print resources but are the only source of the

* Formerly Associate Director for Education, Clinical and Research Services, Health Sciences Library and Information Center, University of Washington.

answer. In 1980, HSLIC instituted a policy for ready reference online search services that specified conditions under which a reference librarian might consult a limited number of electronic resources. Today, librarians choose whichever resource most expediently answers a question rather than the least expensive service, which is often MEDLINE. It is not unusual today for a reference librarian to log on to the campus information system and telnet to another library's catalog or gopher to answer a factual question.

As UW began offering an increasing number of databases at no charge to its users, the HSLIC Administrative Group was reviewing collection development and document delivery policies. Increasing serials prices and budget restrictions forced the library to cancel 116 journals in the fall of 1991. Interlibrary loan (ILL) charges to UW borrowers were reduced and partially subsidized from the HSLIC materials budget to compensate for the loss of the physical volumes. Clearly, the library was moving toward a philosophy of access to information rather than one of physical possession of materials.

However, the document delivery subsidy and the proliferation of electronic resources created a situation in which some UW disciplines were served very well with cost-free service, and others were charged for the same level of service. These inequalities led to the questioning of charges for any staff-mediated search services. Because materials funds were being used to increase access to print materials, could they also be used to enhance electronic access?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The library literature of the 1970s contains many articles on the online services "fee or free" debate [1]. In the mid-1980s, as end-user searching options became more prevalent and massive serial cancellation projects were reported, the debate was renewed. A 1987 *College and Research Libraries News* article summarized the trends in charging for online services in academic libraries [2]. These fees recouped direct costs of the service such as connect time and print charges, while institutional funds usually covered staff time, training, and so on. The libraries surveyed also distinguished among categories of users and charged separate fees accordingly. Meanwhile, Poole and St. Clair asserted, "The information provided by an online search satisfies legitimate education and research needs and should be funded with moneys from the print materials budget" [3].

In 1989, Anderson examined budgetary practices related to integration of online database searching as a ready reference tool. He concluded that the use of online databases for answering reference questions was no different than use of any print source and should be budgeted in a similar manner [4]. In the same year, librarians at the University of Vermont described how they began to treat electronic tools as standard reference sources [5]. Costs were integrated into the library's "Materials and Access" budget, and most services were provided free to university clients. Other articles suggested eliminating fees for online services as a response to the dropping of subscriptions to print indexing and abstracting tools [6–7]. In a more recent article, Brandt looked at the collection development issues surrounding the growth of campus-wide information systems. He advocated development of an information collection development policy for electronic sources that can be mounted and maintained locally or accessed remotely [8]. The authors also examined an unpublished report from the University of Michigan that addressed database issues [9].

THE HSLIC PROPOSAL AND POLICY

Following the literature review, the authors suggested that HSLIC's search services be revised to achieve the following objectives:

- provide staff-mediated searches for HSLIC's primary university clientele in pursuit of their research, clinical, academic, and administrative duties as a basic service paid for by the HSLIC materials budget and money generated by fee-based searching;
- offer staff-mediated search services on a fee basis to other clientele or at levels greater than that defined as basic;
- subsidize all costs of the basic service and partial costs of other staff-mediated search services to UW personnel from the materials budget;
- provide staff-mediated search services to non-UW clientele on a cost-recovery basis;
- fund ready reference direct search costs from the materials budget instead of from search fees; and
- recover costs of in-house searching for document delivery, ILL, and so on from their corresponding cost-recovery budgets.

In August 1992, the authors prepared a detailed document outlining the proposed change in philosophy and the new service guidelines and procedures for review and comment by Information Services staff. The HSLIC Administrative Group reviewed and accepted the proposal the next month.

This new online services policy redefines ready reference searches (one form of basic search services) and describes those staff-mediated search services to be offered at no charge. Ready reference searches must meet stringent criteria. They are performed at a librarian's discretion, they involve only a few key search terms, and they do not require a lengthy search interview. Librarians print only five citations, without abstracts. Ready reference searches are performed at

the point of service and last no more than fifteen minutes. Ready reference searches for HSLIC's primary clientele are provided on any database, regardless of vendor or fee, whereas reference searches for others utilize only fixed-cost systems, such as CD-ROMs or locally mounted files.

Staff-mediated searches are performed at the librarian's workstation and require an in-depth search interview and extensive search preparation time. Searches offered as a basic service also are done at the librarian's discretion. Basic service searches include up to twenty-five citations with abstracts and are completed within twenty-four hours. Any appropriate database or vendor can be used and more than one database searched if needed. Additional references are provided at HSLIC's standard rates for fee-based searching. Those eligible for the staff-mediated basic search service are faculty and staff with work-related information needs; graduate students preparing a dissertation or thesis; graduate students collaborating with a faculty member on research or patient care; and medical students working on their Independent Study for Medical Students project, a graduation requirement of the UW School of Medicine.

