The California Community Colleges
CCL-EAR Committee Review
Of RAND California
April, 1999

The California Community College Libraries, Electronic Access to Information Resources Committee (CCL-EAR) undertook a two-week "hands-on" study of **RAND California**, a new Web-based subscription service on California economic and public policy sponsored by the **RAND Corporation**, the nation's largest think tank.

RAND California, launched in early 1998, features a collection of statistics, an online library of research publications, bulletins on both State and Federal policy developments, and a monthly report on California's economy. RAND maintains an extensive database on California, and its cities and counties, ranging from the economy to crime rates to school test scores. The database also includes an online calendar of workshops, seminars, and other discussions on California public policy issues; Federal policy bulletins from the California Institute on national issues, and; a new bi-monthly bulletin on State policy developments.

Each CCL-EAR committee member independently, or in concert with other qualified professionals on their campus library staff, reviewed and evaluated the three Softline databases. Assessments were submitted on a Review Reply Form specifically designed by the Committee for this purpose. Though other staff may have helped in the review process, completion of the form was by the CCL-EAR committee member only and not transferred to another. Ratings were based upon the potential value of the proposal to the California Community Colleges as a whole and not solely on the needs of any specific campus.

Attributes of the information resource were assessed on a scale of 1 to 4 with 1 representing the "least value" and 4 representing the "most value". The following attributes were examined:

INFORMATION DATABASE
Consider its functionality, the appropriateness of format (bibliographic/full-text), the content of the information, the adequacy of coverage (retrospective, current), and its value to the California Community Colleges as a whole.

SEARCH INTERFACE
Consider the functionality and ease of use of the interface. Is it intuitive or is an excessive amount of training required? Are any crucial features missing from the search interface?

USER SUPPORT SERVICES
If documentation is required for successful use of product, is it available, comprehensive, and well written? Is online help adequate and user friendly? Does vendor supply training if it is needed? Is a telephone helpline available?

COST
If cost is available, does it seem reasonable in terms of comparable products?

ACCESSIBILITY OF SERVICE
Is access/connection to product reliable and stable? Is response time adequate?

OVERALL ASSESSMENT

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#1 --- No Support

#2 --- No Support at this time. Future support conditional upon

        enhancements noted below in Comments Section.

#3 --- Support and Recommend proposal be forwarded to Community

        College campuses for their acceptance or rejection. Would like

        to see enhancements in product noted below in Comments Section.

#4 --- Outstanding offer and opportunity. Recommend proposal

        be forwarded to Community College campuses for their

        acceptance or rejection.
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Following are the results of the CCL-EAR Committee's review as well as comments taken from the individual Review Reply Forms:

INFORMATION DATABASE: (4,3,4,4,3,2,3)

With a choice between adding a new fulltext article database and subscribing to RAND CA, I will have to choose the fulltext database. RAND California is one step too specific for the average freshman or sophomore paper. General US statistics would round this database out nicely. The statistics database is wonderful, very good demographic and economic information not easily available elsewhere. The RAND online library however is not fulltext enough. Less than half the database is fulltext.

I like this product for finding California statistical information. The design of the search pages is clear and the interface is easy to use. The product makes it easy for the user to customize their search results. It has 7 broad areas to get statistics from (economics, education, population, etc.) In most areas it has a good range of retrospective and current coverage. It also provides a section to search for and view policy documents on lots of topics that would not be easily obtained otherwise. I see this product as a worthwhile resource to have for our students but also an important one for administrators and faculty.

Incredible resource. Easy to use, chock full of Calfornia data, including California policy documents (I was particularly interested in the link to the Legislative analyst's Office web page). Of great value for community college students (career search, salary and economic information), public policies, California social, economic, political and demographic aspects. Extremely valuable!

RAND California calls itself an "online source on public policy and economics." It is not actually one database, but rather a collection of several databases. Included are a California statistics database which pulls data from over 70 other statistical databases, as well as a number of other reports and bulletins on the a variety of economic and public policy related topics. Some of what's here is available elsewhere on the web (although probably not to the depth found here), but it is *extremely* convenient to have it all in one place and to have a search engine that allows comparisons, detail by region, county and state, etc. The database collection offers a wealth of good information on economic and public policy topics. Broad topic categories include "Business and Economics," "Population and Demographics," "Education," "Community" (crime, air & water quality, etc.) "Health and Socioeconomic," "Government Finance," and "Census." The source of statistical information is given for each search. New information seems to be added, though I see no indication of how often data is updated and new data added. Some of our most often requested statistics are not included (at least not under the phrases our students would search for). No hits on "teen pregnancy," "single parent families," "teen drug abuse," "drug abuse, "etc. (Turns out that very detailed drug and alcohol abuse statistics are there and can even be searched by zip code, but I had to resort to a search on "drug" to find them.) What's included here is excellent information, assuming that one does not need national or international statistics, of course.

