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Title of Column: ERM Ideas & Innovations

How to Evaluate and License an E-Resource During a Pandemic (Without Scheduling a Meeting)

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From the Column Editor, Randall Lowe:

The COVID-19 virus pandemic has thrust libraries, along with institutions and communities of all types across the globe, into managing situations many never imagined they would have to face. This ERM Ideas and Innovations column details Frostburg State University's experience in evaluating, trialing and licensing a faculty-requested electronic resource during the 2020 health pandemic. Leveraging established procedures for regularly reviewing licensed e-resources, as well as observing a set of principles that enable constructive dialogue with faculty, administrators and vendors, placed the library in a position to successfully cancel existing subscriptions and fund a new database, despite the significant fiscal challenges faced as a result of the pandemic.

Column:

The year 2020 will certainly be one of the most memorable in our lifetimes as a health pandemic raged across the world and the United States experienced its most significant civil unrest in several decades. The only thing that was certain was a high degree of uncertainty in our personal and professional lives. By the time the middle of March arrived, libraries of all types closed their doors and suspended offering in-person services as the COVID-19 virus forced states and localities to quickly institute emergency mitigation orders that forced a shut-down of many, if not most, sectors of the economy. Fortunately, libraries have spent the last two decades developing and offering online collections for their users, as well as reference and instructional services. Much of the spring was spent ensuring that these could be offered uninterrupted and

meet expected increased demand from users, while library staff simultaneously shifted to working from home.

In addition to providing virtual student and faculty support for the remainder of the spring 2020 semester, the librarians and staff of the Lewis J. Ort Library at Frostburg State University (Frostburg) spent a great deal of time planning for various scenarios to continue library services and collection availability for the upcoming summer and fall terms. On top of all these activities, our library experienced evaluating, trialing and licensing a new e-resource at the request of faculty and administrators from Frostburg's College of Business. We continued to move forward with finalizing the review and procurement process as the health pandemic unfolded – all without scheduling a meeting of key on-campus players – and as completing the spring semester and supporting changes to university operations consumed daily schedules.

The e-resources management (ERM) procedures our library has established and consistently followed over the past 12 years to evaluate our online collections and include teaching faculty in this process – as well as the relationships we have developed and continue to carefully cultivate with faculty – allowed us to make the necessary difficult decisions to cancel some existing subscriptions and obtain administrative approval to add a new database to better meet the curricular needs of the College of Business. This foundation built upon the procedural and the personal placed us in a position to be successful in this endeavor despite the unprecedented challenges facing our institution.

Background

Frostburg State University is a regional comprehensive public university located in Western Maryland that enrolls approximately 5,200 students (Frostburg State University, 2019). The university is comprised of the following three colleges: College of Business, College of Education, and College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (Frostburg State University, 2020b). While this column will focus on our collection development efforts with faculty and administrators in the College of Business, the library's approach to evaluating and making e-resource procurement decisions applies to all three colleges.

Lewis J. Ort Library E-Resources Collection Development and Evaluation Processes

The Ort Library began licensing web-based e-resources in 1998. As detailed in a previous ERM Ideas and Innovations column (Lowe, 2019), our library embarked on a concerted effort beginning in 2008 to (1) increase the representation of e-resources in the library's collection within our existing materials budget framework; and (2) systematically engage both library and teaching faculty in this process to ensure that these resources met curricular and research needs.

We began engaging teaching faculty in this process through the administration of two respective surveys in 2008 and 2009 to gauge the value of the Ort Library's print and microfilm journals, print monographic standing orders and database subscriptions. Shortly after the completion of these initial surveys, our working relationship with teaching faculty began to greatly improve through the revitalization of our library liaison program and establishment of events like working lunches with academic departments to assess their e-resources and other collection needs, as well as inform service and information literacy program changes.

In addition to engaging teaching faculty more directly in collection development, in 2009 we established a more rigorous process for evaluating all of the library's journal and database subscriptions that included collecting and reporting a more robust set of usage data to assist with decision-making for renewals. Teaching faculty became increasingly integrated into the annual evaluation process over the years as academic departments were contacted to review infrequently used journals and other e-resource subscriptions, not only as a means discuss those that represented a poor return on investment, but also to engage in meaningful dialogue about potential alternatives that might better meet current curricular and research needs.