The limits placed on the staff-mediated basic search service enable HSLIC to budget available staff, equipment, and funds to provide a minimum level of service for the maximum number of people. The restrictions also serve as cost-control measures, prevent abuse of the service, and aid in managing staff workload. In addition, the limitations serve to fulfill another of HSLIC's missions: to educate clientele regarding access to and use of materials and to assist them in becoming more self-sufficient. Several print and electronic resources remain available for self-service searching to undergraduates and others not eligible for the basic mediated service. The HSLIC staff continues to provide training and assistance in the use of these resources as well as other information management techniques. This combination of instruction and service help to reduce the disparity between clients who enjoy generous information resources and those who have limited access.

Based on the literature review and staff discussions, the authors thought the primary benefits of the new approach would be increased goodwill for the library and assurance of excellent information services. In addition, the staff would be more available than before to provide education and consultation services, because less time would be spent on the clerical tasks required to accommodate billing for every search [10–11]. The use of computer-based sources for ready reference, especially those on the Internet, would be a more effective use of staff time and budget than would continued reliance on print materials [12–13]. Furthermore, staff members would become more efficient, skilled searchers due to the variety of databases searched and increased number of searches performed [14–15].

Table 1
Health Sciences Library and Information Center online statistics

		July 1992–June 1993 No. (%)	July 1991–June 1992 No. (%)	% difference
Databases	Total searches	1,312 (100.00)	952 (100.00)	37.82
	MEDLARS	1,070 (81.55)	812 (85.29)	31.77
	Non-MEDLARS	242 (18.45)	140 (14.71)	72.86
Requestor category	Faculty/staff	990 (75.46)	598 (62.81)	65.55
	Undergraduate	14 (1.07)	41 (4.31)	−65.85
	Graduate	110 (8.38)	111 (11.66)	−0.90
	Non-UW	198 (15.09)	202 (21.22)	−1.98

IMPLEMENTATION

The new basic search services policy took effect on December 1, 1992. The trial service was offered for seven months and evaluated at the end of that time. The library staff spent the time between acceptance of the proposal and implementation of the service preparing new search request forms, cover letters, and search log sheets. HSLIC also cancelled subscriptions to paper versions of *Chemical Abstracts* and *Biological Abstracts* and eliminated duplicate subscriptions to *Index Medicus* and the *Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature* (*CINAHL*) to provide additional funding for ready reference searching.

After assessing their training needs, several information services librarians attended classes to enhance their search skills on non-MEDLARS databases. Mini-tutorials became a feature of the weekly departmental meetings to encourage more efficient use of all online resources.

During the trial period, librarians advertised the new policy to library patrons who requested assistance at the reference desk. The staff logged all ready reference searches as well as mediated searches in great detail to gather data for evaluation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As expected, the new service generated a positive response from primary clientele. Few participants specifically requested that their search results be limited to the twenty-five references provided by the basic service. Clients liked the promptness of the service as well as the easy access to it.

Analysis of the data collected over the seven-month pilot period yielded interesting findings (Table 1). Three statistics vividly demonstrate the success of the service. First, the number of database searches performed overall increased by 38% in one year, revers-

ing a downward spiral that was due in part to increased search fees. The number of searches run on non-MEDLARS databases increased by 73%, suggesting that searchers used the most appropriate database for the information need rather than the least expensive and most accessible database. Finally, the number of database searches performed for faculty and staff increased by 66%, showing that HSLIC reached the target audience for this service.

Information Services staff enjoyed the freedom of selecting the most appropriate database. As predicted, search skills increased as the staff performed more searches and experimented with new systems. Perhaps the only negative aspect for the staff was the cumbersome search logging process. (To track funds spent, the staff used a structured, complex form that showed requester, purpose, and cost of searches.)

Although no data were collected to determine the amount of online time spent by librarians, information about search costs and vendor charges was noted. Slightly less than $3,000.00 was charged to HSLIC's materials budget to recover the costs for ready reference and basic service searching during the pilot project. Previously, this cost would have been recovered from search fees.

After reviewing the data and service at the end of the trial period, Information Services librarians and the HSLIC Administrative Group agreed that the service should continue. Search passwords are assigned for each function (i.e., ready reference, ILL, basic services), eliminating the need for elaborate search logging and billing processes. Today, word of mouth still serves as the primary mechanism for publicizing this service. HSLIC documents also contain such information. In addition, articles in the library's newsletter promote the service to new house staff and faculty members.

THE FUTURE

HSLIC will continue to monitor the impact of basic search services on the materials budget. In addition, the library is expanding its customized, fee-based information service for nonuniversity clientele. A fixed-fee option for unlimited mediated search services (beyond the twenty-five citations provided by the basic service) also may be made available to university departments in the future. Such an option could be expanded to include ILL and document delivery services.

The nature of reference and online services is changing as a result of the electronic environment. The use of locally mounted databases and the proliferation of end-user systems require libraries to reexamine traditional approaches to providing information. This project is a small beginning toward moving the basis of information delivery from ownership to access.

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