In general, I think this database would be a useful tool for community college libraries. The section on "California Statistics" probably serves us best because it allows for searching a variety of statistics for most areas in California and makes available a comparison of years as well so that the researcher can obtain a sense of trends. The "California Statistics" database serves very much like an abridged regional version of "Statistical Abstract of the U.S." Much of the information provided is both current and retrospective, although there were some categories of statistics in which the most current information was a couple of years old. Also, in the case of the statistics on air quality, for example, there was no explanation of what certain abbreviated terms meant. The other searchable links would have been more useful if they could all be searched simultaneously rather than each having their own keyword search engine.

The content of RAND California is good but, it might be too specific for community college students. Full-text Economic Reports, with the announced future online availability of archived years before 1998, provide adequate coverage. The "What's New" section brings the latest updates to California Statistics to the attention of the users. The capability of ordering publications online will make any college librarian very nervous. I did not try but I certainly hope that it can be "passworded" in some way for student access.

The most valuable information are the California statistics. The pull down menus make it easy to construct searches and the statistics are ones frequently requested by students. The key word full text search used on the Online Library often retrieves articles with little true relevance. Also, the need to do

separate searches in the reports and bulletins is rather inefficient. However, overall the information available from Rand California is useful and appropriate for community college student's research.

SEARCH INTERFACE: (4,3,3,3,3,3,3)

Very easy to use. Requires minimal training.

The interface for this product is very intuitive and easy to use. From the Home Page it is easy to get to the search screens. There you are given clear instructions for obtaining the statistics you want and a format (pull down windows or check-off boxes) for customizing the results. The design of these pages is uncluttered and you are basically led through the process. You can do keyword searching in the statistical database and the category database. In one you must use Boolean operators and in the other you cannot use Boolean operators! I did not have good luck using either one, even when I used their example. It would be nice to have a button to go back from instead of using the "back" button on the browser.

For those familiar with the Web it should be a fairly easy adaptation. Under Education statistics I fumbled around a bit until I realized only one STAR report could be requested at a time.

THE PROBLEMS: This website is graphically challenged in a pretty big way. (Maybe its aesthetic design was developed by a statistician instead of by an artist. :-)) My first (and continuing) response to the RAND California interface is that there is WAY too much text to read (for example, the lengthy opening page) to learn about both the contents and the search capabilities of the databases, and what there is to read is spread out all over the place. There seem to be page after page of text with only text *links* to break up the text. While scholars and more advanced researchers may have the time and the patience to read through several pages of explanations and instructions, many community college students, who are usually pressed for time and looking for something uncomplicated, do not. (In fact, *I* did not since I am also pressed for time). The fact that there are several searchable databases within the larger RAND California only adds to the confusion, since the distinctions between the different databases will probably escape many if not most CCC students. I think that part of this problem is simply a visual one. The design of the site should be intuitive enough that people don't have to read and read and read to find out what to do next. See "Comments" section at the bottom of this page for a couple of suggestions on possible solutions for this problem. Further compounding this problem is the absence of cross-database searching capabilities. The "Search this website" option, instead of allowing the user to do one search on a topic for the entire RAND database, leads only to a page listing each of the searchable databases. Each database must then be searched separately. Even as a professional, I kept wanting not to have to take the time to understand clearly what the difference is between the different databases (California Statistics, Online Library, Economic Reports, & California Institute Bulletins.) If *I'm* bothered by this, I know that students with lower reading skills, less sophisticated searching abilities and in many cases English language deficiencies will be, too. I just want information. I don't care if it came from a "report" or a "bulletin" or the "statistics database" until the point where I decide to use the info and I need to cite the source. The usual problems with keyword (as opposed to authority or "controlled vocabulary") searching occur; for example a search on "teen pregnancy" in one of the

