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The Florida State Libraries Resource Sharing Initiative: Unity Among a Disparate Group

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Unity among a disparate group[1]

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Abstract

This article discusses the development of a new resource sharing program within the Florida State University Libraries called UBorrow. Background includes information on similar programs and the use of Integrated Library Systems in this type of program. There is discussion on the pilot project which reviewed and selected the delivery system for this new program. Discussion also includes lessons learned concerning UBorrow's preliminary implementation and how unity in this service was created among a disparate group.

Keywords: Resource Sharing, ALEPH, ILLiad, Statewide Programs, Interlibrary Loan, shared collections, consortial resource sharing, remote circulation

The Florida State Libraries Resource Sharing Initiative: unity among a disparate group

Consortial resource sharing services, separate from standard Interlibrary Loan, have gained momentum as a cost effective, often more efficient, way of providing patrons with access to a larger collection of materials than any one library can hold. Many of these programs have been developed as statewide resource sharing services such as OhioLink and GIL Express. Programs like these use methods and systems outside of WorldCat Resource Sharing to cut costs, and implement standards of borrowing and lending that are stringent enough to ensure a high rate of delivery for a specialized population of users.

Background

While an idea for improved resource sharing among the State University Libraries (SUL) of Florida had been growing for some time, it was the upgrade to ALEPH version 19, an Integrated Library System (ILS) used among all the libraries, that enabled the creation of such a service to become a priority project (FCLA, 2009). Version 19 of ALEPH added an Interlibrary Loan module that allowed any ALEPH server to connect to another in order to send and receive resource sharing requests. In addition, the SUL of Florida already shared a Union Catalog which would facilitate a resource sharing program. In 2008, the Council of State University Libraries (CSUL), the SUL leadership group in Florida, decided on the creation and implementation of an unmediated borrowing service among the SULs, eventually named UBorrow (FCLA, 2009).

Unmediated borrowing is an elusive goal of resource sharing that arose as Interlibrary Loan request management systems became more able to automate entire strings of process steps. It refers to a process where requests for materials may be sent from a patron's fingertips to a lending library with no mediation by borrowing library staff. The term unmediated borrowing is a bit of a misnomer in some cases, as there may be several process points where staff action is still required.

The charge to the Florida Center for Library Automation (FCLA) and the committees under CSUL was to test the two available resource sharing systems, ALEPH ILL and ILLiad (an Interlibrary Loan request management system held by all the main libraries among the SULs), in order to make a recommendation for the back-end system of UBorrow. A UBorrow development task force was formed from committee members in order to test the two available systems and create policies that would cement the service as a true unified endeavor among the Libraries. The development work and the resultant service would have no special or additional funding.

Literature Review

There is significant literature on the development, implementation and review of many statewide resource sharing programs. Many of these programs were developed for a variety of reasons. Some focused on expanding access to collections while others use these as effective financial alternatives to creating collections that are often duplicated at other institutions within a state. OhioLink was developed to provide a union catalog for Ohio Universities and has grown to provide resource sharing between the state universities, community and technical colleges, some public libraries and private institutions across Ohio (OhioLink, 2011). A recent retrospective article on OhioLink describes the successes and challenges of the program after twenty-five years of operation (Cook and Smith, 2011).   A similar program in Georgia, GIL Express, has faced potential reductions and elimination of services, however the program's success and impact has contributed to its continued funding (USG, 2012).   Unlike these two programs, the Pennsylvania Academic Libraries Consortium created a union catalog and E-ZBorrow program for their members which provide a statewide program not originally centered around the state university system (Fennewald, 2005). The success of these programs show the power of resources sharing at statewide level but separate from traditional Interlibrary Loan services. These systems were largely centered around the development or implementation of a shared union catalog. This was possible because many of these institutions shared a

Integrated Library system (ILS). The OhioLink selected and purchased an ILS system (Ohiolink, 2011) while Universities of Georgia System shared the ALEPH ILS system. The significant amount of literature available about these and other statewide resource sharing programs provided background that allowed the Florida State University Libraries (SUL) to identify its needs and develop a program without significant background research.

Discussion

In order to test the two systems currently available to all the Florida State University Libraries some development had to be done on the part of ALEPH, and some unified changes had to be implemented on the part of ILLiad. The State University Libraries in Florida began to adopt ILLiad not long after it was offered with the first libraries implementing in 1999 or shortly thereafter. Later the libraries participated in an en masse move from the NOTIS to ALEPH ILS in 2005.   All upgrades to the ALEPH ILS in the years following were made by FCLA at the same time for all institutions.

ILLiad's ability for unmediated processing lay with customizable routing rules and the OCLC Direct Request system that, given some programing, would allow Interlibrary Loan requests to be sent without mediation by Interlibrary Loan borrowing staff. Direct Request requires an ISBN or OCLC Accession number before it can automatically send a request. The shared SUL catalog was updated to provide an OpenURL link that would connect the patron to the ILLiad request form and automatically populate all necessary information. Each library implemented a standardized Direct Request profile and ILLiad routing rule in order move requests without staff mediation and accurately report the results to the rest of the group. All requests were tracked for successful unmediated sending and the time taken at each point of the process. The biggest challenge for the group, while testing ILLiad, was surveying each library's current set up and implementing a standardized procedure in highly differentiated Interlibrary Loan departments.

Since the ALEPH system could connect any library that used ALEPH and had its own ILL module, it also could be used to send unmediated borrowing requests within the SULs and provide locations to the lender without staff looking up the information. New to the SULs, the ALEPH back-end solution required development which was mostly provided on the part of FCLA. FCLA programmers were to develop, in conjunction with the combined SUL development partners, an unmediated system of lending by utilizing the abilities of both the Mango online catalog and ALEPH (Kuntz, 2008).

