

Satellite Meeting - Reference and Information Services &
Information Technology Sections:

Innovation and the User Experience: Evaluating and Implementing Discovery Systems

Venturing across the Borders: Collaborating on a New Discovery System between Academic and Public Libraries

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Abstract:

Libraries do not minimize potential complexities when they consider acquiring a discovery system. The financial, staffing, and opportunity costs are high. The Indiana State University Library and the Vigo County Public Library confronted aging hardware, increased budgetary pressures, decreased staffing, and poor user experiences when the two libraries began to investigate the utility and potential impact of creating a new consortium to share a catalog system. This analysis also presented an opportunity to investigate discovery systems. A sense of community cooperation and combined purpose led the libraries to create the Library Consortium of Vigo County. The authors share the questions the new consortium asked during the RFP (Request for Proposal) process, and the SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Strengths) of the proposals and the new consortium. The libraries employed multiple channels and platforms to improve communication among the different organizations as well as between information technologists and reference/information services librarians. Even with the understanding of the importance of communication, questions and concerns remained. Reluctant participants maintained an attachment to the legacy Library System, which required ongoing communication, training, and acquiescence.

Keywords: consortia, system migrations, academic libraries, public libraries

Introduction

With different users and thus different user needs, academic libraries and public libraries might be viewed as libraries with little in common. Academic libraries focus their mission on the curricular and research needs of their broader institution. Public libraries focus their mission on the wider public. Academic libraries are generally funded by a mix of tuition,

grants, and governmental dollars (if public). Public libraries are generally funded by local or state taxes. The primary patrons of an academic library are affiliated with the institution. The primary patrons of a public library are the citizens of the local community. Even with these perceived differences, some academic and public libraries have forged partnerships with each other that benefit both the users and the libraries. One such partnership developed between academic and public libraries in Vigo County, Indiana, in 2008-09. While other such partnerships existed at the time, their number was small, especially when considering partnerships that were outside state consortia agreements.

Literature review

Performing a brief literature search revealed only a few articles about academic research libraries and public libraries sharing an integrated library system (ILS) outside state or large regional consortia.

One of the earliest public-academic collaborations was that of Lower Columbia College and the Longview Public Library in the state of Washington. They forged a partnership when the public library decided to "replace its aging Gaylord automated circulation system with a fully integrated automated system" in late 1984 (Baker, 1988, pg. 90). The libraries reaped the benefits of cost savings as well as the benefit of sharing expertise between the staff of the two libraries.

The collaboration between Franklin University and the Columbus Ohio Metropolitan Library followed soon after that of the Washington libraries. These two Ohio libraries merged their catalogs into one system, with informal talks starting as early as 1983 but hardware issues postponing the actual merger for six years. This cooperative venture was motivated to allow "greater ease of patron access," "reinforcement of the university library's access policy to the local community," and to save money in both material acquisitions and in the purchase cost of the system (Maxwell, 1992, pgs. 10-11).

Keene State College and Keene Public Library, located in Keene, New Hampshire, partnered in the early 1990s to move both libraries from a card catalog environment to a combined online catalog system. Both libraries found their collaboration not only saved money but also was a way to "serve and bring together the community, the college, and the patrons and staff of both libraries" (Halverson and Plotas, 2006, pg. 628).

In 2004, *C&RL News'* section, "News from the Field," ran a short announcement about the Library of Michigan's partnership with Michigan State University to create a "unified catalog, designed to maximize service for patrons, enhance the collections of both libraries, and maintain cost and time efficiencies over the next five years" (Orphan, pg. 303).

ILS at ISU

Reflecting on the history of how and why three Indiana academic libraries included a public library in their small consortium means looking back nearly ten years. Indiana State University's (ISU) Cunningham Memorial Library, Saint Mary-of-the-Woods' (SMW) Rooney Library, and Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology's (RHT) Logan Library had shared an online catalog system for ten years. The catalog was under the purview of ISU, with the other two institutions paying a "membership" fee that covered a small part of the overall cost of the system. By 2008, all three libraries were ready to discuss whether or not

they should move to a new system. This decision was brought about not so much by user complaints, but by a growing unhappiness among library staff that the current system was not robust enough to meet the needs of a growing group of more sophisticated users who they believed expected a "Google-like experience." A group of interested employees formed the Technology Committee and was charged with reviewing available systems. No "perfect" fit was found and the topic was dropped until about eight months later when library staff once again brought their complaints to the ISU library administration.

