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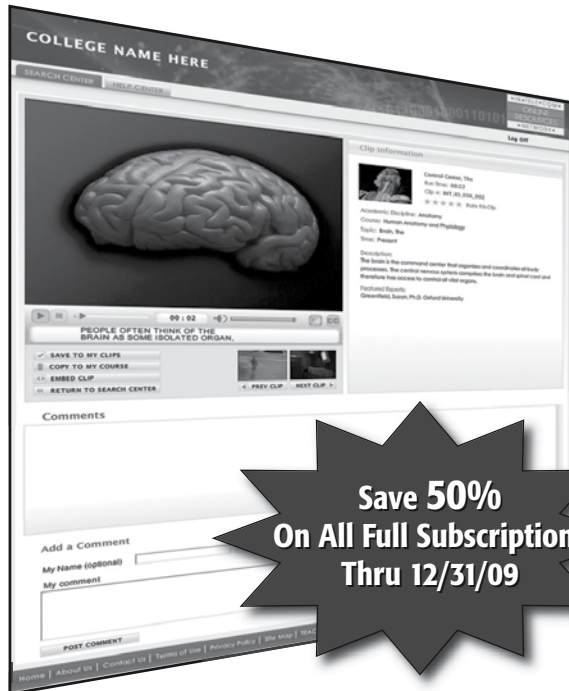
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# Biz of Acq — The Benefits and Challenges of Acquisitions in a Consortium

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The **University System of Maryland and Affiliated Institutions** (**USMAI**) Library Consortium was founded in the late 1990's when the majority of the **University of Maryland System** (**USM**) Libraries joined together to share an Integrated Library System (ILS) and institute patron placed holds (PPH) resource sharing.  Over time there has been an increased emphasis on consortial purchasing of resources, and today the consortium has grown to include all of **USM's** 14 libraries on 12 campuses along with **St. Mary's College of Maryland** and **Morgan State University**.  Today the libraries in the consortium share not only an ILS and PPH service (Aleph), but also a global catalog with shared bibliographic records, a consortium wide implementation of ILLiad, and increasingly sophisti-cated metasearching and linking capabilities through MetaLib and SFX.

This arrangement provides many benefits to the patrons of these diverse libraries and campuses.  Not only is there increased re-source sharing among the institutions, but the consortial purchasing club allows all of the libraries, particularly the smaller ones, to offer a wider variety of resources to their patrons.  However, because the institutions that make up the **USMAI** vary in size and aca-demic focus, not all of the libraries involved

in the consortium benefit equally. Some find that they have suffered a loss of autonomy by joining the consortium, while for others the offers of the consortial buying club are of limited value.

## Shared Catalog/Integrated Library System

The **USMAI** shares an **Ex Libris** Aleph Integrated Library System. The consortium members realize substantial efficiencies by sharing aspects of the system; however, other portions of the system aren't shared, allowing campuses to maintain individual practices best suited to their particular situation. Finally, some aspects of the system such as budgets and other financial information must not be shared, but maintained in strict separation.

Reaching agreement in the consortium on system settings and system changes can be extremely difficult, if not impossible. Invariably, with shared portions of the system, some campuses needs are met and some campuses needs not met, with decisions made based on what the best compromise is as opposed to what the actual best practice might be. For example, with some campuses wanting to show bibliographic data for on-order items in the public catalog, and some not wanting to show it, it was determined to show the data in the catalog because that also allowed for the option of not showing the on-order data by simply not creating an item record, thus accommodating the needs of all campuses.

Bibliographic records, including the minimal bibliographic data needed for an order, are shared, oftentimes eliminating the need to input bibliographic data or to find and import bibliographic records from other sources by each separate campus. This sharing of records also limits campuses policies and procedures for how and when they create or import bibliographic data for their orders, as it's agreed that we must not create duplicate records showing to the public, and also that we must not overlay or overwrite records with different bibliographic information. Campuses that had simply just input all of the bibliographic data for their orders could no longer do so as this would create duplicate records. Campuses that had only used full MARC records from **OCLC** could only do so by overlaying minimal acquisitions records created for the same title. Another area that becomes very complicated with a shared catalog are the increasing numbers of publishers who wish to sell or provide libraries MARC or other bibliographic metadata records for electronic resource sets that carry contractual restrictions on the use of the bibliographic records themselves, as the example below demonstrates. Conversion rates for foreign currencies are also shared, as well as serials patterns, and some reports. While vendor records can be shared among campuses, we don't share them in our consortium; instead every campus maintains its own vendor file for acquisitions. Training and reports are also often shared, but sometimes not.

