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Teaming Up Without Selling Out: The Scopus™ Student Ambassador Program at the University of Waterloo

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Abstract

The University of Waterloo Library recently experimented with an opportunity to collaborate with Elsevier Inc. to promote Scopus™, an Elsevier database, through the creation of a Scopus™ Student Ambassador (SAm) program during the fall 2009 and winter 2010 terms. This program involved hiring a student each term to help raise awareness and usage of this database on campus.

This article evaluates the impact of focused e-resource promotion to students, faculty, and library staff. It addresses how the program affected Scopus™ usage statistics, the opportunities it created for user outreach and learning, the effectiveness of its peer-to-peer training approach, and the dynamics of working with vendors on such initiatives.

Keywords

e-resources; outreach; vendor relations; peer-to-peer training; information literacy; library and information studies

Introduction

As acquisition budgets in academic libraries become increasingly applied to the purchase of e-resources, how can we ensure that our users learn about and use these e-resources, which can often remain buried on our libraries' websites? Many of us would agree that promoting library e-resources is a worthwhile and perhaps much-needed activity, but such promotion is often perceived as a time-consuming and low-priority task, even when we suspect that our e-resources might be underused.

At the University of Waterloo, we recently experimented with an opportunity to collaborate with Elsevier Inc. to promote their database, Scopus™, through the creation of a Scopus™ Student Ambassador (SAm) program during the fall 2009 and winter 2010 terms. Scopus™ is a large, interdisciplinary database covering nearly 18,000 peer-reviewed journals from more than 5,000 publishers. The SAm program involved

hiring a student each term to help increase awareness and usage of this database at the University of Waterloo.

SAm Program: The Basics

The Scopus Student Ambassador Program was first implemented in April 2004 at select universities that were trialing the Scopus database, including the University of Toronto, the American University of Beirut, Strasbourg University, Lausanne University and New Jersey Institute of Technology.

The program has since been implemented at over 60 universities worldwide, and case profiles appeared in Elsevier's *Library Connect* newsletter in 2004 (10), 2005 (8-9), 2007 (7), and 2008 (Dewhurst 2-3; Brown 10).

At Waterloo, the SAm program was funded by Elsevier and was co-ordinated locally by the authors in collaboration with an Elsevier representative.

We hired two students over the course of the program – an undergraduate student during the fall 2009 term and a graduate student during the winter 2010 term – to provide targeted outreach that involved co-ordinating formal and informal events to promote the Scopus™ database. In both cases, we managed the recruitment process independently. This involved promoting the opportunity to students across campus and through our library's website, interviewing and selecting the SAms. We encouraged students of all disciplines, levels and competencies to apply, although in the second term we indicated a preference for graduate student applicants. Once the students were hired, Elsevier co-ordinated the Scopus™ training.

> **Scopus™ Day**
>
> This day was held once per term and featured two catered information sessions presented by the student for graduate students and faculty. In between sessions, the students also staffed two information booths alongside Elsevier staff at uWaterloo's largest branch libraries to educate walk-in students about Scopus™

The SAms worked 10 hours per week. Among other things, their activities included:

- planning and executing "Scopus™ Day" – a day of research workshops for faculty and students.

- developing on-demand instructional sessions for departments, student groups and librarians.

- creating promotional materials for the program.

- responding to one-on-one training requests.

- developing relationships with key contacts within the library and across campus.

- integrating the SAm program with the library's current outreach and services.

Measures of Success

To measure the success of the SAm program we looked at how well the program accomplished or affected the following:

- **Scopus™ usage statistics.** Was there an increase in the number of searches run in this database during the program?

- **Opportunities for outreach and learning.** Did the program create opportunities for learning for students, faculty, library staff and the SAms themselves?

- **The library-vendor relationship.** How did this collaboration affect our vendor relations?

Scopus™ Usage Statistics

There was a noticeable increase in Scopus™ usage during the fall 2009 term (Fig. 1). We also observed a steep spike in usage shortly after the fall SAm delivered a series of information sessions.