At almost the same time, during a casual conversation between then Vigo County Public Library (VCPL) Director, Nancy Dowell, and then ISU Library Dean, Alberta Comer, it became apparent that each library was in discussions about migrating from its current ILS to a different system. Their conversation became the basis of a library-wide discussion on the pros and cons of forming a consortium among the four libraries. At that time, ISU had an enrollment of 10,000 students, SMW had 1700 students, RHI enrolled 2000 students, and VCPL served all of Vigo County's 100,000 plus residents. The casual conversation between Director Dowell and Dean Comer is not an unusual way to start a collaborative venture. Mathson, Sabotage, and Salisbury (2009) note, "Professional relationships are frequently responsible for the development of partnerships between libraries" (pg. 77).

When discussions began among the four libraries, all library integrated library systems were up for consideration; however, with the nearly two million items held collectively, few systems were robust enough to warrant serious consideration. ISU and its two partner academic libraries were on Voyager from Ex Libris while VCPL was on Symphony from SirsiDynix. The libraries decided to keep these two vendors as possibilities as well as consider a third company, Innovative Interfaces System.

Approach

Library system migrations require regular communication and decision-making between the vendor and technical staff. Successful migrations require the involvement of technical staff, public staff, and users. This migration added the additional challenge of separate governing bodies and unique missions. Tim Gritten served as the project manager. He utilized typical project management phases including developing a needs assessment, seeking staff, user, and community feedback, writing a Request for Proposal, inviting vendors and speaking to their references, and evaluating vendor proposals. In addition to increasing clear communication between information services and information technology departments within each library, the organizations needed to address communication and training issues among the four libraries as well as to develop a new memorandum of understanding that could guide the entire process.

The director of each library formed the core of a steering committee. The committee asked a series of questions to drive the process and to create a set of guiding principles. Why should the library look at a new system, why now, and why should this group of libraries work together? As inevitable, unforeseen problems arose throughout the process, the steering team always returned to these questions. Information technologists proceeded to conduct initial research on competing products. The steering committee drafted an organizational memorandum of understanding, and created a RFP. The libraries invited the vendors to ISU, which had the most space available for large staff meetings, although the committee considered multiple demonstrations at multiple sites. Both information technologists and reference/information services librarians reviewed each catalog's functions, and looked for

any red flags within staff feedback. The steering committee developed user feedback questions. Technology committees visited libraries that used each company, or otherwise spoke to references. The questions reviewers asked included: What is the standard response time? How is the customer service? What functionalities work better for one type of a library or another? The steering committee reviewed all references and evaluations.

As a result of the relationship among the four library deans and directors, the libraries were able to simultaneously commence negotiations with the selected vendor while negotiating the Memorandum of Understanding. The questions the steering committee considered included: What are the relative roles of each partner? What are the legal requirements for the different partners? Who owns the individual bibliographic and item records? What can each library control? How much of this is scalable? How will the specific financial arrangements function?

Findings

ISU Cunningham Memorial Library's 2010-2011 Annual Report states:

On Monday, August 16, the Cunningham Memorial Library was closed for the day. When the library opened the following morning, it launched a new catalog system and new library homepage. Almost every staff member in the library worked on the lengthy and complex migration of its Integrated Library System from Voyager to Millennium. Our partners within the Library Consortium of Vigo County--Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology, Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College, and the Vigo County Public Library--were also closed in preparation for the new catalog system. The newly combined catalog provides patrons of all four libraries with access to more than 1.8 million items. (Cunningham)

A story from ISU's newsroom dated January 29, 2010, tells about the signing of the memorandum among the libraries: "The agreement creates the first academic and public consortium in Indiana and is only one of a handful in the United States" (Libraries sign memorandum of understanding).

