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# How Is That Going to Work?: Part II – Acquisitions Challenges and Opportunities in a Shared ILS

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## How Is That Going to Work?

### Part II—Acquisitions Challenges and Opportunities in a Shared ILS

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#### Abstract

Building on a presentation given at the 2013 Charleston Conference, this article continues the discussion about acquisitions policies, workflows, and consortial collaboration in a next-generation shared ILS. The Orbis Cascade Alliance is a consortium of 37 public and private academic institutions in Oregon, Washington, and Idaho. In January 2013, the Alliance began a two-year process of migrating all 37 institutions (in 4 cohorts, with a new cohort going live every 6 months) to Ex Libris's Alma and Primo in order to realize efficiencies and increase collaboration within the consortium. The authors, who represent institutions in the first and third cohorts, offer perspectives on new consortial structures stemming from changing workflows, policy issues to consider from a consortial viewpoint, challenges and opportunities for the new system, partnering with vendors, and ongoing considerations for large-scale cooperative collection development and assessment.

#### Introduction

How much difference can a year really make? At the 2013 Charleston Conference, three librarians from the Orbis Cascade Alliance (the Alliance) discussed the initial phase of migration to a shared, next-generation Integrated Library System (ILS) (Spring, Drake, & Romaine, 2013). At that time, only six Alliance institutions had gone live with Ex Libris's Alma, a product still very much in development. Just one year later, 30 Alliance institutions have migrated, with the final cohort completing migration in January 2015 (Orbis Cascade Alliance, 2014d). Although significant improvements have been made to Alma, challenges continue to exist, particularly for consortia like the Alliance with a strong focus on collaboration.

What policies and procedures are needed before all participants have migrated? What decisions must wait until migration is complete for all institutions, and what can or should be addressed while migration is still occurring? As the end of migration nears, does the shared ILS still hold the promise of greater efficiency and better collaboration for the Alliance? By drawing on experiences from institutions in two different cohorts and the opportunities and challenges

they have faced, the authors offer practical guidance for institutions considering similar collaborative efforts.

#### Background: The Alliance

The Alliance is a consortium of 37 public and private academic institutions in Oregon, Washington, and Idaho. Collaboration dates back to 1993, when five public academic libraries in Oregon formed the Orbis Union Catalog. By 2011, collaboration had come to include other shared services: a courier and resource sharing program, an archives program, joint electronic resources negotiation and licensing, a distributed print repository, a preferred monograph vendor, and a demand-driven acquisitions (DDA) e-book program (Orbis Cascade Alliance, 2014a; Orbis Cascade Alliance, 2014e). Realizing cooperative collection development and shared technical services would require some form of shared ILS, the Alliance issued an RFP for a consortial ILS in 2012, ultimately selecting Ex Libris's Alma and Primo products. Ex Libris's concept of the Network Zone, which allows member institutions to share resources and bibliographic records and see holdings from other institutions at the point of order, held particular appeal for a consortium

interested in taking collaborative efforts to the next level.

## Alliance and Alma Structures

Alliance-wide committees and groups guide decision-making and policy development for the shared ILS. To date, work largely has been coordinated by a Shared ILS Team (SILS), with support from a Collaborative Technical Services Team (CTST). With migration nearly complete, the Alliance is transitioning to a new team structure to guide work moving forward (Orbis Cascade Alliance, 2014i); this structure aligns with the Alliance's five program areas and Strategic Agenda initiatives to "work smart," "design for engagement," and "innovate to transform" (Orbis Cascade Alliance, 2014j).

The Ex Libris consortial ILS model consists of an Institution Zone (IZ), a Network Zone (NZ), and a Community Zone (CZ). The IZ contains local inventory, ordering/licensing/vendor information, patron data, and a handful of bibliographic records that cannot be shared across institutions. The NZ contains the vast majority of bibliographic records shared by all Alliance libraries, allowing staff at any institution to see which resources are held by other institutions. The CZ is available to all Alma customers and utilizes Alma's Central Knowledge Base; it primarily contains bibliographic records for electronic resources.

In Alma, acquisitions and cataloging workflows generally begin with a purchase order line (POL) and inventory in the IZ, attached to either a bibliographic record in the NZ or to a bibliographic or collection record in the CZ. Because of the need to use and share bibliographic data in the NZ, acquisitions staff must pay close attention to Alliance policies and standards for bibliographic records.

## Sharing the Work

To ensure all institutions would benefit from a shared ILS, the Alliance initiated discussions about shared standards and policies early in the process. Seven bibliographic shared best practices mandates emerged from these discussions. Alma workflows blur the lines between acquisitions and

cataloging, so it is essential for all technical services staff at member libraries to be familiar with and follow the mandates. The mandates require the following:

1. Institutions must use OCLC as their bibliographic utility and attach their holdings in OCLC.
2. Institutions must abide by a floor bibliographic standard, which sets minimum levels for completeness and mandatory elements (some exceptions allowed).
3. Institutions must use separate records for each format of a title.
4. Institutions must use provider-neutral records.
5. Institutions must catalog at the WorldCat level.
6. Institutions must maintain at least their current level of contribution to the Program for Cooperative Cataloging.
7. Institutions must, whenever possible, use vendor records that meet Alliance bib standards and best practices (Orbis Cascade Alliance Shared ILS Preparation Team, 2012).

