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Biological Sciences Division

The Virtual Journal Reading Room

by

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The Setting

The University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth is one of five schools in the University of Massachusetts system. The enrollment is around 6,000 students. About 1500 of the students are science majors. A new Marine Science Laboratory will open during the summer of 1997.

There is one central library on campus. In the summer of 1995 a new position was created for a science librarian to serve the specific needs of the science students and faculty. The responsibilities of this librarian included collection management, reference, online searching, bibliographic instruction and departmental liaison for the departments of Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Mathematics and Computer and Information Science.

A number of the faculty members had not set foot in the library for years, while others were daily visitors. The immediate goal for the science librarian was to meet with every faculty member in the designated departments and find out how frequently they used the library, what services they liked and what they thought the library should be doing better.

A request which came up almost unanimously was for a reading area for current periodicals. The library has no such space. The incoming issues of serials are shelved directly with the bound volumes, which are arranged alphabetically by title. The lack of a browsing area was so contentious for some that they had proposed removing the science journals from the library and setting up reading areas in their departments! They felt that the need for a display of current science journals was not taken seriously by the library and this clouded their vision of all the positive services the library was providing.

The library was already bursting at the seams. There was no physical space available to create a journal display area, even for a few selected titles in each subject area. While the library sympathized with the concerns of the faculty members, they saw no way that anything could be done to solve the problem at this time.

A Peace Offering

The Reference Department of the library had hired a student with web expertise to work part time on the UMass Dartmouth Library web pages. This student was looking for creative ideas to challenge his abilities and to bring some unique features to our web pages.

What better project than to create a VIRTUAL Science Journals Reading Room? This project would bring a selection of the library's journal issues, with tables of contents, right to the reader's desktop. The reader could then decide whether to make a trip to the library to read a specific article. There was no space involved, no cost, and the project had the potential to create a lot of good will.

Each department (through their designated departmental library liaison) was asked to suggest up to 10 journals to which the library subscribes which they would like to see in the proposed Virtual Science Journal Reading Room. Some replied with more than 10, others decided to postpone submitting a list. The science librarian created a list of interdisciplinary general science titles for the page.

The World Wide Web was searched to locate any of the journals had web presence. Some had wonderful web pages with tables of contents and abstracts for current issues as well as back issues. Others could not be found on the web. The URLs were noted for the journals with tables of contents available.

Uncover was searched for the remaining journal titles and those available on Uncover were noted.

This information was given to the web page student so that he could work on a design for the page.

The next step was to find a way to keep the information on our new web page up to date. The current issues for the web page had to be identified out of the stream of hundreds of incoming issues. This must not impact on anyone's workload, it must not delay the journal issues' arrival on the shelves and it must not require any extensive training. Discussions with the Head of the Serials Department resulted in a methodology which seemed to fulfill the requirements.

At the time this project was conceived, the library was manually checking in journal issues using a Kardex system. The check-in was done mostly by work study students. The simplest way to identify which incoming issues were part of the Virtual Science Reading Room project was to use brilliant fluorescent green cards for those titles. When the Kardex card was green, the student placed that issue into a designated fluorescent green box.

There was another work study student in the Reference Department who worked for 2 hours daily. This student would become responsible for noting which issues had arrived in the green box and placing them back into the stream of issues heading for the shelves.

The Overall Picture

The Virtual Science Journal Reading Room page was created and a link was made to it from the [UMass Dartmouth Library web page](#). The Virtual Reading Room page has a list of UMass Dartmouth departments. Under each department is a list of the journals they requested. Links connect each title to its web site. It is only necessary to click on a title and its current table of contents should appear.

The Kardex was set up with fluorescent green cards for the issues to be detected. Work study students were instructed to take note of those issues and place them into the designated box.

The Reference work study student was instructed in how to record the desired information (volume, issue, date) from each issue in the green box. This student was then instructed in how to access the web page to

update the issue information daily.

Once a week, the science librarian would search Uncover for new tables of contents for journals which did not have a web page of their own. Updated information would be noted on the Virtual Science Journal Reading Room page.

Some of the journal titles on the lists provided by the departments did not have web sites and were not available through Uncover. For these, our student simply updated our library holding information. An occasional search is made to see if web coverage becomes available.

Reactions

Soon after the Virtual Science Journal Reading Room went live many faculty members took the time to make comments. Most of their comments were positive. Many comments had nothing to do with the content of the web page. They were impressed that someone at the library had taken time to think about their concerns and had made an attempt to address them. They were also pleased to see the use of technology.

The Head of the Serials Department was pleased that the flow of work continued smoothly and that issues did not pile up in the green box. She even showed off our new page to visitors to the department.

The one aspect of this project that has fallen behind is the searching of Uncover for new tables of contents to be pasted onto the web page. It is brought up to date occasionally, but is not a high priority at this time. The Reference work study student may someday be taught to perform this task.

Evaluation and Follow Up

There has been no formal evaluation of the project, but an indicator of success may be the frequency of use of the page. From February 1996 through February 1997 the page was accessed just under 2,000 times.

The UMass Dartmouth Libraries have created many more web pages over the past year. Among them are a Virtual Reserves Reading Room where professors post solutions to assignments. There are also links to our CD-ROM databases and electronic resources.

Our users find it very convenient to be able to access the library 24 hours per day from their labs and offices. They have seen our willingness to listen to their concerns and relations with the library have improved.

There has also been some reorganization in the building. The library now has an electronic classroom with 14 workstations for students and an excellent projection system.

Space was reallocated in the library building and plans are underway to create an area for lectures and receptions. That space will also include a very limited current journals display area.

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