databases turns up a report on the cognitive and behavioral development of children before the age of five which just happens to mention that problems in these years can lead to a host of later problems, including "teen pregnancy." The main focus of the article has little or nothing to do with teen pregnancy. Strengths That said, there are features of the search interface which are wonderfully useful. Users can search by keyword or they can browse a list of statistical documents. They can search the entire California Statistics database or they can search or browse within specific categories (e.g. "Population and Demographics"). The databases use a very nice search engine which allows an extraordinary amount of detail and specificity when searching. For example, searches in the California Statistics databases can be limited to statewide statistics on a topic, or limited to particular region(s), counties and cities. Some can even be searched by zip code. (In one category, our *college* was even listed as a limiting option.) Within each of these categories, topics can be further limited by date range, sex, ethnic group or many other factors. It is possible to view more than one geographic entity at the same time for easy comparison of, e.g. the murder rate in Los Angeles County and Marin County. Source information is given for search results. The layout of the actual search screen, even with all its limiting options, is very clear. Students should not have any difficulty following or interpreting this section of the database. Search results can be viewed online as a web page, or saved in tab-delineated format for importing into a spreadsheet. Those with Java-enabled browsers can view stats as a simple line graph. It is not necessary to reenter your ID and password when you return to the home page from various places within our site, as your session will remain active for approximately 12 hours.

I thought the search interface was pretty intuitive with a couple of search examples presented to give the researcher an idea of how to begin. Boolean searching was generally available. There was no keyword searching available for California Economic Reports and the keyword searching available for California Policy Bulletins is case sensitive. A search for "smoking and ban" brought up hits, whereas "SMOKING AND BAN" resulted in none. The keyword searching for California Institute publications was interrupted on a couple of occasions with the message "connection refused by server".

The interface is well-designed and easy to use, especially for browsing. But keyword searching capability is limited and often does not yield any results. I put in "immigration and illegal" as suggested in the example, and the search returned no results. The search term "illegal aliens" "illegal immigration" "homeless" did not fare any better.

The search interface is generally easy to use and intuitive. The inclusion of instructions on how to make multiple selections from the pull down menus is particularly helpful. One useful addition would be a true site search that would retrieve articles from all documents included in the database.

USER SUPPORT SERVICES: (4,4,2,2,3,3,2)

Information provided is clear, concise and helpful.

Hardly any help is needed to use this product. Instructions on the search pages are clear. There is an explanation of the kind of information you will get in each of the 7 broad categories. For the kind of information we are getting, this is one of the easiest databases I have used.

Help and User information not readily available, as far as I could tell. There are FAQs that could provide some assistance. Also an online question box is available.

The absence of any kind of online help would pose a significant problem for many if not most community college level students, particularly since they are not likely to read through all the text on the top level pages. Other than the "Sign our Guestbook" link on the top level page, I didn't see any indication of how one would contact Tech support or Customer support if help were needed.

Each keyword search page had at least a short example of how to search in that database. Though the suggestions for how to search were minimal, at least the researcher would have some idea of how to start searching. I saw only one real "help" screen for how to search effectively on the RAND homepage in the keyword search location. I don't know if the vendor supplies training nor whether a telephone helpline is available.

There is no online help screens except for login. A phone number and email address are listed for technical support. The FAQ on the home page might be useful to some users.

While the site is fairly intuitive, there do not appear to be any "help" screens associated with it.

COST (3,4,4,4,3,2)

The RAND online library is not fulltext enough, and the statistical offerings not broad enough (don't include US) to warrant the $1320 price tag for our 12,000 FTE. A cap should be set at around $700-800.

At $.11 an FTE I think this is a great deal for the kind of database this is.

Wow! Free for a year!!! Let's do it.

You can't beat free. Assuming no future budget surprises, $.11 per FTE is a price we could probably manage (but I understand they just cut TTIP funds). Those with limited budgets might still have a difficult time here if they also felt they need a national or international statistics database. Many class assignments are not limited to California.

The three-year-subscription deal seems like a good deal but I have no knowledge of other comparable products and their cost to make a judgement.

The cost seems somewhat high considering the quantity and limited scope of the included information. Some of the information is available from other sources, and some of the reports and documents indexed in Rand must be purchased. If there is to be a charge for access to the site, I believe that there should not be additional charges for the documents.

ACCESSIBILITY OF SERVICE: (4,2,3,4,3,4,2)

Access has always been reliable and fast.

It may have been a glitch at my end but for every search I did it took one minute or more (yes, I timed each one) to get the results. I hope mine was an isolated case, otherwise this is a problem!

When I first started I had response problems but then it seemed to clear up. May have been a local problem.

I had no difficulty accessing the web site over our campus network. I was disconnected once when searching from off-campus via modem, but I suspect that this was an ISP problem, not a RAND problem. There is no indication of what options are available for searching from remote (i.e. off-campus) sites. Since not all community colleges have proxy servers and since remote access is half the reason for subscribing to an online database, this is an important issue. RAND should consider offering the option of using a referring URL.