These efforts have helped us to gradually establish a culture where teaching faculty know that the library will take their requests for resources seriously. This, in turn, has provided us with the opportunity to educate faculty more effectively about the limitations of the library's budget, with an emphasis that this requires us to work collaboratively to make necessary cancelations to underutilized or other e-resources in order to fund new ones (in many cases). The College of Business has now collaborated with the library twice over the past ten years to review and make significant changes to the composition of e-resources that support their programs.

Initial Review of College of Business E-Resources – 2011

Frostburg State University's College of Business

Frostburg State University's College of Business is comprised of four academic departments that offer undergraduate programs in accounting, business administration and economics, as well as a Master of Business Administration (Frostburg, 2020c); the College is Accredited by AACSB International (Frostburg, 2020a). The library has cultivated long-standing and productive

working relationships with the College Dean, Associate Dean and faculty in the Management Department, all of whom have played a major role in reviewing existing library e-resources, evaluating potential new or alternative subscriptions and reviewing the financial implications related to procuring e-resources needed to support their curriculum.

First Major E-Resources Review – Spring 2011

The initial set of web-based e-resources the library licensed beginning in the late 1990s to support College of Business curriculum consisted of journal and report content from EBSCO's Business Source product line, as well as LexisNexis Academic (now Nexis Uni), company financial data from Mergent Online and market and investment reports from Value Line; multidisciplinary databases provided additional article content to faculty and staff. The curriculum throughout the College of Business consists of industry and company analysis, both domestic and global. By the 2010-2011 academic year, Management and Marketing & Finance faculty were finding that students were experiencing increasing difficulty locating sufficient company and industry information to complete their research and assignments. They also began receiving regular contact from vendors who had supplied students with complementary reports, requesting that Frostburg State University consider subscribing to their products.

The Management and Marketing & Finance faculty reached out to their librarian liaisons and me in February 2011 make us aware of this situation; they were and have continued to be consistently helpful in informing us of contact they have had with vendor representatives. At this point, we embarked on a review of the e-resources that supported College of Business curriculum, our first in-depth evaluation with a specific college or academic department since

completing our initial set of collection development surveys in 2008 and 2009 as described above, as well as a subsequent migration of a large percentage of the library's continuing resources from print and microfilm to online format.

To support this evaluation, we continued our conversation with vendors whose products faculty found to be potentially most beneficial, which resulted in the library hosting trials to Passport GMID (Euromonitor) and NetAdvantage (Standard & Poor's). These and existing e-resource subscriptions were used extensively by College of Business faculty and their students in various courses. Students were also introduced to three Standard & Poor's (S&P) print subscriptions: *Industry Surveys*, *Stock Guide* and *The Outlook*. Students were provided with an online survey to provide feedback; they overwhelmingly responded that the information in EBSCO's Business Source database, along with Mergent Online and S&P *Industry Surveys* were the most useful. Not surprisingly, they also desired that the latter be available in electronic format.

Armed with this information, we made the relatively easy decision not to pursue a subscription to Passport GMID. Upon reviewing the library's proposed budget for the next fiscal year, we found that funds would not be available to support simply adding a new subscription. This left us with the question of how to fund a subscription to S&P NetAdvantage, leading to our first significant conversation with a specific group of teaching faculty to make the difficult decision to cancel existing subscriptions to fund a new e-resource. Fortunately, canceling the S&P print subscriptions to *Industry Surveys*, *Stock Guide* and *The Outlook* provided enough of a fiscal foundation upon which the library could license the S&P NetAdvantage database. While pinpointing available funds was not a particularly difficult challenge in this case, *this*

conversation with faculty was significant, setting us up to successfully address similar questions with College of Business faculty during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020.

Revisiting College of Business E-Resources – 2020

In the years following the 2011 evaluation of e-resources supporting College of Business programs, faculty occasionally reported that they received vendor contacts following student requests for non-subscribed content, again primarily for industry reports and company financial data; sales representatives from these vendors typically also reached out directly to the library to provide this information and suggest database trials. When students could not find information in the library's business databases, they most frequently cited requesting information directly from IBISWorld (industry reporting), PrivCo (private company financials), and Statista (statistical data on a wide range of topics). Although they would sometimes receive complementary reports, students reported frustration in running into paywalls when locating content.

