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The Network of Alabama Academic Libraries and the Consortial Licensing of Electronic Databases

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Introduction

Consortial licensing of electronic databases and journals offers significant advantages to libraries. As described by Kohl and Sanville, “In the last decade and a half the convergence of two explosive trends—the rise of digital information and consortial organization—have provided radical new possibilities for improving libraries’ abilities to get more value out of each dollar spent.” While debates over the ultimate value of “the Big Deal,” an online aggregation of journals offered to libraries as a package has generated numerous debates, the increase in access to journal literature through consortial licensing is an attractive option, particularly for smaller and mid-sized academic libraries. As Kohl and Sanville point out, the essence of the Big Deal is “primarily a means of substantially improving the purchasing power of the consortium and its library members by delivering proportionately more titles per dollar spent.”

The Network of Alabama Academic Libraries has operated on the principles articulated by Kohl and Sanville and has provided the academic libraries in Alabama with electronic access to a wide range of titles by increasing the purchasing power of the institutions through shared purchasing power.

History of the Network of Alabama Academic Libraries

When the Network of Alabama Academic Libraries (NAAL) was established in 1984, its goals were ambitious: to coordinate resource sharing among academic institutions in the state of Alabama that offer graduate education.

The purpose of the Network of Alabama Academic Libraries (NAAL) is to coordinate academic library resource sharing to enhance education and research. NAAL is an unincorporated consortium of the Alabama Commission on Higher Education and Alabama’s eligible public and private four-year colleges and universities. In addition, other research libraries not affiliated with educational institutions may join as nonvoting cooperative members.

NAAL currently consists of twenty-one member institutions, along with a representative of the Alabama Commission on Higher Education. The twenty-one general members include both public and private non-profit institutions. Additionally there are seven cooperative members consisting of two federal libraries, three state agency libraries, one special library, and one public library. In 2000, the NAAL Advisory Council established an affiliate institution program for the eight private non-profit academic institutions in Alabama that were not eligible for general membership due to lack of graduate programs.

The member libraries of NAAL have worked assiduously to ensure cooperation that would benefit the students, faculty and researchers in Alabama. As described by Dr. Sue Medina, Director of the Network of Alabama Academic Libraries, “Alabama is unique among the states in considering its total academic library resources as a single research collection. The resources are housed in the libraries of the various institutions, but are available for use by all students, faculty, and researchers.” Through the 1980s and 1990s, NAAL efforts focused upon the sharing of resources, both via traditional interlibrary loan services and document delivery activities. By the early 1990s, however, NAAL embraced group licensing of databases as a strategy to improve access to information. A statewide plan for electronic access to information, “An Electronic Gateway to Information: Networking for the Nineties,” was adopted by the NAAL Advisory Council in 1992. The overarching logic that drove this decision was that given the inherent poverty of the state, only by collective action could the institutions overcome the economic limitations each institution’s budget placed on their libraries.

NAAL and the Alabama Virtual Library

NAAL was an early leader in advocating a statewide collection of electronic resources. Recognizing that the students coming to the state’s universities were under-served by the resources in their local school systems and public libraries, NAAL began in the early 1990s to advocate negotiations with vendors for a statewide program that would benefit K-twelve schools, two year colleges, public libraries, as well as colleges and universities. In 1998, by working with the leadership of key education agencies, a successful lobbying campaign was conducted which resulted in the Alabama State Legislature providing three million dollars for funding the Alabama Virtual Library (AVL) (http://www.virtual.lib.al.us/). Five state agencies were responsible for the governance of the AVL and each appointed three representatives to a governing council. The AVL licenses full-text access to fifty-six journal databases or encyclopedic resources, and eleven citation only resources. Within the full-text resources, the Alabama Virtual Library licenses access to more than nine thousand full-text journals and magazines. Because of the support provided through the AVL, NAAL is able to focus upon licensing databases that have a higher level research component.

