

Libraries Working Together: Users Benefit when Libraries Share

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I. What is a consortium?

Webster's dictionary defines a consortium as "an agreement, combination, or group formed to undertake an enterprise beyond the resources of any one member."

Libraries have, for decades, organized themselves into consortia as a means of broadening the services they provide to their public which would otherwise be unaffordable to any individual library. Libraries of all sizes and types create consortia to leverage the resources of all their members. Academic library consortia – for example, GALILEO Interconnected Libraries (GIL), in the state of Georgia has 30 college and university members, and the Committee for Institutional Cooperation (CIC) has fifteen university libraries in the Midwest, are but two examples.

Public libraries are well represented in consortial settings. Hundreds of different consortia exist, ranging from statewide public library consortia to regional public library systems. Examples of statewide public library consortia include OPLIN in Ohio, PINES in Georgia, and numerous others. Examples of regional public library systems are vast: Kansas alone has seven geographically-based consortia. In addition to public library-only consortia, hybrid models exist. One example is Wisconsin, which has seventeen regional library consortia.

Libraries join consortia to gain three primary advantages:



Better Service - To their customers, the general public. By definition, a group of libraries will have a larger total collection than any one single library. If policies allow, users can borrow from the entire consortium's collection and resources are shared across city, county, or state lines.



Increase Buying Power - By combining orders for library services, materials, and equipment, the consortium can usually achieve better pricing – due to volume – than what any individual library could have achieved alone.



Lower overhead costs - Particularly for processing and technical services functions. Many libraries have developed shared cataloging mechanisms wherein one library takes responsibility for creating high quality bibliographic records, and those records are shared among the consortium members. This means that any given library member need not have cataloging expertise on its own staff.

Of course, library consortium membership brings trade-offs, as well.

- A library in a consortium may lose some autonomy to operate with its own local policies and practices. Some integrated library systems, such as VERSO, allow each member to maintain its own circulation policies, but other consortia require that all members follow the same set of rules.
- A library's collection – purchased with that library's funds – may end up being used more by the library's consortial partners than by the library that purchased the item. To the library user, it may appear that sections of the library's collection may not be there to support the needs of local residents.

Libraries have, for decades, weighed the advantages and disadvantages of consortium membership, and have overwhelmingly decided that they have much to gain from being in a consortium.

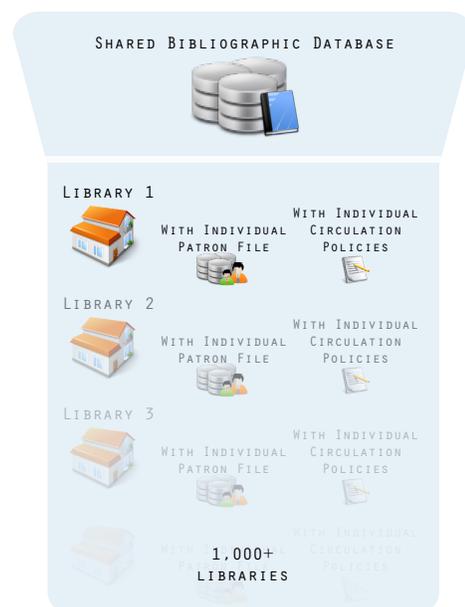
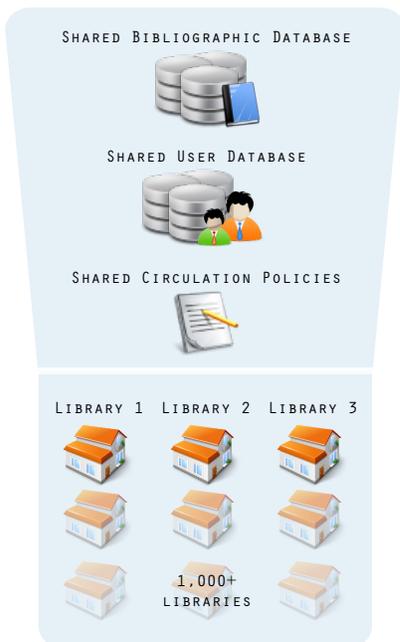
II. Different consortium models – many types of consortia for many different needs

The structure of a consortium depends on the goals of its members, the degree to which they do (or don't) want to act as a group, and type of governance by which they chose to manage themselves. No two consortia are exactly alike. VERSO has been built to accommodate the needs of various consortial models.