To address this problem, library faculty collaborated with College of Business faculty to provide information literacy instruction and supporting LibGuides that more clearly highlighted the library's business e-resources for locating industry research and company financials. We also conducted a campus-wide trial to Statista during the fall 2015 semester, but the depth of content was found to be insufficient to meet the College's needs.

By 2019, we could no longer ignore the fact that College of Business students were continuing to regularly request industry reports directly from IBISWorld. A vendor sales representative

contacted the Associate Dean of the College of Business and me in October to inform us of the regular requests he was receiving from our students for complementary industry reports. The Associate Dean, who happened to be a Department of Management faculty member and leading figure in the 2011 e-resources evaluation, and I soon began a dialogue to consider a trial to IBISWorld during the spring 2020 semester as well as the fiscal ramifications of a possible subscription.

IBISWorld Industry Intelligence Trial

I reached out to our IBISWorld sales representative in December 2019 to discuss a trial for the upcoming spring semester and to investigate database content, pricing and license terms. After obtaining this background information, I was straightforward in describing our objectives for evaluating this e-resource as well as the conditions that would need to be fulfilled for us to consider a subscription.

First, the database content would need to meet College of Business curricular specifications, which meant that we required a semester-long trial in order for faculty and students to utilize and evaluate IBISWorld for the entire duration of the courses it would primarily support. Second, I was blunt about our budget situation. A subscription would require deeply discounted pricing and – even with a discounted rate – the College of Business was going to need to agree to cancel existing library resources to identify funding. It was important that the sales representative know that a subscription to IBISWorld would require a significant amount of evaluation and work on our part to make a reality. Third, I made clear that user feedback received from a trial survey would have significant influence in our discussions with teaching faculty and that negative, or

even moderately positive responses, would not be sufficient for us to move forward with a subscription.

The sales representative and IBISWorld management agreed to our request for a lengthy trial, which was conducted from January 20, 2020 to May 1, 2020. We would evaluate three IBISWorld “membership options,” with additional content included at each successive level. To my surprise, I also received an early quote for aggressively discounted pricing, a very positive development.

The IBISWorld sales representative kept in regular contact with me, providing usage statistics almost weekly. Throughout all of our communications, I remained clear and consistent in reiterating our objectives and fiscal limitations.

Fiscal Environment, Pre-Pandemic

The university’s fiscal environment and status of the library budget for the 2019-2020 academic year, pre-pandemic, is important to note as we considered a possible IBISWorld subscription. While the library’s materials budget was stagnant for many years following the Great Recession of 2007-2009, we felt that our established collection evaluation processes and outreach efforts placed us in a position to work effectively with faculty to ensure that library resources were meeting their programmatic and curricular needs, even though a flat budget meant we would need to cancel underutilized (or other) e-resources to make room for new ones.

We had worked diligently to educate teaching faculty about this reality and made significant progress in this area since our initial collection surveys in 2008 and 2009 and business e-resources evaluation in 2011. This included collaborating with the Biology Department to evaluate usage data and conduct vendor pricing negotiations for most of 2014, which resulted in significant journal cuts to fund database subscriptions that better met their needs. By the time 2020 arrived, our developing dialogues with faculty across the university included evaluating library e-resources supporting the African-American Studies, Psychology, Nursing and Physician Assistant Medicine programs.

We were confident that our efforts over the preceding decade had allowed us to successfully find a way to work collaboratively with faculty to dynamically evaluate and make meaningful changes to the make-up of the library's e-resources collections while operating within the framework of a stagnant budget – a reality we believed would be the status quo for a number of years. Then, March 2020 arrived.

Enter the COVID-19 Pandemic

Frostburg State University closed its physical campus on March 19, 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with the spring semester completed virtually. As teaching faculty scrambled to shift all courses to online format, library faculty and staff acted to perform operations and deliver services from their homes.

As it became clear that the pandemic was likely to continue for an extended period of time and the national, state and local economies were effectively frozen, we soon learned that the State of

Maryland Comptroller's Office suspended all payment processing except for payroll and items and services approved as "mission critical." We rushed to cancel all outstanding firm orders and began to prepare for Fiscal Year 2021 budget cuts. All procurement, including payment of the library's continuing resource subscriptions, required approval from both the university Provost and Vice President for Administration and Finance.