The photo in the news story of two vice presidents, one associate vice president, and the Chair of the Vigo County Library Board signing the agreement, further illustrates not only the difference between an academic library and a public library, but also is indicative of the politics of reaching an agreement to which all the administrative levels of the four entities could agree.

The news story states that the reasons for the collaborative venture were many, including:

- Provide better service to patrons including simultaneous searching
- Provide a cost savings for the county and universities
- Allow the members to pool resources
- Offer different kinds of information for users
- Could afford a more robust system by pooling resources including
- Narrow topics more quickly
- Accessible through mobile devices
- Capable of RSS feeds (Libraries sign memorandum of understanding, January 29, 2010).

Although not mentioned in the story, the collaborative venture further addressed the challenges inherent in a ten-year-old system that was configured to last only five years. The extra years had strained the aging hardware hosting its current system. If the hardware had to be upgraded, and it did, this was an excellent time to determine if it were time to also change the ILS vendor and investigate discovery platforms. And if the system was changing, then it was also an opportune time to consider new partnerships.

One additional reason that compelled the libraries to consider forming a collaboration was the economy. When the collaboration discussions started in 2008, the recession was in full swing across the country and the state of Indiana was feeling its impact. By 2009-2010, as talks continued about a possible collaboration, the recession was reaching a crescendo. ISU was facing budget cuts unlike anything seen in current times and the possibility of saving funds through a consortia agreement to jointly purchase an ILS plus saving staff time was very attractive.

Creating a new governance even between organizations that share a common purpose proved challenging. A SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses Opportunities, Threats) analysis became critical to account for the overlapping and occasionally diverging needs of the partner libraries. The steering committee recognized that no system or discovery platform is perfect, or every library would license that mythical product. The mere existence of a shared catalog would lead to closer collaboration among the four libraries. From the patrons' perspective, they would be able to search a larger collection of material through a single interface. From the libraries' perspective, the need for staff from different organizations to work on the shared catalog leads to increased networking and the serendipitous discovery of other shared activities, whether themed events or co-branded marketing opportunities. The larger consortium would reduce migration and licensing costs, require fewer total people to focus on back-end system functionality, and enable other staff to work on new activities.

Migrations are always expensive, both on financial budgets and staff labor. At least some, if not all, of the libraries would need to redo bibliographic instruction materials. If the libraries chose a vendor that was different than the two that were currently in use, the migration's complexity would increase exponentially as all data from the two existing systems would need to be exported before loading the data into a new platform. The steering committee also recognized that any migration has hidden training costs (in staff time), possible data loss, and opportunity costs, as our information technologists could not focus on other activities, such as a possible redesign of the library's website.

Beyond the identification of the inherent advantages of flaws of specific systems, the steering committee recognized that some libraries would be uniquely interested in modules that do not impact other libraries. How should the consortium allocate these costs? ISU agreed to act as the fiscal authority for the consortium. Yet consensus on procedural details among stakeholders beyond the four libraries emerged as unexpected obstacles. PCI compliance (Payment Card Industry Data Security Standard) thus proved the most challenging hurdle to overcome, in that multiple ISU divisions—including Legal, central IT, and Purchasing—needed to work with VCPL, a local bank, and the vendor in order to acquire a payment processing module, even though ISU would never use the service. A question arose about the process to merge the catalog records from different systems. ISU's catalog had more records and was therefore loaded first. However, should duplicate records remain in order to preserve unique MARC information? Academic public service librarians held different perspectives than technical service librarians, but the public library likewise had a different perspective

than the academic libraries. The consortium agreed to manually merge records after the migration. This decision allowed librarians to have greater control over individual records, but it created an enormous labor cost.

The lessons learned in this collaborative venture were many, some were not so unexpected while others caught library administrators by surprise. They expected some staff members would be reluctant participants, at least initially. Mathson, Sabo, and Salisbury (2009) note, "Do not assume that every employee will be excited about the opportunity to meet new people and learn new procedures or practices" (pg. 85). Halverson and Plotas (2009) note that the initial concerns in Keene, New Hampshire, had been about "different overdue fines, loan periods, and classification systems, which needed to be brought together," but another problem they faced was with getting staff buy-in with "some of the library staff members . . . stressed at all the changes" and "not sure initially of the benefits to such a partnership" (pg. 626). Librarians questioned whether the missions of their individual libraries were getting lost in the purpose of the new consortium.