## Group Purchasing and Resource Support

The consortium provides cost saving benefits by centralizing the processes for vendor contract negotiation and shared electronic resource acquisition primarily at the largest member library, **College Park**. Other **USMAI** institutions also negotiate group vendor contracts, especially when there may be differences in the type or volume of materials collected by smaller or specialized libraries which make it difficult for them to benefit from group contracts meant to acquire materials suitable for the research level collections of the larger institutions. Group purchasing reduces all libraries' costs but the benefit can be greatest for the smallest libraries, who are often able to realize savings for very expensive products and services that otherwise would not be possible with a single library contract. Consortium contracts for purchasing, books, periodicals, binding, and electronic resources are all written so any library in the consortium can use the contract.

Vendors often will provide volume discounts on books or reduced periodical service charges to the largest libraries but offer less discount and higher service charges to small institutions. A one or two percent savings in periodical service charges from a consortium periodical contract has a measurable impact on the budgets of smaller libraries. Consortium purchasing allows such contracting expenses as writing specifications and RFP's, advertising for bids and evaluation of offers to be done once for the entire system. **State of Maryland** regulations for open bidding, creating a clearly defined description of the specifications required, and impartial decision making are time consuming, and must be considered in the evaluation of time spent by the lead negotiating institution. Vendors do appreciate responding to fewer, higher value RFP's, and are often more willing to offer trials or development opportunities for new products to a larger group once the initial contract is in place. The pricing of electronic resources is often based on FTE students. The charge per FTE student declines as the number of students served increases. By pooling all our campus FTE's, all libraries benefit from the volume pricing discounts offered by database providers. But there are certain considerations that must be taken into account when approaching group purchasing and support for electronic resources.

The cooperative purchasing business model of **USMAI** is different from other consortia of its kind in that the largest institution at **College Park** is also simultaneously the lead negotiating institution for the much larger consortia group, the **Maryland Digital Library**, a 53 member library group which includes within it the 16 member **USMAI** libraries. Unlike other buying club consortia groups which negotiate licensing for electronic resources and then allow member libraries to acquire those resources directly from the publisher or vendor at the negotiated rate, **College Park** negotiates license and pricing for all, and then processes all ordering and billing relating to both **USMAI** and **MDL** contracts. This has necessitated some creative uses of the Aleph ILS system used in common by **USMAI** member libraries in order to represent and track consortial budgets and acquisitions purchases

on behalf of all of the libraries, including those who are outside of the **USMAI** group and are part of **MDL**. It has also meant examining the staffing needed to support this effort on top of the otherwise normal acquisitions processes relating to **College Park's** home material acquisitions workflow.

In addition to licensing, ordering and billing, **College Park** also provides electronic resource support for the **USMAI** libraries who share common public access management tools, SFX and Metalib, which are also hosted at **UMCP**. The technical support for creating, monitoring and troubleshooting database access would be difficult at the smaller campuses. A larger base of users allows consortium staff to dedicate experienced staff to these functions who are employed by the largest institution and who often have direct access to the payment data, licensing data and/or systems expertise needed to resolve access problems. Many smaller campuses lack the expertise to support databases on the local campus level. Depending on campus computer staff that are not familiar with these interfaces and often have other priorities would make the access and support of these resources much more difficult.

As the volume and complexity of materials offered in the marketplace increases, **USMAI** has begun to examine the types of tools and/or vendor services it should be using to support acquiring and managing these resources for a sustainable future. As other consortia groups have done, we are beginning to look at how the traditional acquisitions and support tools we have used for print resources can either be modified to help better support electronic resources, or if they must be used in tandem with new tools, or even replaced altogether. An example of this is the current project underway to adapt the use of SFX and Metalib to support the display of terms and conditions of use for our commonly purchased resources covered under consortia licenses held at **College Park**. **College Park** IT staff are programming a Web accessible database to store information about the licenses, and then **College Park** acquisitions staff are inputing the data from the licenses into that database, and then adding a URL to the publisher records in SFX and Metalib. This comes on the heels of a **USMAI** decision not to implement another ERM tool that would have required an unsustainable amount of manual duplicative data entry between licensing, acquisitions, and public access management content held in SFX and Metalib.

## Usage Information

For libraries serving teaching orientated institutions, whether the item will circulate is an important consideration in purchasing. **USMAI's** single catalog and intercampus borrowing provides useful information for making book selection decisions. Intercampus borrowing is one of the most popular services offered by the consortium. This service allows any user to request nearly any circulating item from any other campus without library staff intervention. Requested materials can be shipped to any consortium library, not just the home campus library.

When a book is considered for purchase, the catalog can be checked for other campus owners of the book. Some libraries will not purchase books held by three or more libraries on titles that may be useful, but are not core, to the individual library's needs. Looking at the catalog, circulation charges from other campuses are shown. If the book is charged or missing at several campuses this information suggests the book is in demand and probably would be a good purchase at another campus library.