The trial to IBISWorld continued unabated despite these rapidly changing environmental factors. In mid-April, I provided trial survey responses received by that time, which were universally positive, to the College of Business Associate Dean. Anticipating the College may wish to subscribe to IBISWorld, I also sent him an initial set of use and cost-per-use data for current database and journal subscriptions that supported their programs, while clearly stating we would have needed to make cancelation decisions even without the expected fiscal difficulties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. With anticipated budget cuts, we would need to make even deeper cancelations to fund a new e-resource.

Being a veteran of the 2011 subscription review, the Associate Dean responded that he not only understood completely that current subscriptions would need to be sacrificed to make room for a subscription to IBISWorld, but that we should look to eliminate all subscriptions that did not represent a strong return on investment as a means of demonstrating that the College of Business and Ort Library were good stewards of university and state funds; this might also serve the needs of the library in regard to preserving e-resources that supported academic programs in other colleges. This represented solid strategic thinking, enhanced by the working relationship we had cultivated for many years.

The Associate Dean then conducted an independent analysis of the usage data I provided and listed those subscriptions he identified as a poor return on investment. I followed up by providing additional usage data and other metrics such as the average cost of interlibrary loan requests and journal impact factors, as we negotiated what constituted an “acceptable return on investment” for each current subscription under evaluation. After additional exchanges regarding our data analyses and the receipt of more positive survey responses, the College of Business and library decided on a final list of database and journal cancelations in mid-May to support an IBISWorld subscription should the vendor meet our general pricing requirements.

Obtaining Subscription Approval

After settling on a subscription level at an acceptable price with IBISWorld, we needed to move forward with obtaining administrative approval. Typically, this would involve license review by the library and the university’s Coordinator of Procurement; however, the suspension of payments by the state except for those items and services approved by the Provost and Vice President for Administration and Finance due to the financial crisis caused by the pandemic added additional steps to the process. But we felt we had developed a strong case demonstrating the value of this new subscription as well as the means to pay for it and were determined to move forward.

Within days after the Library Director submitted a formal request with accompanying justification for approval of the IBISWorld subscription, another obstacle was placed in our path: the abrupt resignation of the Provost. I continued to communicate with the vendor, providing

updates and appealing for flexibility as the price quote deadline approached. Fortunately, the Library Director was able to keep this request on the table for consideration and we received permission from the new Interim Provost to move forward with the subscription. Our Coordinator of Procurement was very accommodating given the circumstances of managing his own set of challenges brought about by the pandemic.

We successfully executed a license for an IBISWorld subscription in mid-June for a July 1, 2020 start date; it was a great relief that our hard work and persistence was rewarded. Our positive (and often long-term) working relationships with all of the key players at our university, along with the documentation developed to justify the subscription request, allowed us to conduct *each step of this process without scheduling a meeting*; each was completed via email.

Why We Were Successful (This Time, Anyway)

In addition to following our established procedures for reviewing currently licensed e-resources as well as those for evaluating potential new subscriptions, we regularly observe a set of principles that enables us to openly and dynamically engage in dialogues with faculty, administrators and vendors regarding our library's collections, no matter how dismal the fiscal environment may be at any given time. The reality is that we may not always be able to move forward in procuring requested e-resources; however, a willingness to consistently have these conversations with faculty and vendors placed us in a position to make a significant change to our library's online collections to meet the curriculum and research needs of one of the university's three colleges during a health pandemic when fiscal activity came to a standstill on our campus.

Of course, many of these practices, as listed below, are regularly observed by ERM practitioners, but occasional reminders of them help to keep us honest and ensure that we are applying them on a consistent basis. Following them allows us to create some of our own luck in challenging situations.