As Figure 1 illustrates, Waterloo's total usage of Scopus™ has been increasing since 2008. A more drastic increase in the usage trend line was observed for 2009, and it flattened out over 2010. This suggests that the SAm program during the fall 2009 and winter 2010 terms had a stronger positive effect on Scopus use than might have been seen with normal growth. The total number of searches increased from nearly 44,000 searches in 2008 to over 100,000 searches in 2009, an increase of 132 percent. This number continued to climb substantially with over 150,000 searches run in 2010, a 54 % increase over 2009.
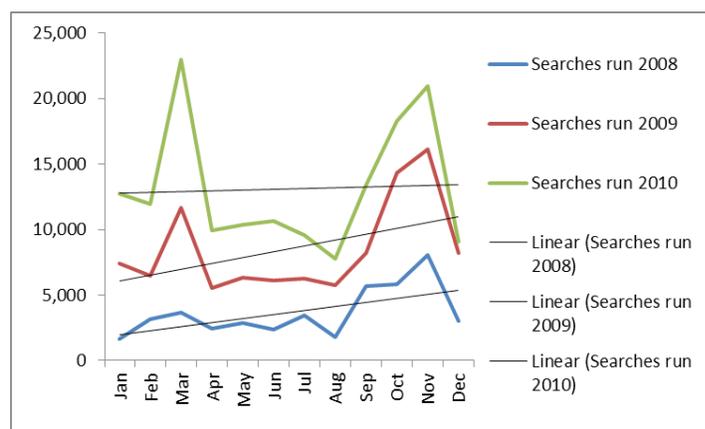

Figure 1 - Total searches run in Scopus™ database by month for 2008, 2009 and 2010.

Most of the searches performed in 2009 were during the fall SAm program. Over 30,000 searches were performed in October and November of 2009 alone. This is an

impressive spike even when one keeps in mind the typical usage spike that many institutions experience during peak periods.

The number of searches run per session in Scopus™ during the fall 2009 term also spiked in October, coinciding with the major Scopus™ events taking place on campus (Fig. 2). This suggests that users were spending more time within Scopus™ during a session.
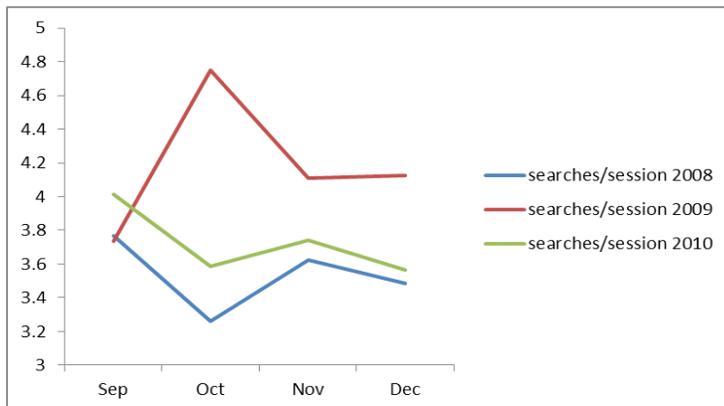

Figure 2 - Searches run per session in Scopus™ database over the fall months for 2008, 2009 and 2010.

In response to the increase in usage, our library added the Scopus™ database to the list of "Popular choices" on our research databases webpage.

Opportunities for Outreach and Learning

The SAm program provided a wide range of outreach and learning opportunities for students, faculty and library staff that would not normally be available.

Special workshops for undergraduates, graduates and faculty provided an overview of how to use Scopus™. During these Scopus™ workshops the library became particularly aware of how engaged our graduate student population is. During the fall programs, over 75 graduate students came out for an evening Scopus™ workshop organized and delivered by the student ambassador. Future events had similarly remarkable attendance.

Although workshops attendees did not provide formal feedback, in all cases they were receptive to the SAms and asked numerous questions during and after the sessions. Questions always related to the Scopus™ database, but ranged greatly according to individuals' interest. Common questions focused on Scopus' citation-tracking functionality, as well as its institutional search and alerts.