NAAL Licensing Practices

The Network of Alabama Academic Libraries has developed a set of guiding principles, described under the heading of Online Content Program on the NAAL Webpage (http://www.ache.state.al.us/NAAL/background.htm). Among the background information provided is a description of the NAAL licensing strategies. The principles that NAAL adheres to for allocating group costs to its members are:

- NAAL should make it possible for as many members as possible to subscribe to needed databases by seeking the lowest possible group cost and allocating individual costs as equitably as possible.

Rumors from page 14

Recently read a column by Kathleen Parker which I cut out and put on my bedroom work table. It was called “Loss of Newspaper Book Sections Symptomatic of Rising Illiteracy” and was published in the Charleston Post & Courier on Thursday, April 26 (p.13A). It’s about the recent decision by the Atlanta Journal-Constitution to eliminate its book editor position. Now there are only five stand-alone book sections: The Washington Post, San Francisco Chronicle, Chicago Tribune, the San Diego Union-Tribune, and the New York Times.


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<http://www.against-the-grain.com>
No member should pay more than an individual subscription would cost.13

In allocating costs, NAAL utilizes five models4 to allocate group subscription costs to the individual subscribers in the groups. These models were developed when vendors provided a single group quote, but can be adapted for use with almost any quote if the vendor allows NAAL to allocate the costs. The models are:

• The FTE Model. The total group cost is distributed using the participating institutions’ student FTE data. Each institution pays the percentage of the cost that represents its percentage of the group’s total student FTE.

• The Equal Model. The group cost is divided equally amongst the participating institutions.

• The 50/50 Model. In this model, the participating libraries divide one-half of group cost equally. The remaining cost is divided using the FTE allocation.

• The Bid Model. Institutions are asked to “bid” the amount they can pay to be a part of the NAAL group.

• The Vendor Model. Vendors will present quotes stipulating the price for each institution. Vendor pricing is most often linked with access controlled by simultaneous users with a set number of users assigned to each participant.

With each model, the AUM Library has benefited by being able to extend access to full-text journal coverage at a reduced cost for licensing products, particularly when compared to our licensing a product as a single institution. In negotiating the license for a product, NAAL seeks to establish a common expiration date for renewal. Any current subscribers are able to transfer an existing subscription for a resource into a NAAL group licensed subscription. Each of the models listed above has advantages and disadvantages which are listed on the background page for the Online Content Program.15 The advantages and disadvantages are identified as follows.

The FTE Model results in the lowest possible cost for the smallest members and the highest possible costs for the largest members. As a result, it violates NAAL’s second principle that larger schools may pay more than those they would pay for an individual subscription. The FTE Model works the best when participating institutions are similar in size.

The Equal Model works best for reference type products not generally used by students, e.g., Books In Print, Ulrich’s International Periodicals Directory. It is also used when a group shares the same number of simultaneous users. The assumption in this instance would be that every user, regardless of the institution’s size, has an equal chance of accessing the database. The model is also used for online products which have a comparable print cost.

The 50/50 Model is judged as being more equitable in distributing costs. Larger schools with bigger budgets are paying more than smaller schools but less than would be the case using the FTE Model. For both the larger and smaller schools, the costs are less than an individual subscription.

The Bid Model has as an advantage — the ability to allow smaller schools to join in a subscription based upon what they can pay. Larger schools will often pay their individual costs or more in order to allow as many institutions to participate as possible. Even doing so, the larger schools benefit from the lower group cost negotiated by NAAL and the resulting group does not incur the higher costs that a smaller group would be charged. Over time, NAAL works to move to a 50/50 Model for the participants in groups using the Bid Model. To accomplish this, renewal price increases are allocated to those schools paying less than 50/50 Model while holding the costs level for those paying more than the 50/50 Model. An advantage for the smaller schools is that even with the renewal price increases there is not the sticker shock of having to come up with a large amount of money to maintain the subscription at renewal.

The Vendor Model utilizes vendor set pricing linked with access controlled by simultaneous users with a set number of users assigned to each participant. This can be a problem in delaying user access to a resource because a limited threshold has been reached. However, NAAL has always been quick to react to situations where this occurs and works with the vendors to acquire additional simultaneous users for the group. Overall, the price stipulation provided by vendors does not offer a distinct advantage for the NAAL libraries.