Robust training naturally eased the transition to the new system. However, administrators recognized that staff at all four libraries would feel an emotional loss of expertise. Academic public service librarians and technical service librarians had as many as ten years of experience with the legacy system; they knew the tricks and strategies to overcome the limitations that users typically confront. Now these librarians felt as inexperienced as first-time users of the library. Mistakes will naturally occur more frequently immediately following a new implementation. A shared catalog complicates diagnoses of errors, as the cause may originate in multiple departments rather than just one. It is critical for information technologists to remain patient as library staff across the consortium acclimatize to their new digital surroundings.

Communication across libraries and between technologists and public services occurred throughout the selection, implementation, and launch of the new catalog and discovery platform. Library staff created listservs around common functions (e.g. circulation), and allowed anyone to subscribe, post questions, or exchange new best practices. When it became apparent that electronic sharing of information did not suffice, library administrators began to hold regular meetings across the consortium based around job functions.

However, while administrators had expected the need for robust communication with staff, they had not foreseen that staff would expect to give input on even the most mundane of decisions. Quickly understanding that this was indeed something staff wanted, numerous staff meetings were conducted and surveys were provided to allow staff to offer feedback on ILS functions. Reference librarians indicated that users would need more than the discovery platform's standard interface. Information technologists customized the settings to allow for greater flexibility when reference librarians provided instruction on the system. Even though not all needs could be met, especially with some requests in direct opposition to what another staff member might recommend, staff indicated they appreciated their inclusion into the decision-making process. The outcome of this feedback was not only that staff appreciated being included, administrators also found that front-line staff often had an understanding of what was needed that was at a much deeper level than what they themselves held. As well as providing input, staff also wanted to know what decisions were made and why. It was vitally important to keep the channel of communications open, both up and down the "chain of command."

Another surprise to administrators was the attachment that even the most bitterly complaining staff members had to the former system once the new system was in place. Suddenly, all of the things inherently wrong with the old system were viewed as not really that serious. The workarounds that had formerly made staff members so angry were talked about almost lovingly. Staff and administrators alike had to come to terms with the fact that the new system was not "perfect" and, in fact, had to admit there was no "perfect" system available.

The ISU Library administration and staff also hoped to form a partnership that would go beyond sharing an ILS. During the next few years after signing the collaborative contract, the libraries wrote a grant together, shared programming, engaged in advertising about the role of libraries, and brainstormed ideas about how to best serve the users. The public library also allowed college students to get public library cards by using their college ID cards and each of the college libraries allowed the students at the other institutions to check out material. Shawgo states in her 2012 master's thesis, "It is important to note that many of these partnerships began simply as a cost-sharing method and eventually grew into a stronger connection between the two libraries, resulting in both program based and services-based collaborations" (pg. 9). The partnership among these four Indiana libraries illustrated such a finding with the cost-sharing benefit quickly expanding to include other benefits as well.

Conclusion

Mathson, Sabo, and Salisbury (2009) wrote of their own joint academic-public libraries venture that "the sky is the limit for such ventures" (pg. 85). The libraries at Indiana State University, Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology, Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College, and the Vigo County Public Library certainly found that true as well. Through the combined online catalog project users may now access the collective library holdings. The partnership enlarged the research, teaching, and learning potential for students, staff, and faculty at all three academic institutions while also informing these academic populations about materials available for pleasure reading. It also apprised area residents of academic library holdings, which in turn could prove valuable to their lifelong learning pursuits. In addition, sharing personnel expertise increased cooperation between information technologists and reference/information services librarians. Libraries also engaged in cooperative ventures such as grant writing, publicity sharing, and public programming. For these four libraries and their users, this collaborative venture, although laborious at times, was well worth the effort.

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