At go-live, the first cohort immediately realized policies were needed specifically to address working in Alma. Since that time, the relevant SILS working groups have collaborated with CTST and its internal working groups to identify issues and draft policy, gathering feedback from all relevant constituencies and incorporating changes as needed. Generally, policies are approved by CTST and, if necessary, are sent to the SILS Implementation Team for final approval before they go into effect for the entire Alliance. Alma-specific policies pertaining to acquisitions cover in-process brief bibliographic records, minimum acquisitions data, overlay of records, and best practices for non-serial electronic resource management (ERM) (Orbis Cascade Alliance, 2014b).

In-process brief bibliographic records need to be imported into the NZ or shared with the NZ

so that other Alliance institutions can see what materials are on order across the consortium and avoid unnecessary duplication (of both bibliographic records and the materials themselves). This policy also sets a floor standard for the information required in a brief bibliographic record (Orbis Cascade Alliance, 2013).

The minimum acquisitions data policy requires all institutions to create POLs at the point of order. It also requires that gift materials be added to the NZ as quickly as possible (Orbis Cascade Alliance, 2014f).

The overlay policy deals with replacing records in the NZ via manual export from Connexion or via daily OCLC loads (which add, update, and delete records where Alliance institutions have holdings). The policy's purpose is to make it clear when overlay is and is not appropriate, and to avoid adding duplicate records to the NZ that will need to be removed once the final cohort has completed migration (Orbis Cascade Alliance, 2014h).

The best practices for non-serial ERM document provides a set of guidelines for libraries to use when making decisions about how to handle non-serial electronic resources in Alma. A decision tree assists staff as they try to balance the need for Alliance-level coordination with local conditions that may influence workflow decisions (Orbis Cascade Alliance, 2014g). This tension is at the heart of many of the policy discussions the Alliance has had since the start of migration.

Beyond policy, the CTST Acquisitions Working Group has created Alliance-wide brief bibliographic record templates. These templates live in the NZ in Alma and are accessible to staff at all Alliance institutions who have permissions to create bibliographic records. This is one example of a coordinated effort to “work smart”—by creating a set of shared templates intended for use at all institutions, there is no need for all 37 institutions to create their own templates. To the greatest extent possible, shared templates also ensure consistency in coding for fixed fields and in

the fields and subfields used. Similar to the best practices mandates, the shared templates demonstrate the blurred lines between acquisitions and cataloging in Alma; while bibliographic records traditionally have been the domain of catalogers, acquisitions staff are more likely to use shared templates, given the workflows in Alma.

## Sharing the Pain

Although sharing work remains a central goal for the Alliance, the reality is that many pain points are also shared since Alma is still being developed. Two examples of shared pain points are record loading and import profiles. With migration for all cohorts almost complete, the Alliance is exploring how the potentially time-consuming burden of record loading might be addressed by leveraging the architecture of the NZ, where records for shared packages need only be loaded once. For electronic resources, bibliographic records may be centrally loaded into the NZ (or activated in the CZ) and then made available for all institutions or a select subset. Task groups have been formed to pilot and document shared record loading for electronic Marcive documents, for multi-institution packages like Alexander Street Press, and for streamlining vendor record match points across Alliance institutions.

Import profiles, which dictate how new bibliographic records are loaded into Alma, have been another pain point. Many Alliance institutions use YBP's Electronic Order Confirmation Record (EOCR) service to create bibliographic and order records in their ILS. In order to use the EOCR service, institutions had to set up import profiles once they were live in Alma. Earlier cohorts did much of the initial setup and testing work, documenting their successes and unresolved issues, thereby lessening this pain point for later cohorts. A weekly acquisitions call open to staff from all Alliance institutions allowed participants to share other pain points, ask questions about Alma acquisitions workflows, and suggest Alma enhancement requests that could benefit all institutions.

## **Basic Functionality to Better Usability: Collaborating to Improve Alma**

Throughout migration, Alliance institutions have utilized two primary tools to communicate problems to Ex Libris and to suggest changes to Alma and Primo: support cases and enhancement requests. Ex Libris uses Salesforce to track support cases and enhancement requests for both Alma and Primo. Select personnel at individual institutions can file cases, as can SILS working group chairs in order to document Alliance-wide problems or requests.

