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## Analyzing Value: EBSCO and Gale

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When the Oregon State Library's Statewide Database Licensing Committee announced that LSTA funds would be subsidizing a new vendor, rather than our long-standing vendor EBSCO Publishing, the Edward P. Kellenberger library at Northwest Christian University (NCU) faced a decision: whether or not to continue our subscription to the EBSCOhost database package we had enjoyed for many years. EBSCOhost databases had been our primary resource for online full text and students, as well as faculty, were tied to this particular tool for meeting their information needs. The money was found to continue our EBSCOhost subscription on our own, with the intent of doing a careful study of the costs and benefits of the two database packages. This article describes our process of doing that study and discusses our conclusions.

NCU is a very small, private liberal arts university in Eugene, Oregon. When Gale/Cengage was awarded the statewide contract, our student body was around 480 FTE. Over half of the FTEs were in our daytime undergraduate programs, with the remaining students in our evening Professional Studies Program (degree completion) and graduate programs. A small number of these students are in distance sites or online-only programs. The cost to continue EBSCOhost on our own was roughly equal to our entire electronic resources budget, so represented a very significant unplanned investment at a time when our university was struggling with budget concerns as many in Oregon were and still are. With very limited staff and financial resources we set about to determine if this investment was worthwhile for our university.

NCU already had an existing Library Advisory Committee (LAC), consisting of a few faculty and two professional librarians. This committee was charged with conducting the study and making a recommendation in time for budget planning in March 2010. To ensure that the interests and perspectives of students, the primary users of our online databases, were taken into account, an effort was made to recruit student representatives from our various student populations to serve on the committee for this project.

As a first step the LAC identified criteria for evaluating EBSCOhost and comparing the two online database packages. Those criteria included:

- search interfaces (ease of use, ability to discover all relevant documents, and the relevance of documents retrieved)
- scope (the number of journals and articles in full-text)
- number of scholarly/peer-reviewed articles in full-text
- degree of support for disciplines in which NCU has majors
- number of unique items in each database package
- "extras" (such as "MyEbsco")
- reliability and the level of technical support
- cost

Costs were already known, so the LAC set about determining how best to address the other criteria. Constraints on available time for library staff and for faculty members of the LAC, along with difficulties in getting students fully engaged with the committee, hampered our efforts. As a result, not every identified criterion was reviewed or reviewed fully. During the process we also realized that usage statistics would be easy to obtain, so usage was added to the criteria.

In the end we prepared and conducted a student survey (see: http://bit.ly/dqEPot) to gauge student perceptions of the two interfaces; prepared and conducted a survey of faculty to generate a list of journals most important to them in their various disciplines to have available in full-text online (see survey: http://bit.ly/9YJulp and results: http://bit.ly/aN0FhD); and reviewed the COUNTER usage statistics from both databases over identical time periods. Time constraints precluded a review of reliability and support issues. Investigation of the various "extras" in each package, became a lower-priority criteria and assumed to be somewhat addressed in the student survey. A review of unique journal titles or number of articles in full text in each database was deemed too time-intensive and not attempted. We also determined that such a measure was not as useful in determining the added value of a database. We were not necessarily comparing the relative values of Gale and EBSCOhost, but determining if EBSCOhost represented enough added value to warrant the added expense.

The faculty survey was administered during a faculty assembly. This "captive audience" coupled with advance publicity and follow-up e-mails resulted in a very high response rate for faculty. This list of journal titles was then compared to the title lists for both EBSCOhost and Gale (see summary: http://bit.ly/djzaqt ).The student surveys were administered in selected daytime undergraduate, evening Professional Studies, and evening Graduate classes. No scientific sampling method was used, but every attempt was made to select classes that would be representative and avoid the same students taking the survey multiple times. Ninety-five completed student surveys were received and tabulated (see results: http://bit.ly/9Sfa3u).

The averaged responses from the student survey are slightly higher for Gale for ease of use (3.4 vs. 3.0 on a 5 point scale) and slightly higher for EBSCOhost for usefulness (3.2 vs. 3.1). These differences are negligible and not significant, in addition to pointing in conflicting directions. Were student responses our only measurement, they would not justify the extra expense to continue our EBSCOhost subscription.

The analysis of faculty-supplied journal titles, however, tells a different story. Of the 30 titles deemed by faculty to be "vital" or "important" to have in full-text online for their discipline, 14 are available in EBSCOhost. Only 4 are available in Gale and all 4 of those titles are also available in EBSCOhost. For our faculty, there is a clear benefit to maintaining a subscription to EBSCOhost, in addition to the state-supplied subscription to Gale.

EBSCOhost and Gale both provide COUNTER version 3-compliant usage reports. A comparative chart (see fig. 1) shows how our students have been using each provider, month by month.

There are many factors that may help to explain the size of the disparity in usage. Chief among these would be the "newness" of the Gale databases to our established users, who are accustomed to turning to EBSCOhost for every request. Secondarily, we have added a number of specialized databases to the base EBSCOhost package, which we have not done for the Gale package. Accounting for these "extra" packages would be time-consuming and difficult; so far as we can determine fulltext results are not reported by database, but only as a total or by journal title. Additionally, EBSCOhost integrates databases so that full text content is cross-linked across their subscribed databases.

