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The Dream of a Statewide Catalog

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The dream of a statewide library catalog, and the ability to borrow books from any library in the state—it’s a wonderful dream. It’s a dream has been around for as long as I’ve worked in Oregon, and that’s a quarter of a century.

The dream figured prominently in the Oregon Library Association’s Vision 2000 and Vision 2010 and there are strong echoes of it in the new Vision 2020.

In Vision 2000 it was expressed this way:

Goal 2: The Oregon Library Community is committed to unrestricted access to the State’s collection and library services for each Oregonian.

Objective a. Establish a statewide cooperative collection development program.

Objective b. Establish statewide cooperative borrowing privileges.

Objective c. Create and maintain accessible databases containing all library holdings.

Objective d. Strengthen statewide document delivery services.

I recall, as a member of the Vision 2000 Committee, how daring it seemed at the time to refer to “the State’s collection.” “What?—you are claiming *my* collection as the State’s collection,” we could almost hear some contrary library director say.

In Vision 2010 the dream was expressed with similar edginess and enthusiasm as part of the “Call to Action”:

Statewide Library Card

- Sweep away the regional, jurisdictional and procedural boundaries so every Oregonian has a library card that works in any publically supported library.

Statewide Library Catalog

- Make the holdings of all Oregon libraries accessible through one catalog.
- Encourage Oregonians to place interlibrary loans through the statewide catalog.
- Deliver library and information directly to the customer.

The new Vision 2020, being less of a strategic plan and more of a vision, is a little more subtle, but it too calls for greater collaboration to “build, develop and provide access to collections” and “ensure that all Oregonians have access to library resources and services.”

I can imagine someone auditing these library community aspirations of the last two decades, and concluding that we have not been successful in carrying out our vision. Strictly speaking, they would be right. It is not the case that any Oregonian can easily discover any book in any Oregon library and make an online request and have the book delivered rapidly to his or her library, or home. And that really *was* the dream.

But looked at from a closer perspective, one could argue that for most Oregonians, we have come awfully close, and in some cases even exceeded the vision. With only a few exceptions, if you are a student or faculty member at one of Oregon’s four-year colleges and universities, or at a number of our larger community colleges, you have something even better than what was envisioned two decades ago. You have the Orbis Cascade Alliance and the Summit catalog. You can search a database of 9.2 million titles in 36 academic libraries in Oregon and Washington and request that a book be delivered to your home library in a few days.



From time to time I have compared resource sharing in Oregon academic libraries to that in other states using data from the National Center for Education Statistics, which collects academic library data. In 1994 Oregon ranked 16th among the 50 states in interlibrary loans per student enrollment, according to my analysis. Ten years later, in 2004, Oregon had moved to the #1 ranking with an astonishing 1.5 interlibrary loans per student enrollment. That number was three times the mean for the 50 states and the District of Columbia. What a testament to the value of Summit.

It should also be noted that thanks to the Orbis Cascade Alliance we have achieved Goal 2, Objective d of Vision 2000: a statewide courier delivery service. And we have maintained that with good price stability for over two decades. Of course the volume of loans in the Alliance requires a good delivery system. Thankfully, participation in the Alliance Courier has not been limited to Alliance members, but is open to any library in Oregon, Washington and parts of Idaho.

So that's the story for academic libraries. A lot to be proud of. But what about public libraries?

Again, even though we did not achieve the dream of an all-encompassing statewide resource sharing system, we have done very well with a different model. Beginning in the 1980s, the State Library began using federal Library Services and Construction Act (LCSA) funds to invest in shared automated library systems throughout the state. Today we have 10 major shared automated systems serving multiple libraries in one or more counties. In all, these systems serve libraries in all but nine of Oregon's 36 counties. Most have benefitted from investments of LCSA or Library Services Technology Act (LSTA) funds at one time or another. The most recent investment was made in Oregon's largest shared system, the Sage Library System, which now serves libraries (including some academic libraries) in fourteen counties. LSTA funds helped Sage migrate from a proprietary automated system to the new Evergreen open source integrated library system in late 2010.

And what is the outcome of having most of Oregon's public libraries participating in shared automated resource sharing systems? It's nearly as impressive as the outcome for our academic libraries. For a number of years Oregon has ranked #2 among the 50 states and the District of Columbia for interlibrary loans per capita in our public libraries. In the latest national data for 2008, Oregon ranks second only to Wisconsin with 0.9 interlibrary loans per capita. That's more than four times the mean for all states.

So without having one statewide library catalog and statewide borrowing for every academic and public library user, we have nonetheless achieved a top tier ranking in library resource sharing in both our public and academic libraries.

So do we really need to keep thinking about a statewide library catalog and resource sharing system for all Oregonians? I think it's still a wonderful dream, and one that perhaps we can still achieve someday.

If we truly want to serve *all* Oregonians with such a system we need to first solve the problem of the 168,000 or so Oregonians who do not pay taxes to support public library services. These Oregonians reside mostly in Lane, Linn, Columbia and Clatsop counties with smaller pockets of what we at the State Library call "the unserved" in a few other counties. There is general agreement that it would be bad public policy to give away library service, via a statewide library catalog with borrowing privileges, to these Oregonians, and thereby create a disincentive for them ever choosing to do what about 96 percent of Oregonians already do—tax themselves for public library service.



