Sustainable Funding Models for Mobile Resource Development in Academic Health Sciences Libraries?

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Abstract

Do academic health sciences libraries in the United States have sustainable funding models for the development of mobile applications, mobile resources, or mobile interfaces?

An environmental scan of forty academic health sciences libraries' websites was conducted to identify current mobile activities and funding efforts. This data was supplemented with a targeted review of content in several mobile marketplaces and selected interviews. In general, while academic health sciences libraries embraced and participated in early mobile app development, sustainability of funding for these efforts remains a challenge. Patchwork temporary resolutions are the norm; cohesive long-term strategies and program development are the exception.

Background

Academic health sciences libraries are actively engaged in the provision of mobile resources and services to their primary user populations (research and clinical students, staff, and faculty and health sciences professionals). These activities commenced in the mid-2000s with the increasing acceptance of handheld mobile devices (PDAs and smartphones) in clinical care settings and accelerated with the introduction of tablets in 2010. These innovative and experimental services and resources were frequently add-ons to a library's existing information technology infrastructure. Published literature offers suggestions for DIY programming and free software but no guidance or consideration of the ongoing costs of sustainability.

Methodology

1. **Identified peer academic health sciences libraries** (n = 40) using the following criteria: (a) libraries at CIC institutions with a medical school (b) libraries at ARL institutions associated with medical schools (c) inclusion in the Association of Academic Health Sciences Libraries.

2. **Reviewed related library and/or institutional websites** (n=31) for evidence of mobile app, mobile website, or mobile optimization development by library staff and funding information. Documented product existence and support via curation (i.e., screen captures, downloads, etc.). Obtained institutional contact information.

3. **Reviewed iTunes, Google Play, and Window Apps** (n=16) for products developed by libraries specific to health sciences.

4. **Conducted selective, structured informational interviews with primary personnel** (n=6).

Observations

The **environmental scan** was run in August 2013 and May 2014 (7 private universities; 30 public universities; 3 were disqualified due to "newness".)

- 1 library (2.5%) has developed 2 mobile apps.
- **25 libraries (62.5%) have developed mobile websites and/or mobile interfaces** for their online catalogues; 2 institutions have separate mobile websites for their health sciences libraries.
- **20 libraries (50%) are included in their institution's main mobile app**.
- **2 libraries (5%) do not have any mobile interface** to their website or library catalog.
- In 34 libraries (85%) mobile design work is formally located within Library Information Technology units; 13 health sciences libraries have programming staff/students and web designers.

Aside from apps developed by the National Library of Medicine, **this is the only app in iTunes and Google Play created by an academic health sciences library**.

Several **themes emerged from the interviews**:

*"I'd love to do more with mobile, but I **don't have a programmer** to spare for a mobile website build. The regular website is a mess."*

*"**Mobile is competing with digitization**. Donors aren't interested enough to support these efforts."*

Observations (continued)

*"No one wants to own the mobile stuff, but we all want the library to do it. **We need to plan this out**."*

*"There's **no extra money or staff** but we need to do this."*

*"Our **students want this**."*

Conclusion

While the use of mobile devices has exploded, libraries are still positioning themselves in the new environment. Mobile activities must compete for funding with other library priorities such as programming form internal library systems, digitization, and the growth of special collections. This is not a trend that will disappear. Libraries need to develop strategies for this area.

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