- **Establish and Follow a Process to Regularly Review E-Resource Subscriptions:** The annual review process we established over a decade ago allows us to be receptive to adding e-resources despite budgetary challenges. Since simply adding new subscriptions on top of existing ones is not always possible, the detailed annual reviews we conduct allow us to immediately provide faculty with information about underutilized e-resources from which funds may be derived for new subscriptions.
- **Set Clear Expectations and Be Consistent:** Be sure to set clear expectations for new e-resource evaluations and trials and explain fiscal and technical limitations. Be consistent in adhering to them in all messaging and communication with faculty, administrators and vendors. Otherwise, the e-resource evaluation risks becoming a moving target, making it difficult to keep everyone on the same page.
- **Be Candid with Faculty, Administration and Vendors:** It is important that administrators know the library understands and is respectful of the institution's fiscal situation. Likewise, faculty must be made aware of the limitations of the library's budget and be asked to review existing resources for possible cancelation, if necessary. Vendors should also be made aware from the start of the process of fiscal limitations and license requirements. In this example, we made it clear to IBISWorld from day one that we

required a significant discount from the quoted list price or we would not move forward to the trial phase.

- **Document the Process:** Our case was bolstered by the fact that we kept detailed documentation for each step of the evaluation process, including price discounts and survey results as well as usage statistics that supported canceling e-resources to fund more than the cost of the subscription. This was critical for us given pending budget cuts due to the health pandemic.
- **Know Your Institution's Procurement Procedures and Personnel:** Become familiar with all relevant procurement procedures at your institution so that you may address known issues, including simple mistakes; this can expedite the process. Respect the personnel who manage procurement on your campus by following guidelines, having paperwork in order and necessary approvals completed; be ahead of deadlines when possible. These individuals are quite busy and often work under stressful conditions. Now is one of those times.
- **Be flexible:** Expect the unexpected and be prepared to make necessary adjustments. COVID-19 was not on our radar in December 2019 when we decided to begin the IBISWorld evaluation and trial. When most institutional procurement was significantly curtailed and we began to plan for Fiscal Year 2021 budget cuts, we did not give up on a subscription once it was clear faculty wanted to move forward after the trial. This is where our annual e-resources evaluation process and experience navigating budget cuts helped. Faculty understood from the onset that we would need to make subscription cancelations to license IBISWorld, so when the health pandemic and related economic troubles arose, it wasn't a surprise to them that even more cuts would be necessary to

fund the subscription. We experienced a positive outcome this time, but accepting bad news is also part of being flexible.

- **Build and Maintain Positive Working Relationships:** The old adage “it’s about building relationships” applies here. Building and maintaining positive working relationships with colleagues, library administration, institutional administration and vendor representatives takes time, but adding them to your ERM tool chest is invaluable. Our long-standing relationships with the College of Business Associate Dean and faculty allowed us to get on the same page early in the IBISWorld evaluation and keep it moving forward.
- **Model Professional Behavior:** The Golden Rule – treating others as you wish to be treated – is another maxim that applies to ERM work. This allows for a culture of cooperation and improvement to flourish, while helping others understand your library’s objectives and limitations in providing e-resources to users. Getting faculty to buy into our annual e-resources evaluation process and establishing more trust along the way took years but was critical in the success of this case. The same applies to vendors: clearly communicate objectives, expectations and limitations while understanding you are working with another human being who is also trying to do their job.

Conclusion

We had the good fortune in this case to have teaching faculty and administrators who were supportive of the processes we have established over the years to review both existing and potential new e-resources, and who have placed their trust in us as a result of years of outreach efforts. When faculty demonstrate an understanding of the institution’s fiscal challenges and are

willing to give up infrequently used library resources in order to gain those that will be more useful to them, a foundation for success has been built. These essential elements contribute to a culture and environment of cooperation that has allowed our library to serve as an effective intermediary, facilitating processes to procure the most valuable e-resources in support of our university's many academic programs within the framework of our budget.

The above describes one of our success stories; not all of them work out this way. While any number of circumstances are beyond the control of the library, we do have the power to set up procedures, follow a set of principles and model professional behavior that allows us to be successful, even during the most challenging time periods. Doing so is the result of relationship building, hard work and trial and error – all enhanced by time and experience. The real lesson is to pay attention and be patient so that more tools are at your disposal when the unexpected occurs or you are presented with challenges. Taking the viewpoint that these situations present opportunities can also set you up to be successful. If challenges are raw material, then we currently have more than enough to work with in creating ways to meet the many needs of our users.

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