Well, what about a statewide library catalog and resource sharing system for the 96 percent of Oregonians who do support a public library? Here we would first need to do some cost/benefit analysis, because we have already pushed library resource sharing in this state to several times the national average in both public and academic libraries. So we'd need to compare the cost of a statewide library catalog and resource sharing system serving all library cardholders with the marginal gain in resource sharing that we might achieve. My seat of the pants analysis is that the new system would have to come pretty cheap to cost-justify the marginal gains that would probably result.

Any resource sharing system has to have two components: discovery and delivery. Library users need to be able to discover the books and other materials they want to borrow from other libraries, and then they need to be able to request the materials to be delivered to them (usually to their home library). In 2011, discovery comes relatively cheap. OCLC WorldCat can be the basis of what we could call a statewide library catalog for Oregon. It will only include libraries that list their holdings in WorldCat, but that's the large majority of the major public and academic libraries in the state. Delivery (the software that lets the user make requests) is, however, another matter. There are several ways this could be done, and there are vendors who would sell us a delivery system, but it would not be cheap. If we had to use LSTA funds to pay for it, my guess is it would require a major long-term commitment of these funds. And the costs may not be commensurate with the benefit. Remember, most Oregon library users are doing pretty well with the resource sharing systems we have in place. Do we think we can really push resource sharing in our academic libraries much beyond three times the national average, and more than four times beyond the national average in our public libraries? It seems unlikely.

In the past I have been of the opinion that having a discovery system (aka statewide library catalog) without a delivery (requesting) system is a waste of time and effort. But I have revised my opinion. If we can have a discovery system at little or no cost, why not do it? The State Library has, in fact, tasked Terry Reese, the Gray Family Chair for Innovative Library Services, at Oregon State University Libraries, with creating a no-cost discovery system based on WorldCat. It's going to be featured in the *Libraries of Oregon* portal that Terry is creating under contract to the State Library.

The idea for *Libraries of Oregon* came from a task force of the State Library Board that wants to deliver some minimal benefits to "the unserved," those 168,000 Oregonians without a public library. The Board's idea is that there ought to be a Web site where Oregonians without a public library can go to get some services that they are entitled to because they are funded with Federal LSTA funds (e.g., Gale databases, LearningExpress Library, L-net, the Oregon School Library Information System). In addition to these resources, the site can provide information about purchasing a library card at a nearby library. Who knows, over time it might even make "the unserved" interested in annexing their area to an adjacent library service area. The statewide library catalog on the *Libraries of Oregon* site will just be a teaser. It won't include a requesting feature, but it might whet someone's appetite, and it might motivate them to purchase a card at a nearby library.

I can see other public libraries linking to Terry's statewide library catalog on their Web site, perhaps to facilitate interlibrary lending, or maybe just for fun.



But there another way that the *Libraries of Oregon* catalog might be useful. Vision 2010 called upon us to “sweep away the regional, jurisdictional and procedural boundaries so every Oregonian has a library card that works in any publically supported library.” I think it’s time we do this. Can’t we just agree to honor each other’s library cards and loan to each other’s patrons? I’m not talking about interlibrary loan (which would require the costly delivery/request system I already discussed). I’m talking about the ability for anyone with a library card from a public library, or public academic library (privates too, if they want to play), to walk into any participating library and walk out with a loan.

In the past there was a major barrier to making this happen. Since the mid-1980s public libraries in Multnomah, Washington, and Clackamas counties have had a reciprocal borrowing agreement known as the MIX agreement (Metropolitan Library Exchange). Until a few years ago, the items loaned and borrowed were tallied up at the end of the year and libraries actually got paid for net loans. For a long time, the Multnomah County Library got a pretty good sized check from the other MIX participants. But over time loans evened out considerably and a few years ago the MIX participants decided they could live without the payments. As long as the payments were taking place, it would have been hard to institute a statewide reciprocal borrowing program without any funding. But now that money is not changing hands for reciprocal borrowing, not in MIX or anywhere else in Oregon, the way seems clear to extend the MIX idea to the whole state. Other parts of the state are already doing it too. All 14 counties in the Sage Library System have no-cost reciprocal borrowing for walk-ins. Even the University of Oregon and Oregon State University have been extending free borrowing privileges to walk-ins for several years now.

I think it is time for OLA to appoint a task force to figure out how to “sweep away” any barriers to walk-in lending for bona fide library card holders. This would still leave out “the unserved,” as I think it should. Would this be a big deal and a big increase in workload for library workers? I doubt it, but the task force could assess this, since Colorado and probably some other states have already been doing it for years. What would the mechanics of checking out something to someone presenting a card from another library be? I don’t know. Let’s check with Colorado. There must be a relatively painless way, and an OLA taskforce could surely come up with it. I do happen to know that Colorado maintained a fund to reimburse libraries for stolen books, but did away with it a few years ago because it seldom got tapped.

I think statewide library borrowing for bona fide Oregon library cardholders would turn out to be, more than anything, a brilliant publicity stunt that would put the Oregon library community in a very favorable light. We would be saying to Oregonians that we have decided to add value to the library card that you already have at no cost to you. It would earn us all a lot of kudos, and probably at little cost and effort. I say we go for the dream. 

