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ERIC: Overview

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ERIC (the Educational Resources Information Center) has provided, for over 35 years, the most extensive access to education related information in the world –currently more than 1.2 million records. Millions of people utilize ERIC’s diverse services and products every day. As Jim Kohlmoos, the president of the National Education Knowledge Industry Association emphasizes, “As the nation works to implement both the No Child Left Behind Act and the recently passed Education Sciences Reform Act, there has never been a greater need for ERIC and its resources.” (<http://www.nekie.org/about-nekie.html>)

Established in 1966, ERIC is sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education and managed by the Resource Sharing and Cooperation Division of the National Library of Education. It has primarily been structured upon a collection of subject focused Clearinghouses hosted at universities, research institutions and associations.

The ERIC Clearinghouses collect, abstract, and index education materials for the ERIC database; respond to requests for information in their subject specific areas; and produce special publications on current research, programs and practices.

(<http://www.eric.edu.gov/faq/faq.html>)

There are also Adjunct Clearinghouses associated with some of the 16 major clearinghouses which may perform a variety of functions including:

...identifying and acquiring significant literature within their scope area... providing reference and referral services, providing technical assistance, maintaining or contributing to Web sites, and producing publications. They receive funding from sponsors outside of the ERIC system. (ibid.)

Finally, systemwide products and services are created and provided to users by the ERIC Support Components (ibid.). These support contractors also manage the overall database, including marketing, subscription and document delivery services, and provide the documentation to facilitate the work of the Clearinghouses (Walter, 2001¹). The longstanding decentralized structure of ERIC and the diversity of experts on the Clearinghouse committees promote a variety of perspectives on any given education subject area as well as a more locally responsive and accessible system of information.

As a database, additional strengths lie in some unique aspects. Not only are articles from Education journals described, but also articles about educational topics appearing in the literature of other disciplines. The selective nature of the indexing and abstracting service has allowed this broad interdisciplinary coverage. Additionally, the Clearinghouses have collected, described, disseminated and archived documents describing education related activities useful to the day to day practitioner, as well as the education scholar, in the form of ERIC documents. These include tests and surveys, online journals, directories and bibliographies, conference and working papers, books, curriculum and teaching guides. Conservative estimates using sampling statistics show that more than 7 million people utilize the ERIC database through its public or vendor mediated web pages every month (Rudner, 2002 at <http://www.dlib.org/dlib/april03/rudner/04rudner.html>; <http://searcher.eric.org/ablit.htm>). A further strength of the ERIC database has been the quality of the indexing provided through the ERIC Thesaurus, a living and evolving controlled vocabulary. The Thesaurus facilitated access in the print era and continues to facilitate focused searching in this electronic world of increasing full-text. Researchers in particular have come to rely on the consistency, quality and depth of this indexing.

Not content to be a large and heavily used database, however, ERIC has become, particularly in recent years, “an active creator and conveyor of knowledge” (Eisenberg, et al. 1997, cited in Walter, 2001, 10). ERIC also provides expert reference and referral services (e.g., *AskERIC* and

AskERIC Live!), syntheses of research on topics of high public interest and impetus for issue-based professional discussions. The Clearinghouses respond to over 150,000 phone calls and e-mails annually (<http://searcheric.org/abit.htm>). Since its inception, the synthesis of knowledge about educational topics has been a goal. Originally the Clearinghouses produced primarily monographic works, but since the early 1980's the focus has shifted to producing shorter documents, known as ERIC Digests. Over 2,300 digests have been produced by the Clearinghouses and Adjunct Clearinghouses with topics that "span the gamut of education." (Imel, 2002 at <http://ericacve.org/docs/ericfile-spr02.htm>). Additional synthesis products are produced by the various Clearinghouses, often in response to analyses of information requests received, developing trends in the literature, and discussion topics on education listservs. The Clearinghouses have also done much to harness the rich but unruly resources of the World Wide Web by providing links to screened resources relevant to their subject scope. For more detail on the services and products of the Clearinghouses, see "The ERIC Clearinghouses" chapter in the *ERIC Annual Report 2002* (<http://www.eric.ed.gov/>), Walter (2001) or visit the individual Clearinghouse pages, linked from <http://www.eric.ed.gov/sites/barak.html>. These are all examples of a problem-solving approach that attempts to serve the multiple constituents of ERIC with more than a passive collection and description of the literature (Imel, op.cit) More than 10 million people a month connect to the ERIC provided web pages (<http://searcheric.org/abit.htm>) making it the most popular federally sponsored education program.

ERIC has also been at the forefront of technological dissemination practices; ERIC was one of the first databases to create an electronically accessible product in the 1960's, as well as being an early adopter of CD-ROM technology in the 1980's. "ERIC was one of the first organizations to provide large-scale, on-line document delivery," (<http://searcheric.org/abit.htm>) and has led the way in online and virtual reference services. These activities led one reviewer to characterize ERIC's information dissemination strategies as "electronically aggressive." (Eisenberg, et al, 1997, cited in Walter, 2001, 10)

ERIC has also shown itself to be highly efficient economically. For example, a cost and usage study done in the early 80's showed that each \$1 of federally invested money translated into more than \$20 in ERIC associated activity. The ERIC system has also developed corporate partnerships which provide improved document acquisition and dissemination as well as equipment donations at no cost to the government (ibid).

ERIC has demonstrated that it can flexibly respond to changing demands, technologies, and audiences while still meeting its original mission to
...improve American education by increasing and facilitating the use of educational research and information to improve practice in learning, teaching, educational decision making, and research, wherever and whenever these activities take place. (*ERIC Annual Report 2002*)

ⁱ Walter, Scott, 2001. A "'Hothouse' of information and ideas": ERIC resource on the Internet and the public services librarian. *Behavioral & Social Sciences Librarian* 19 (2): 7-38.