Regional Medical Library-Sponsored e-Science Activities: A Qualitative Survey and Lessons Learned

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OBJECTIVE

To determine, by National Network of Libraries of Medicine (NN/LM) needed.

BACKGROUND

What prompted my interest?

I have been the Project Coordinator for the University of Massachusetts and New England Area Librarian E-Science planning group in April 2011.

METHODS

The same introductory letter and qualitative survey was emailed to each RML Associate Director.

RESULTS

100% of surveys were completed.

All regions indicated activity pertaining to e-science, the form that this took, however, varied greatly (Table 1)

Each region indicated that they intend to sponsor e-science related activities in the future (Table 2). Again, the form of this varied greatly. Additionally, these results reflect that the survey was administered only 18 months into the current NN/LM contract period (see Lessons Learned).

Table 1: e-Science related activity, broken down by form of activity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity Type</th>
<th>Number of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Webinar/Webcast</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-Science Portal</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science Symposium</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Day Workshop/Symposium</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

LESSONS LEARNED

Very valuable lessons were learned during the course of this project, which ultimately broke down into two categories:

ABOUT THE RMLs

• The RMLs are not necessarily "top-down" organizations, the direction of such is led strongly by the interests and needs of the network members.
• Each RML has its own culture and because of this, it is difficult to fairly compare them.
• Some RMLs have been in place for multiple contract periods, others are either new or relatively new and are still working out their regional plans.
• The regions do not "exist as a vacuum," i.e. they do not necessarily operate independently of one another.

o E.g., a few regions acknowledged the work done by the New England Region on the e-Science Portal and decided that since it satisfied the educational needs of other regions, they would not need to create a similar resource.

ABOUT DOING RESEARCH

• Defining "e-science" is difficult. Although I provided a frequently cited definition, there does not seem to be a standard definition of e-science, thus the survey questions may be interpreted differently among Associate Directors.
• E.g., one RML included CTA activities, while another did not.
• It would have been a good idea to contact each Associate Director before doing this project, to receive feedback on triage and assess the interest in participation.
• Since the survey was administered only 18 months into the current NN/LM contract period, it could be concluded prematurely as there are 42 months left in the contract. The question regarding whether the RMLs plan to sponsor activities in the future was critical to it highlighted that RML planning and activities are still in development.
• Be very cognizant of bias! It can unintentionally show up in your project.

o E.g., I did not read over the NNLM RFP Statement of Work before designing the survey. Given my lack of knowledge of the e-science outreach objectives in the RFP and my own experience with the RMLs and e-science, I assumed "e-science support" would take the form of educational activities. This bias was reflected in my survey questions. The RFP states that the RMLs "shall develop pilot projects, which may include professional networks and organizations, to identify and promote the roles of libraries in institutions that have e-science initiatives." This is a broad enough directive that the results from this project illustrate that each RML has so far participated in e-science support activities, regardless of whether or not this takes the form as an educational activity.

CONCLUSIONS

As this project has illustrated, e-science, while a nebulous concept and rather difficult to identify with one definition, is being discussed and supported for medical libraries/their libraries due in part to the national outreach of the RMLs. In retrospect, the author has come to understand that the most interesting question is not, "What is each RML doing to address e-science," but rather, "what form are the RMLs e-science outreach activities taking?" Every RML is participating in e-science related activities; the most important take-away for this author is that the form and structure of these activities may vary greatly from one RML to the next. Ultimately, the bottom line is, what level of activity best serves the region and its network members? As the author has learned, the RMLs are not strictly top-down organizations, and as such, their activities will strongly reflect the interests of their regional membership.

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REFERENCES