Intercampus borrowing data can also be used to make acquisitions more effective. The monthly intercampus borrowing report shows books that local libraries should have purchased to support user interests, new editions of important books with good circulation histories and new areas of interest. Each month a title report is generated of home campus borrowers' requests for books from other campuses in the consortium. This report has been used to identify sections of the collection that were out of date. For example, **University of Baltimore** saw several requests for trademark and patent books. A campus law library has extensive resources on these topics but does not collect books written for the informed layman or business person that are needed to support a business program. Based on the intercampus borrowing request, the University found its holdings on the subject were ten years old and ordered new books on this topic. Subsequent tracking of circulation showed these books were used by other users.

### Limited Autonomy

The limits of autonomy for library deans and directors in the consortial environment may be difficult to define, particularly for those administrators who are new to the system. Specific guidelines may be unwritten and are often learned by the process of trial and error. In the case of one of the smaller **USMAI** libraries, under the leadership of a new dean, the seemingly simple purchase of a set of MARC records yielded a lesson directly from the school of hard knocks.

The basic premise at the heart of a shared catalog is that bibliographic records may be openly used. That is, while there is a single administrative record in the catalog for a given entity, any **USMAI** library holding materials described by that record is free to add holdings or items to that record. While this may seem to be an easy concept to understand for those whose daily work involves the technical end of the process, it is far from clear to administrators, vendors, subscription agents, etc. what "shared catalog" actually means.

In this particular instance, the provider of the bibliographic records agreed to the records being viewed in the shared catalog. The use of the records, however, by **USMAI** institutions other than the purchasing institution, was an unanticipated consequence that proved unacceptable to this provider. The loading of non-sharable records into the **USMAI** catalog

was unacceptable to a wide spectrum of groups within the consortium. The situation was resolved by the largest library's willingness to pay a small fee to the provider in order to be able to attach their holdings to the records. If this compromise had not been achieved, it is quite likely that the records would not have been purchased, thereby depriving faculty and students at the initiating library of a valuable resource. The lesson learned here was that all bibliographic records should be purchased with the consortium in mind.

### One Size Doesn't Fit All

The consortium offers the most benefit to general academic libraries. The shared records in the catalog, the group purchases, and the shared user information work best for those libraries that share a similar purpose and have similar patrons. The three special libraries in **USMAI** — two law libraries and one academic health sciences library — often have needs that the consortial purchasing club and shared catalog can meet in only a limited way. The majority of the databases and journal packages offered for consortial purchase — and particularly those purchased with consortial funds for all members of **USMAI** — have little utility for the special libraries. For example, the academic health sciences library chose not to add most of the databases in a recent package acquisition to its Webpage because they were of limited or no use to its patrons. And because the special nature of its collection, the academic health sciences library sees a limited benefit from the information sharing that is inherent in the shared catalog.

This is not to say, however, that **USMAI** membership is not helpful to the special libraries. The size of the consortium and the diversity of its members mean that the resource sharing features it offers — particularly a patron-placed hold service that allows the free sharing of monographs between institutions and no cost ILL of journal articles — means that the special libraries' patrons need for marginal and out-of-scope materials are often met at little or no cost. Because the members of the **USMAI** consortium are willing to adapt their policies and procedures to meet the needs of the special libraries, cataloging records — even shared cataloging records — display MeSH in the health sciences implementation of the OPAC, while only LC subject headings are displayed for other institutions.

### Conclusions

The **USMAI** Libraries' consortial acquisitions practice requires substantial compromise to insure maximum benefit and minimal detriment to each individual library. We are keenly aware that we must consider the balance between cost savings to all libraries measured alongside the cost of human resources needed to implement or support our practice. Substantial time and effort is invested in researching, communicating, developing alternative courses of action, and compromising, with the ultimate goal being that all member libraries benefit from direct cost savings on systems, services, and collections as well as the resources and knowledge shared.

# Random Ramblings — Book Selection Then and Now

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I got to thinking how different the process for book selection is today than when I started out as a librarian in the 1970s as I sent in my orders a few weeks ago before the final deadline for this fiscal year. I had saved much of my allocation until now for faculty requests, but the threat of losing my positive balances prodded me to decide on what materials to buy with my remaining funds. To give some context, I select for the three Romance languages — French, Italian, and Spanish — that are taught at **Wayne State University**. I have both an easier and more difficult time than most selectors. Since the acquisitions unit has one preferred vendor for each of the languages, I can check the vendor databases for availability and choice of editions. On the negative side, I must deal with currency fluctuations and limited availability for some countries within my selection universe.

I did everything except check shelf availability with my office computer, either at work

or from one of my home computers connected remotely to my work computer. With the new generation of browsers, I normally had a minimum of three or four tabs open: the vendor database, the library online catalog, **Amazon.com** for product descriptions and occasionally reviews, and **WorldCat** for bibliographic and holdings information. I happily cut and pasted among the various open windows and used a clipboard utility to retain earlier actions that I might need to repeat. Through trial and error, I have learned where backtracking is the most effective strategy to keep the correct windows open for my next action.

The ordering process varied a bit from vendor to vendor. I particularly liked ordering Italian materials from **Casalini Libri**. My acquisitions contact has trusted me with the database password as long as I am very care-