Testing the systems

The UBorrow development and implementation group was comprised of circulation and Interlibrary Loan representatives from each State University Library and a team of technical advisers from FCLA. Most of the circulation and ILL representatives served permanently on an Access Services committee among the libraries. During development the work of the group was guided by the UBorrow Steering Committee (Council, 2010). Progress reports created by the group were disseminated through all involved committees and subcommittees including the Access Services Subcommittee, Public Services Planning Committee (PSPC, the parent committee of Access Services), and the library deans in CSUL. FCLA technical advisers were the primary agents of information and moved about within all groups and committees to directly report progress.

While FCLA worked on making changes to ALEPH and Mango in order to get a working model of UBorrow to test, a subset of the UBorrow Development group worked with each library to standardize a process with ILLiad that would best illustrate ILLiad's ability for unmediated sending. Evaluation among these two groups focused on the possible amount of unmediated process steps. The time spent during each process was also examined and recorded for evaluation. In addition, a pair of assessment librarians not previously involved with the development group were tasked with traveling around the state and recording the the work processes in action.

Both systems, ILLiad and ALEPH ILL working with the Mango catalog, could initiate a request from the item record in the shared SUL catalog and attach that request to a patron record that previously existed either in ALEPH or ILLiad. The patron's request was sent with no staff mediation to a potential lender among the State University Libraries. Both systems also allowed patrons to access their request information and get status updates through an online interface.

With the meat of the process duplicated successfully in each system, attention was turned to what each system could do that was unique. ILLiad could automatically send the request outside of the SUL system if unfilled. This feature was problematic for the libraries during testing since all involved wanted to keep the experiment within the group. However, it was considered valuable in practice since it would automatically forward a patron's request outside the group if needed. If a request exhausted all possibilities among the libraries in ALEPH the patron would receive a cancellation that referred them to ILL. Much discussion took place over whether this option was acceptable, since many thought that patrons would not be completely aware or care how their request was filled. ILLiad could also divert patron requests to other programs like 'just in time acquisition.' This customization was already in use at many involved libraries who worried that their acquisition or Purchase on Demand programs might be compromised by redirecting borrowers to another system. One final characteristic of ILLiad is that it offered one location for article and loan requesting, something that ALEPH could not do at the time.

One of ALEPH's greatest benefits was that it searched real time book statuses to direct requests. When a patron selected a record in Mango, the system checked the availability of all items at the time of request to decide on the best path of processing. ALEPH also provided call numbers on incoming lending requests and unmediated this part of the lending process in a way that ILLiad could not do. Requesting items with ALEPH and Mango also gave patrons the opportunity of choosing a pick up location on a per request basis. This option was especially

important to those University Libraries that managed several different locations. At these institutions patron records in ILLiad were permanently tied to a home library and all requests were sent to that location.

A click assessment of the two workflows by the assessment librarians provided the primary argument for ALEPH as a back-end for UBorrow. The librarians counted each motion or 'click' made by staff within the request process. Because of ALEPH's automated pull slips printing and attachment of lender location, it required far less 'clicks' than the workflow in ILLiad. Debate continued over the pros and cons of each system. The group turned its attention to figuring out if any of those cons could be eliminated in either system. The final result of the testing was a report by FCLA to the deans of CSUL recommending ALEPH. ALEPH UBorrow was approved and the development team turned their focus to implementation.

Lessons learned/Looking ahead

During testing it became apparent that, while diversity among operations was expected, many SUL ILL operations were not functioning to their full potential. The reasons for this were varied and included the structure of library technical support, the nature of vendor relationships, and training obtained. The organizational structure and leadership culture of the institutions was unique as each institution demographics and strategic missions were not always aligned to foster development of a collaborative program. Challenges arose as the system had to be designed, developed and implemented to accommodate those with less resources or unable to allocate resources to the service. The addition of a parallel resource sharing service, that is of ALEPH UBorrow to the standard Interlibrary Loan services at each library, lead the CSUL to form a task force that would study and suggest the best ways to optimize services and ensure that the two services/systems, ILLiad ILL and ALEPH UBorrow, complement each other.

Since no money was allocated for staffing the new service it was fit into the old structure of pre-existing library departments for the time being. The assumption at the time was that a large amount of Interlibrary Loan requests, an estimated 30-40%, would be diverted to the

UBorrow service (FCLA, 2009). This figure was on the idea that all or most Interlibrary Loan activity between the libraries would move to UBorrow. Once those Interlibrary Loan staff members are freed from their previous workload the Libraries could make more strategic use of the UBorrow system. If not re-examined sometime following a full launch of the service the libraries may risk duplicating workflows and neglecting to make full use of the proposed benefits.

Results

Resource sharing programs, particularly statewide programs like UBorrow, run counter to the conventional wisdom of declining print circulation. The programs provide access to a wider collection of materials which encourages increased usage of these materials. Many of these programs incorporate user friendly requests processes and efficient delivery systems that encourage their use. UBorrow is situated to become highly successful as the implementation and delivery systems utilize preexisting systems and a statewide courier services that will not significantly increase cost of the program. The main cost will be staff time and development efforts which will be the responsibility of the individual institutions providing the service.

Challenges faced by UBorrow will continue due to the disparity and uniqueness of the eleven participating institutions. UBorrow was established at each library with differences in location and processing that mirrored the wide array of pre-existing ILL services. Each institution is faced with specific challenges based on their demographics such as student FTE, staffing levels, organizational structure and leadership culture. Though initially intended as a standardized service, each UBorrow unit continues to address process flows uniquely. This leads to the requirement of increased collaboration and discussion in order to ensure the success of this statewide program.

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