Considering that we were not comparing the databases, but determining the added value of EBSCOhost, and that the specialized databases had no direct parallels available from Gale, the LAC made note of these disparities but ultimately decided that the usage statistics were still valid and useful. The end result is that, for us, the EBSCOhost platform currently
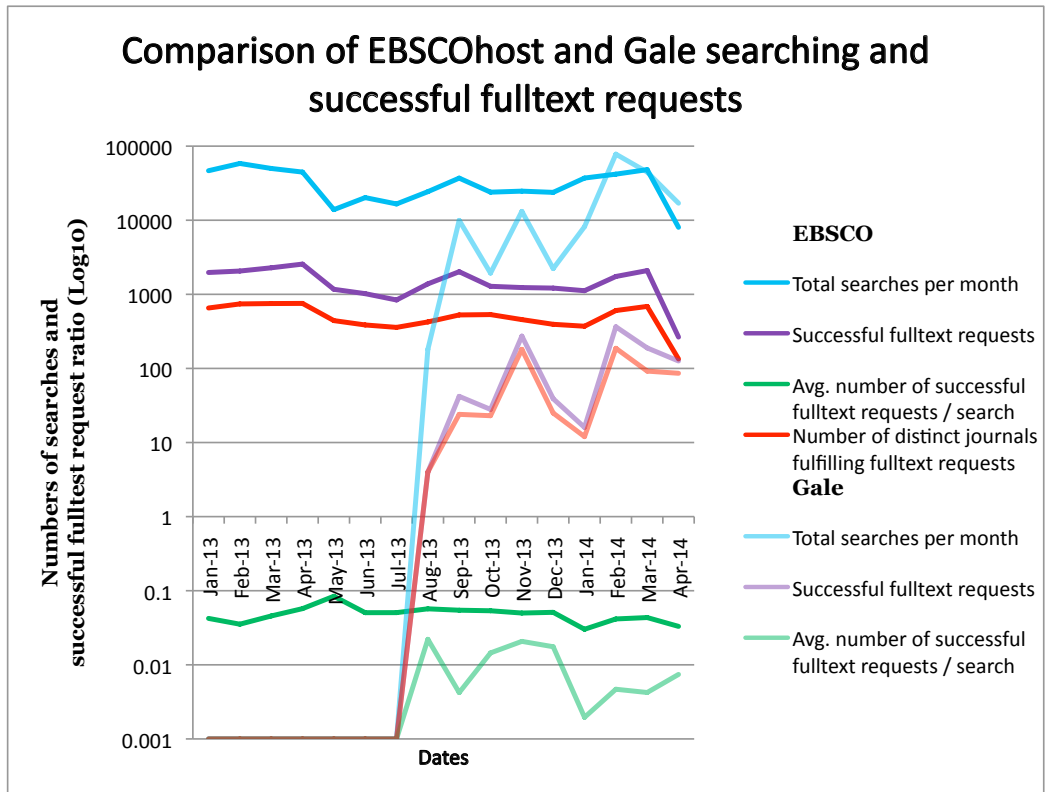
## Comparison of EBSCOhost and Gale searching and successful fulltext requests



Fig. 1. COUNTER Usage Reports
(Data for this chart are available at Google Docs, via http://bit.ly/cVyGY9) The calculated results for the average number of successful fulltext requests per search (green lines at the bottom of the chart, below the dates) show the greatest disparity for the two vendors. The darker green line, representing EBSCOhost, shows that EBSCO databases fulfill fulltext requests roughly twice as often as the Gale databases for our students during the time for which data are available.

provides significantly more full text articles for our users, on both a per-search and an absolute basis.

Though the results of the student survey are inconclusive, the usage statistics and faculty journal title list results demonstrate a clear added benefit to maintaining our EBSCOhost subscription. But does this added benefit justify the significant extra expense? This is a more difficult question to answer. Since the Gale package is provided by the state at no charge to NCU, a comparison of cost per journal title or cost per accessed article is not possible. Such an analysis would only compare Gale to EBSCOhost and not really answer the question of the added value of having of both. The committee also reviewed options for obtaining at least some of the content available in EBSCOhost through other vendors, but ultimately determined that these options held no advantage in either cost or access. In the end, the committee had no strong recommendation regarding EBSCOhost and left the decision up to the library. A drop off in attendance by faculty on the committee and the lack of success in engaging student members possibly contributed to this indecision. A more engaged and proactive committee membership may have aided our process and resulted in a stronger recommendation.

Based on the information we were able to gather, the library decided to include the EBSCOhost subscription in our budget request for the 2010–11 fiscal year. The list of titles provided by faculty as "vital" or "important" to their disciplines has been provided to Gale for consideration as titles to add. Sufficient improvements in Gale's content may prompt another review in the future. Continued instruction and experience with Gale will also build a stronger user base and perhaps increase the usage statistics over time. A review of this question may be warranted in the future, but for the time being we are resigned to paying significantly more for the academic content our faculty and students require, while enjoying the added benefit of additional content in the state-funded Gale databases.