Benefits of NAAL Licensing

NAAL licenses access to ninety-six separate databases,16 three of which are provided by multiple vendors. In one instance, NAAL negotiated with the database vendor for a discount based on the number of subscribers and then negotiated a separate access cost with the database platform provider so members could choose their preferred provider platform. NAAL has also negotiated deeply discounted secondary access to the same licensed content available from multiple vendors. Table 1 documents the number of databases and the allocation formula ascribed to each.

The methods that have been used by NAAL to license databases have saved the citizens of the State of Alabama more than two million
dollars annually\(^7\) by reducing the costs for licensing of needed databases by the participating institutions. More importantly, the Online Content Program has assured that NAAAL members can add needed databases which might not have been possible if the institution was forced to accept the vendor’s retail pricing. In actuality, however, the savings are far more extensive. The value of print costs for titles included in one of the SMT databases alone is in excess of three million dollars. In providing statewide access to the general members of NAAAL, one can easily extrapolate the benefits received by the state. For the Auburn University at Montgomery (AUM) Library, we license sixteen databases through NAAAL. Of these, four are abstracting and indexing services only. The remaining twelve all include full-text access.

In 2006, the AUM Library spent $202,481 to license electronic resources, including databases and e-books. Of the databases, sixteen were subscribed to via NAAAL at a cost of $77,630. These sixteen databases had 92,509 searches conducted for a cost per search average of $.34. The searches conducted resulted in 38,978 journal articles being retrieved, for a cost per article of $1.99. Given that Mary E. Jackson has reported a unit cost of mediated ILL / Document Delivery services in 2002 as being $17.50,\(^8\) the AUM Library has certainly received an extraordinary benefit by participating in the NAAAL Online Content Program. Our users have access to articles at their convenience. By our participation in the NAAAL program AUM has been able to license databases that we would never be able to afford on a stand-alone basis. This is particularly true with SMT databases such as Science Direct and Wiley Interscience.

The spirit of cooperation that has been a hallmark of the activities of the Network of Alabama Academic Libraries has successfully made the leap from a print environment to a digital environment. Through the cooperative licensing of resources, the AUM Library has access to 7,487 journal titles available in full-text. When examining the value the AUM Library has received, we divided by the number of titles available in full-text through the sixteen into the subscription cost. With the NAAAL licensed databases, our average cost per title is $10.36 per title. When taking into account the lack of storage cost necessary for housing print collections of these titles, the library reaps a substantial benefit.\(^9\)

**Conclusion**

The experience of the NAAAL consortium fits neatly within the context of improving access to journal literature while improving the purchasing power of the participating academic libraries. Access to more titles was provided per dollar spent by the academic libraries. Substantial cost savings have occurred for the institutions participating compared to individually licensing the databases. Overall, the NAAAL libraries have chosen to provide users with access to a wide range of literature and to allow the user to judge those titles and articles which have the greatest utility. This has involved a shift from the traditional role of the library and librarians as selectors and repositories for journal literature to a role as a portal, or gateway to a wide range of literature. The cooperative efforts of the NAAAL libraries have immensely benefited the students and faculty in the academic institutions in Alabama.

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Formula</th>
<th>Number of Databases Licensed Using</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>50/50</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bid</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FTE</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vendor</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOLINET*</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (Vendor/Bid Combination)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: NAAAL coordinates member participation for one subscription, but the license for the database is actually provided by the Southeastern Library Information Network (SOLINET).*

### Endnotes


10. Agencies include the Alabama Commission on Higher Education (parent agency of NAAAL), the Alabama Department of Education, the Alabama Department of Postsecondary Education, the Alabama Public Library Service, and the Alabama Supercomputer Authority.


19. I would like to express my deep appreciation to Dr. Sue O. Medina, Director of the Network of Alabama Academic Libraries. Her generosity of spirit and cooperative support in reviewing an early draft of this paper is very much appreciated. — R. Best