

Case Study

The Orbis Cascade Alliance: Strategic Collaboration among Diverse Academic Institutions

Abstract

Chapter 4 of Library Technology Reports (vol. 49, no. 1) "Resource Sharing in Libraries: Concepts, Products, Technologies, and Trends" presents a case study in which the Orbis Cascade Alliance progressed through a series of configurations of automation implementations to achieve shared strategic goals of its members to effectively share collections and other resources.

Note: This case study was adapted and expanded from an earlier article.¹

The Orbis Cascade Alliance, a consortium of thirty-seven academic libraries in Oregon, Washington, and Idaho, is implementing a strategy to share a single automation system instead of the current arrangement of individual systems supplemented by resource-sharing infrastructure. Alma and Primo from Ex Libris were recently selected as the preferred products for the technology environment to be shared among the members.

The Orbis Cascade Alliance represents thirty-seven academic libraries across three states with an aggregated student FTE of 258,000.² The current Orbis Cascade Alliance was formed in 2003 through the merger of the previously separate Orbis and Cascade consortia of academic libraries, which were both established in the 1990s. These libraries hold an aggregate collection of 9 million titles and 28 million items.

The members of the Orbis Cascade Alliance have long held a strategic emphasis on resource sharing. The original basis for the automation of Orbis and the Cascade consortium involved a separate Millennium ILS in each library with an INN-Reach system to provide a union catalog and enable consortial borrowing. In

1993, the Orbis consortium was one of the early adopters of Innovative's INN-Reach union catalog and inter-library loan system, second only to OhioLINK, Innovative's development partner for the product. When Orbis and Cascade merged to form the Orbis Cascade Alliance in 2003, they migrated to a single instance of INN-Reach to connect their Millennium systems.

The configuration using INN-Reach provided very efficient resource sharing since it involved a homogeneous array of Millennium systems and was able to take advantage of proprietary mechanisms to provide transparent borrowing and fulfillment among the participants in the consortium. The initial requirement for participants to use Millennium was seen, however, as an impediment to the participation of new member institutions. The consortium also sought a seamless way to search WorldCat and transfer requests to ILL for resource sharing beyond the member libraries.

In April 2008 the Alliance announced that it would partner with OCLC to implement a resource-sharing environment based on OCLC products including WorldCat.org, WorldCat Local, WorldCat Navigator (based on VDX), WorldCat Resource Sharing, and a circulation gateway to manage transactions with each of the institutions' integrated library systems. A union catalog, called Summit, provides the ability to search WorldCat.org to provide prioritized access to the materials of all the Alliance members as well as the broader holdings of WorldCat. In addition to WorldCat, members use several discovery systems, including Encore, WorldCat Local, Summon, and EBSCO Discovery Service.

Summit

<http://summit.orbiscascade.org>

The Alliance has become slightly more diverse in the ILS implementations involved since it migrated from INN-Reach. The University of Idaho, using Voyager, joined in November 2011, and Eastern Oregon University migrated to Evergreen as part of the Sage consortium in 2010. Thirty-five of the libraries currently operate the Millennium ILS from Innovative Interfaces; one, Eastern Oregon University, uses the open source Evergreen ILS as part of the Sage Library System; and the University of Idaho uses Ex Libris Voyager as part of the Washington-Idaho Network.

Taking the strategic approach to resource sharing a significant step forward, the Orbis Cascade Alliance decided in July 2011 to begin exploring the possibility of a single automation system to support all of its member libraries.³ This process resulted in developing a Request for Information in 2010 followed by a Request for Proposals for a Shared Library Management Service, which was issued on January 2, 2012. Based on responses to the RFP, Innovative Interfaces, Ex Libris, OCLC, and Serials Solutions were invited to give product presentations in April 2012.

On April 18, 2012, the field was narrowed to Innovative Interfaces and Ex Libris. At the July 13, 2012, meeting of the Orbis Cascade Alliance, the Council of Library Directors voted unanimously to select Alma and Primo as the product suite to support the consolidated system and to enter into contract negotiations with Ex Libris. The Alliance has conducted a transparent process with all major documents made available on a publicly accessible website.⁴ This outcome counts as a vote of confidence in Alma from Ex Libris in this early phase of its entry into the marketplace of new-generation library services platforms.

According to John F. Helmer, executive director of the Orbis Cascade Alliance, the migration to Alma is expected to take place from January 2013 through January 2015. He anticipates that WorldCat Navigator will continue to be used through the migration process and beyond. As member libraries begin placing Alma into production, VDX will continue to play an important role for the Alliance, providing resource sharing between the early adopters of Alma and others that

follow later. Even after all the Alliance members have implemented Alma, WorldCat Navigator might remain in use to enable resource sharing in support of other partnerships.

This progression of platforms by the Orbis Cascade Alliance reflects an interest in exploring technology configurations that enable a vision of a distributed group of libraries with a single shared collection. This vision includes concepts of collaborative collection development, opportunities for some degree of shared technical processing and related services, management of consortial purchases of electronic resources, and greater resource-sharing capabilities. Helmer emphasizes that the institutions involved embrace a strategic priority for exploring and pressing the boundaries of deep collaboration. Previous arrangements of separate integrated library systems impeded the progress of collaboration, and the shift to a single shared infrastructure is seen as a path leading to the increased cooperation and improved patron services envisioned.

Many challenges, however, stand out in this approach. Though sharing this vision for collaboration, each library holds an interest in maintaining its own identity and policies. The institutions involved represent a diverse group of academic libraries ranging from as those small as 1,000 FTE to major universities enrolling more than 45,000. The Alliance membership covers a geography spanning three states.

It will be of interest to observe whether the implementation of Alma and Primo as shared infrastructure results in meeting the goals of improved collaboration and patron services once this transition takes place.

Notes

1. Marshall Breeding, "The Orbis Cascade Alliance Selects Alma for Consolidated Automation," *Smart Libraries Newsletter* 32, no. 8 (September 2012): 6.
2. Orbis Cascade Alliance, home page, accessed October 18, 2012, www.orbiscascade.org.
3. Orbis Cascade Alliance, "RFP for a Shared Library Management System," accessed October 18, 2012, www.orbiscascade.org/index/rfp.
4. Ibid.