The Alliance selected Alma as its shared ILS with the understanding that it would need continued development to build out missing functionality. Enhancement requests are designed to address that missing functionality, as well as to address existing functionality that could be improved. Requests usually come from staff within functional areas, who relay their ideas to members of the relevant working groups. If the working group supports the request, an Alliance-level case is filed with Ex Libris. Enhancement requests often, but not always, make it into Ex Libris's roadmap for Alma and appear in future releases. (Ex Libris has a monthly release cycle for Alma, which requires diligence on the part of staff since the new features sometimes have unintended and adverse impacts on other parts of the system, particularly the NZ.)

Beyond support cases and enhancement requests, the Alliance and Ex Libris have instituted a Center of Excellence (COE) to "focus on the development and continual enhancement of Alma, Primo, and best practices for consortia" (Orbis Cascade Alliance, 2014c). One proposed initiative that may be addressed through the COE deals with improvements for usability, accessibility, and ergonomics in Alma. This proposal addresses a broad swath of issues to improve efficiency, streamline processes, and reduce the need for workarounds using external systems.

## **Third-Party Vendor Collaboration: Real-Time Acquisitions in Alma**

In addition to collaborating with Ex Libris through their established channels in order to improve

Alma, opportunities have arisen for collaboration with third-party vendors. At the Ex Libris Users of North America (ELUNA) annual meeting in May of 2014, staff from Willamette University Library and the University of Minnesota Libraries met with staff from Ex Libris and YBP to discuss partnering to develop an API that would streamline the YBP ordering process and enhance workflow efficiencies in Alma. This new API would replace existing ordering processes that required waiting overnight to retrieve order files via FTP before loading them into Alma the next day. Ex Libris and YBP needed libraries of different sizes—one small, and one large—in order to cover the spectrum of issues found at each type. Willamette's consortial ILS setting presented the additional challenge of multiple zones, since all orders must have inventory represented in both the NZ and the IZ. Ultimately, all parties agreed to move forward with the collaboration, with a projected implementation date of fall 2014.

After several weeks of testing and debugging, the first version of the API was released in September 2014. Using this new service, acquisitions staff can place orders in YBP's online bibliographic platform, GOBI<sup>3</sup>, and see the corresponding order data updated automatically in real time in both Alma (in both the NZ and IZ) and GOBI<sup>3</sup>. Future releases of the API will include the ability to match on different control numbers (matching currently occurs only on ISBNs), allow for manual handling when an ISBN matches multiple records, and integrate duplication control. This collaborative effort is a promising example of relatively quick product development that benefits not only Alliance institutions but also other Alma customers worldwide.

## **Challenges and Opportunities for Collaboration**

Much policy work and decision-making across all functional areas still needs to be done before the shared ILS will enable the Alliance to fully realize its "work smart" strategic objective. While migrating to a shared ILS has allowed us to construct the foundation on which we will build a house together, the final placement of the walls,

windows, and doors—and who will place them—is uncertain. For example:

- In a shared system where one institution may do work on behalf of several or all institutions, how is that institution compensated? How is shared work coordinated and distributed? With 37 institutions, is it practical to expect that shared work can be evenly distributed?
- As Alliance-wide policies and procedures are developed, how do we strike a balance between institutional autonomy/local practice and consistency across the consortium in such a way that maintains flexibility and efficiency while minimizing confusion for staff and patrons?
- With migration nearly complete, how should future training be done, and who should coordinate it?
- How can participation in Alliance-wide committees and groups be increased to guard against burnout and widen the existing pool of expertise?
- Should everyone be able to manage bibliographic records in the NZ, or should that access be restricted?
- Some institutions use CZ records with minimal metadata to describe electronic resources; others only use fully cataloged NZ records. In a shared environment, is there a right way to describe and manage electronic resources, or is a mixed approach acceptable?

- Although Alma allows institutions to see others' inventory, it does not (yet) allow institutions to see one another's order data. Is shared order information critical to building a more collaborative purchasing model or to sharing technical services work? How will the Alliance do consortial assessment given existing limitations in Alma's reporting tools?

### **Moving from How Is *That* Going to Work to How Are *We* Going to Work?**

Eighteen months after the first six institutions migrated, the Alliance has a much better sense of how a shared ILS can work, what Ex Libris can provide, and what Alliance institutions can expect from each other. We are developing workflows that will allow us to maximize efficiencies and minimize pain points so that we “do things once, do things the same, do things together” (Orbis Cascade Alliance, 2014j). The Alliance is actively working with third-party vendors to integrate workflows into Alma and improve discovery in Primo. We agree that being able to share and manage license records, serial publication patterns, and DDA subscription information at the network level are all desirable features; as such, we are collaborating with Ex Libris to incorporate these features into Alma. Despite the incredibly diverse nature of the 37 member institutions, it appears clear we are better off working with Ex Libris collectively to resolve workflow blockers and cross-institutional issues than going it alone. We know the Alliance will continue to encounter both technical and philosophical challenges in the post-migration era, but we are optimistic the solid foundation we have laid will support us in our future collaborative work.

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