

CASE STUDY: PROQUEST DISSERTATIONS & THESES DATABASE

University of La Verne

ProQuest®



The library had already started to review the way in which it served its patrons and had decided to invest in electronic resources. “One of the purchases we made was for a relatively new database called ProQuest Dissertations and Theses (PQDT). It changed the way students conducted research.”

Donna Bentley joined University of La Verne as librarian over 20 years ago. It was a time of exciting change for the institution, having just embarked on a large project to renovate its library. As part of the project, the library had money to purchase an integrated library system and electronic databases. “At that point we were still using card catalogs,” said Donna. “Digital was still in its infancy and we were using OCLC’s interlibrary loan to access materials we didn’t have on campus. When a student needed to access a piece of literature, they had to fill out a paper form and I had to try and find the information they wanted. It was really time-consuming!”

La Verne serves more than 8,000 students, with a good proportion based off the main campus. The institution’s three doctoral programs are attended mostly by working adults who conduct their study during evenings and weekends. “Given the disparate locations of our students, particularly our doctoral students, it’s very important that we can provide ongoing access to resources. We chose to purchase the full text version of ProQuest Dissertations and Theses from day one (the resource is also available as an abstracts and index only subscription) and it’s been used heavily by both doctoral and masters students ever since,” said Donna.

In addition to providing students with instant access to key information, another benefit of that purchase was La Verne also got digital copies of their own dissertations. “Our paper dissertations go right back to the inception of the doctoral programs that began in the early 1970s. So by making this purchase, not only did we get access to dissertations published by other institutions, we could also now get digital copies of our own dissertations. That was the deal clincher; the database has been a terrific buy for us.”

As anyone who did their dissertation pre-digital era will know, the research process can be time-consuming, particularly if the materials required for research reside in numerous libraries that span counties, even States. As Donna recalls, “I can remember working with doctoral students at University North Carolina at Greensboro and they were running from library to library, carrying boxes of information they’d photocopied for the research they needed. Now students can do it all from their desktop at home.” One significant advantage of the digital age is the ability to search for almost anything you need, including dissertations and theses. Donna concurred, “I’d say that 24/7 access and ability to download the full text PDF of a dissertation directly to a desktop are the primary benefits. But the second part is the ability for students to search for research by keyword and find resources that they might not have thought to look at.”

For doctoral students, starting their dissertation can be a daunting process, particularly if they have been out of school for many years. “I conduct Webex meetings with our doctoral students and often they say to me that they don’t know what to do for their dissertation.” The way we search for information today is a lot different to what students may recall from their time at school, so Donna takes them through PQDT and suggests keywords that relate to their specialty. “They’re always amazed to find how much has been done in their

area. Of course, they can’t do the same thing that’s already been published, but they can use this information to explore new avenues of research.”

Working with the students to identify relevant keywords for their specialty also helps them to broaden their research, as the terms can be used in other databases leading to greater discoveries. “Being able to search and review published dissertations and theses not only helps to make the research process more efficient, but it also leads to better quality research output.”

But its not only the students that want to stay informed of latest research, faculty also need be on top of the cutting edge in their own fields and for this, Donna finds that PQDT is a useful resource. “We have a faculty member in public administration who does a lot with networking. It’s really interesting because he was doing this long before the term was applied to the social aspects of the web. By referring to PQDT, he’s been able to see what other people are talking about with regards to social networks, and how this compares to his own work.”

Another example of how PQDT has supported research comes from a student who is exploring the concept of why libraries in North America should not be privatized. “There’s not been a great deal of research done on this topic, which is interesting,” said Donna, “but there is a lot of anecdotal evidence. The student’s been using PQDT to first see if anyone is working on this, but also to identify ancillary research on other privatization projects that can be called upon to support the case against privatization.”

“ProQuest Dissertations and Theses changed the way students conducted research.”

Donna Bentley, University of La Verne

With its simple to use interface, locating information in PQDT is quick and easy. It includes 350-word abstracts for all dissertations published since 1980 and 150-word abstracts for all Masters theses published since 1988. For selected dissertations and theses, 24-page previews are available so students can see quickly if a paper is relevant for their work. As Donna concluded, “Searching in PQDT is fruitful for students because they can read the abstract and also view the preview pages to check a paper is something they’re interested in prior to downloading it. As I mentioned earlier, our doctoral students do most of their work from their homes so for distance learning, PQDT has made a world of difference. But for me, being able to access electronic resources such as PQDT has allowed La Verne, considered to be a relatively small institution, to provide the same excellent resources you would expect at much larger institutions. We can offer doctoral programs and students, regardless of their location, can do doctoral research.”