

Innovation through Collaboration – The Orbis Cascade Alliance Shared Library Management Services Experience: An Interview with John F. Helmer

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The Orbis Cascade Alliance (<http://www.orbiscascade.org/>) is a consortium of 37 academic libraries in Oregon, Washington, and Idaho. The Alliance currently serves faculty and the equivalent of more than 258,000 full time students. In addition to its members, the Alliance offers selected services to more than 280 libraries, museums, archives, and historical societies in seven western States. Over the last several years, the Alliance has participated in a variety of collaborative projects including [Summit](#), a system that allows library patrons to search and request library materials owned by Alliance member libraries; the [Northwest Digital Archives](#), providing access to primary sources in the northwest United States; a distributed print repository; and a demand driven shared ebook program. Recently, the Alliance completed the challenging task of organizing and completing a RFP for a shared Library Management Service and, currently, is in the initial stages of implementation. This innovative project has resulted in the Alliance becoming pioneers in embracing the next-generation of library services platforms and serves as an important model for libraries and consortia. More information about the RFP can be located on the Orbis Cascade Alliance website at <http://www.orbiscascade.org/index/rfp>. Editors of *Collaborative Librarianship* recently discussed this project with John F. Helmer.

John F. Helmer is the Executive Director of the

Orbis Cascade Alliance. Prior to joining the Orbis Cascade, John was the Executive Director of the Orbis Consortium and held various positions within the University of Oregon Libraries System. John received his BA in Applied Mathematics and Economics from the University of California, San Diego and his Master of Library Science degree from the University of California, Los Angeles.

CL: In your experience over the years, what type of factors help foster an environment of collaboration among libraries?

Helmer: Productive people tend to be very careful about where they invest their scarce time and it helps for an organization to have a track record of success – a history of collaboration as time well spent. Collaboration also works best when built on personal relationships and when projects are new, exciting, and where all gain from the outcomes. Not every project needs to demonstrate balanced reciprocity but across projects and over the long haul all should give and get in approximately equal measure. Collaboration also works best when there is administrative support and an informed investment of time and money on the part of the participants. For example, participants tend to pay very close attention to the initiatives they voluntarily join and pay to support as opposed to those imposed as a mandate, or even those centrally funded.

CL: Recently, Orbis Cascade conducted a RFP for an ILS/Discovery system. Was there any hesitancy about going down this path rather than enhancing the existing system(s)? If yes, why?

Helmer: Hesitancy would seem to imply a lack of self-confidence or fear of bold action. These have not been significant issues for us. Any rational person can see the cost and risks involved in such a venture but there are costs and risks to inaction as well. Our process has been pursued in a brisk but deliberate manner with lots of opportunities for input. As a result, we have a high degree of confidence in the quality of the eventual outcome as well as how much work it will be to get there!

CL: Taking on a project that involves the cooperation of 37 institutions is a major undertaking. What steps did the Alliance take to ensure that each institution was “on-board” with implementing a new ILS and how did the planning team ensure that each institution had the ability to provide input and was well-represented?

Helmer: This is a big topic and was accomplished in a number of ways, including:

- Creating strong teams that include staff from a broad array of members.
- Designating a lead at each institution. Part of the lead’s job is to facilitate two-way communication.
- Providing multiple ways to provide input: in-person meetings, conference calls, surveys, and targeted phone calls.
- Multiple opportunities to provide input: as the concept is developed, as the RFP is written, as part of product demonstrations.
- Listening to and acting on input. It is not enough to receive input, the team also needs to read, analyze, and act on what they are hearing.
- Regular email updates.
- Web pages summarizing all work done to date as well as next steps.
- Information “toolkits” to help a library communicate with their campus.
- Outreach to related organizations ... what we called “sister consortia.”

- Communication that includes repetition of important information.
- Did I mention repetition?

CL: You chaired a 12-member ILS team during the process. How did the composition of the group work to your advantage? Any challenges?

Helmer: The groups we form are our most important asset. There is nothing more important than choosing the right people, then giving them reasonable guidance and plenty of latitude. When forming groups we pay some attention to representation by type, size, geography, etc., especially when those aspects are important, but proven merit and potential are our primary guides. We pick the best people for the job but also include those less known but showing promise. The Shared ILS Team that ran our RFP process was nothing short of spectacular and the new group now working on implementation has an extraordinarily strong membership and has quickly established a track record of success.

CL: What factors did the Alliance use to determine how the cost of the ILS and Discovery platform is distributed among the institutions?

Helmer: We tried several models, some of which were fairly complex, but in the end settled on a familiar model we have used to distribute membership fees for many years: 40% flat fee, 60% weighted by a three-year average of student FTE. This is a simple, familiar, and stable formula that we judged to be as fair as any other. We also made an early decision not to perpetuate the various inequalities in what members have historically paid for their ILS and related products and to work with individual members as needed to phase in the new model.

CL: How is discovery managed since there will many unique sets of holdings for each school?

Helmer: Ex Libris is providing a consortial implementation of Primo that links the inventory of local holdings for each library with master records that reside in a “Collaborative Zone.” In essence, each library has a local catalog and there is also a shared catalog to use for resource discovery and sharing.

CL: Did the Alliance develop and incorporate measures that would help you determine if the implementation actually made things better? How will the improvements be manifested across such a broad spectrum of participants?

Helmer: We have a strong sense of the impact on total cost of operations and an assessment team that will help us determine the impact of the Shared ILS. We expect that some aspects, such as a collaboration in technical services, will take time to achieve and be an area of active experimentation for years to come.

CL: Now that you have finished the RFP stage of the project, what is the Alliance's strategy for implementation for the ILS and the Discovery platform?

Helmer: This is an immense question! In brief, we will have four cohorts implementing at six-month intervals over a two-year period. The first goes live in July 2013, the last in January 2015. The Shared ILS Implementation Team consists of an Alliance program manager as chair and seven members. Most of these team members also chair functional working groups (Cataloging, Acquisitions, Serials/ERM, Circulation/Resource Sharing, Systems). Some of the working groups include joint appointments to related Alliance committees. The Team has great latitude to make decisions but can also refer selected issues to a Policy Team. Here is our org chart for the project: <http://goo.gl/TmK83>.

CL: Your process was and continues to be very transparent both within your consortium and to the outside world. Any pros and/or cons you care to address?

Helmer: Sunlight is the way to go. We value the input of all our members, other consortia, libraries, and the vendor community. We want member library staff to know as much as possible. It takes some time to achieve this level of transparency but it is very much worth the effort.

CL: What advice or words of caution might you offer another consortium that embarks on a sim-

ilar collaborative path of doing an ILS and Discovery RFP?

Helmer: It is important to have the culture and history of working together before embarking on such an effort. This is a project that requires a high degree of cohesion. It may be helpful to keep in mind that our Shared ILS initiative is big because it takes on three huge projects at once:

- 1) Moving from many to one
Migrating from 37 systems to one, including a migration from local servers to a cloud application.
- 2) Next generation system
Implementing a "next generation" library management system that requires that we think in new ways and engage in some degree of product development, especially where consortial functionality is concerned.
- 3) Collaborative technical services
Creating innovative approaches to collaboration in technical services with a new shared system that provides improved options to experiment and explore the best ways to work together.

Other consortia might not want to do all these things at once or might have already accomplished an aspect we are just starting. For example, many groups already share an ILS and might want to move on to looking at next generation systems. In other words, you don't have to do all three at the same time.

Whether taking on one or all three, I do think that libraries should be looking at next generation systems and strongly considering group implementation. The new open source and proprietary systems currently under development are very exciting and this may well be a time that is not unlike the first migration from card to computer catalogs.