Access to the product was generally good. I did find the link to the California Institute rather slow and I found downloading a bulletin and keyword searching to be quite slow at the California Institute site as well.

During the trial period the service was reliable and response time excellent.

On occasion some searches were extremely slow and eventually resulted in an error message "your browser sent a message this server could not understand."

OVERALL ASSESSMENT: (3,4,4,3,3,3,3)

Enhancements: add basic demographics from US census data; make more of the documents available in fulltext, online; cap the price at $700-800.

I like the way this database performs and what you can obtain from it. I am hoping the access time was a glitch, otherwise my rating would be a 3 and talk to the vendor about response time before it could be offered.

Let's go for it!!!

Something about this collection of databases feels new, as if it were still developing and growing. The text dominance of the interface is really off putting, and attention should be paid to developing a coordinated set of graphics to assist users with navigation. The graphic on the opening screen is very attractive. Cross database searching would also make the database much more user-friendly. The content of the database seems excellent for what it is (statistics on California alone). With the notable exception

of the text dominance and the lack of cross-database searching options, the interface also seems excellent, particularly the search engine. OTHER COMMENTS: Suggestions: Something about this collection of databases feels new, as if it were still developing and growing. The text dominance of the interface is really off putting, and attention should be paid to developing a coordinated set of graphics to assist users with navigation. (The graphic on the opening screen is very attractive). Cross database searching would also make the database much more user-friendly. The content of the database seems excellent for what it is (statistics on California alone). With the notable exception of the text dominance and the lack of cross-database searching options, the interface also seems excellent, particularly the search engine. Suggestions: 1. Layout, navigational clues and visual appeal make a HUGE difference in the effectiveness of a web site. Use some graphics to break up pages of text and to make the different choices stand out more clearly. For example, use specific icons or buttons for different databases or topic categories (a small $ sign for "Business and Economics," a graphic of a couple of people for "Population and Demographics," a small schoolhouse or a graduation cap and tassel for "Education," and so forth. Likewise, some specific graphic image for each database (a button with a topic-related image?) at each place where users have the option of starting a search in that database. Don't make users read and read to find the link they're looking for. 2. Get rid of examples that don't work, e.g. on http://www.ca.rand.org/library/search.html, "immigration and illegal." 3. Add cross-database searching. 4. Add a concise, *context-sensitive* online help system. 5. Add contact info (phone, e-mail) for Tech Support and Customer Support. 6. Perhaps some sort of thesaurus or "fuzzy"-ness could be added to the search engine to accommodate searchers who do a keyword search for a phrase that doesn't appear ("drug abuse") when the topic is actually there under different terminology ("drug and alcohol abuse"). 7. Specify what options exist for remote access for subscribing libraries.

I think the product is a useful one for the California community colleges, especially the "California Statistics" section. There are a variety of subject categories that are useful for statistical information for community college students. The lack of one overall search engine for the entire RAND site means more instruction to students to help them learn how best to use the product. With every new addition of an electronic online product, the issue of ease of use becomes increasingly important since many of us have no increase in reference staffing while we offer more and more options for searching. I found it took a while to discriminate between the economic reports, policy bulletins, and the variety of government and research institutions that are made available via this product. I rate it #3 because I think it fills a unique informational and statistical niche.

This could be a useful site for community college students. The ease of searching and compiling statistics has potential for class assignments in economics, health, and other disciplines. However, its use would depend on faculty involvement. I would definitely like to be able to search all components of the site with a single search and have access to the retrieved documents without additional cost.

Rating for home campus only: (2,4,3,2,2,3)

I am dropping our subscription to the database because the contents of the database do no warrant the price and we are shifting money into another full-text article database.

Based on utility for home campus: I think we need this on our campus, and I feel it would be affordable for us to purchase. I would particularly focus on the usefullness of this product for the administrative areas on campus. staff.

Our campus has definite need for a national and international statistics database, so RAND California could not serve as our primary statistics database. Optimally (if the budget situation were good), we might be able to subscribe to both, and I would certainly recommend this if the search interface problems mentioned above were corrected.

I'd rate it a 2.5 due to the amount of time it would take us to explain the resource to students at the reference desk.

Too specific for our students needs at this time.

This is dependent on cost. At present I do not see a great deal of potential use for this database unless faculty were recruited to include its use in their assignments. Much of the statistical information required by our students is available elsewhere at no cost.

Last Updated: February 26, 2002