The program's peer-to-peer focus offered a unique opportunity for students to learn from other students and was one of the program's key benefits. One of our SAms was a graduate student and was able to relate her own experience to the workshop, showing

how she used Scopus™ when conducting a literature review for her thesis. She introduced high-level information-literacy competencies such as accessing relevant information efficiently and effectively.

Other libraries with past SAm programs have also recognized the benefit of the program's peer-to-peer focus. At the University of Connecticut, the program's underlying premise was "that student ambassadors (graduate students) [would] be very effective teachers because they easily relate to the needs and challenges of their peers" (Betz et al. 250-51). uConnecticut librarian Stephanie Willen Brown writes in Elsevier's Library Connect newsletter that "SAms have agreed that their academic commonality with their students was useful in helping class participants improve their research skills" (13).

At Waterloo, the SAms' in-depth knowledge of Scopus™ caused them to become confident researchers and champions for the library and Scopus™, enabling them to reach their peers beyond their role at the library. Our undergraduate SAm remarked upon how he was able to advise his friends about using Scopus™ for their research, mentioning specifically its citation tracking capabilities. His research knowledge was also applicable in class situations:

> *"In one of my courses our final project was a pretty research heavy assignment... I mentioned to [the professor] that I used to work for [Elsevier], showing people how to use Scopus™ for research... I think that for this project people would really benefit from knowing about the different tools for research." (pers. comm. Fall 2009 SAm)*

During the program, the SAms also strengthened their project-management skills, independent-learning ability, peer-to-peer-training skills, and confidence in presenting to groups.

Library staff also benefited from the program. The SAms co-ordinated specialized sessions on how to use Scopus™ for librarians and other reference-desk staff. Roughly half of these staff members attended at least one of the workshops. Librarians also met with the SAms separately to learn about possibilities for collaborating on outreach to specific academic departments.

The Library-Vendor Relationship

Our collaboration with Elsevier was a conscious endeavour. We were aware of the potential downside of collaborating closely with a vendor, yet pursued the opportunity with interest and optimism for the potential it had to impact our users positively.

We were satisfied with the outcome. Both the University of Waterloo Library and Elsevier benefited from the program.

The uWaterloo Library benefited by:

- reaching more students and researchers in non-traditional settings.

- providing opportunities for peer-to-peer research help.

- creating champion researchers at the library who spread the word beyond the library's borders.

- increasing usage of the library's electronic resources.

Elsevier benefited by:

- increasing usage statistics and therefore demand for their research products.

- enhancing value-added support to client libraries.

- enhancing the library-vendor relationship.

Elsevier also increased its knowledge of the University of Waterloo, which later prompted them to highlight Waterloo's growing nanotechnology program in the April 2010 issue of their Engineering Village newsletter (2010).

Admitting a potential downside

Collaborating with Elsevier naturally required us to become advocates for Scopus™ within our library – a situation that was sometimes met with an undercurrent of scepticism or hesitation by library staff.

While librarians and reference-desk staff were generally supportive of the program, some librarians expressed concern with aspects of the program. Comments included:

> *"While I think Scopus™ does have a lot to offer and it's been good to have its profile raised through the program, I must admit I am a bit uncomfortable with this kind of relationship with vendors."*

> *"I think that if the library is going to continue with the program it needs to bring other like-minded vendors into the mix...allowing other vendors the same opportunity to promote their product."*

When asked, the majority of Waterloo librarians agreed that the library's collaboration with Elsevier was appropriate, was good for the library's image, and maintained the integrity of the library-vendor relationships. Some librarians even suggested that similar collaborations should be replicated with other vendors.

Conclusion

The SAm program provided the University of Waterloo Library with a unique opportunity to evaluate the impact of focused promotion of e-resources to students, faculty, and library staff. It also gave us a chance to test various outreach approaches, the effectiveness of hiring students to provide peer-to-peer training, and the dynamics of working with vendors on such initiatives. Our experience suggests three things. One, that targeted e-resource promotion can increase e-resource usage as well as create valuable opportunities for engaging with our users. Two, that peer-to-peer training is a successful approach that would be worth replicating in other contexts. Three, that vendor collaborations, when pursued thoughtfully, can be fruitful and worth exploring on a trial basis.

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