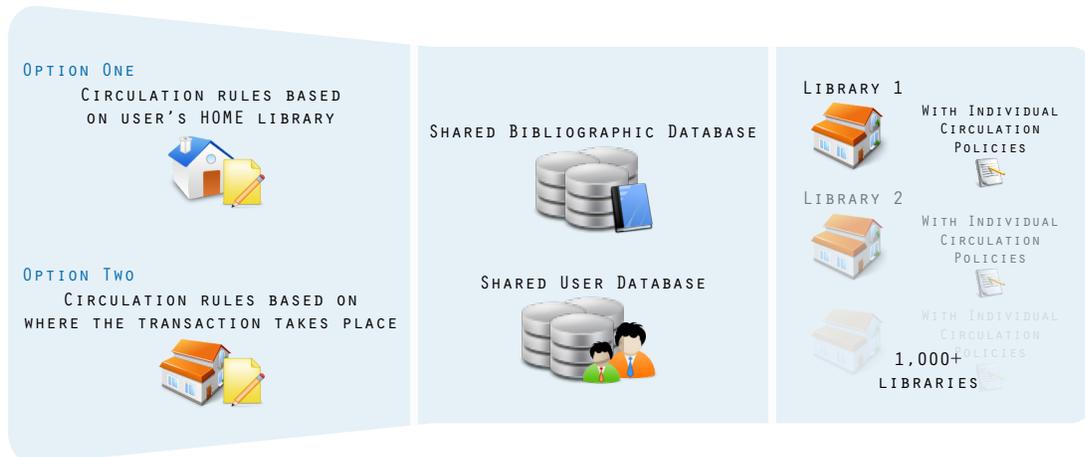
The primary consortial structures are:

- a. Multi-branch public libraries
All of the libraries see themselves as a single unified entity. They share the same bibliographic database and the same user database, and they all follow the same circulation policies. An example of this model is Harrison County Public Library in Mississippi.
- b. Multi-branch with autonomous users and policies
This consortium model allows each library to act autonomously, with its own user database and its own circulation policies. These libraries usually share a single bibliographic database for cataloging quality control, but in all other ways act as autonomous institutions.

Some consortia using this model allow for cross-institution holds to be placed, while others do not. An example of the multi-branch with autonomous libraries is the North Central Kansas Library System in Kansas.



c. Multi-branch shared users and shared bibliographic database but not shared circulation policies



This consortium model is most applicable in large consortia where libraries want to offer expansive services across a number of municipalities and counties, leveraging the total collection for the benefit of all libraries in the group. In this model, users are shared across the entire consortium, the bibliographic database is centralized and shared, but each library can choose to maintain its own local circulation policies including fines, circulation limits, reserve policies, etc.

In this multi-branch shared environment, VERSO supports two variations:

- i. Policies and transactions are based on the location where the transaction takes place.
 - ii. Policies and transactions are based on the home library of the user regardless of where the transaction physically occurs.
- d. Hybrid consortia: this consortium model can be a combination of the different consortial models listed above. A single library may be an autonomous part of a consortium, but itself have multiple branches or locations, and have its local policies apply to its sub-locations only. Examples of this model include: Colorado Nexus in Southeastern Colorado and the Southwest Kansas Library System in Kansas.

Tight versus Loose consortia: Library consortia, when they are created, make decisions about governance, funding, and most relevant here, how they will operate to reflect this governance. Frequently, the ‘tightness’ of a consortium reflects external political influences – city or county government constraints, for example. Each consortium, through its members, determines how it will operate—there is no ‘right’ solution for all libraries, only choices that reflect that consortium’s needs.

At a high level, consortia can be described as either “tight” or “loose”. A tight consortium generally is more centrally controlled, with a larger degree of centralized policy making, ‘best practice’ creation, and coordination between members. A loose consortium tends to offer each member increased autonomy as an individual member of that consortium.

III. Auto-Graphics, Inc. (A-G) is a strong supporter of libraries in consortia that leverage their individual collections and expertise to the benefit of all consortium members.

We have developed and supported consortium software for more than twenty years. We see that cooperation is beneficial for libraries because it allows them to increase services both in quality and quantity at a considerably lower cost per library.

As a result, A-G's corporate strategy includes the following basic tenets:

- a. A-G builds consortium support into all of our products. SHAREit enables interlibrary lending and consortial sharing in multi- state, statewide, and regional consortia. SearchIT provides query and retrieve capability among libraries of all sizes, types, and structures, and brings results scoped to the locations or libraries desired. VERSO builds the administrative management tools to allow libraries to carry out staff functions across consortia.
- b. Cloud based service delivery eliminates geographically based consortium challenges. Most of A-G's customers have elected for A-G to host their sites as opposed to deploying their own system and maintaining a costly IT infrastructure themselves. In this way, Library Management Platform services are available 24/7/365 without the need for consortia to deal with complex server and telecommunications configurations.

IV. A-G Differentiators

USER ADMINISTRATION AND MANAGEMENT

- User: chooses home library at time of registration, which is used as the default library when placing holds, receiving notices, etc.
- User: statistical categories for reporting are based on home library, county, township, etc.
- Staff: The library can configure individual staff to work at more than one facility; 'floating' staff can use a single login at multiple physical locations.
- Library self-registration function allows for different policies and permissions for each consortium member.
- Library can configure Patron Groups in addition to patron categories to aggregate and report statistics for geographical groups of users.

CATALOGING ADMINISTRATION

- Bibliographic Record Merge allows consortium administrators to select and merge multiple bibliographic records into a single record. This function also retains all attached items and holds, and will merge them chronologically.

- Libraries that use a shared bibliographic database can use Local Authority Control to enter and authorize their own headings, but also have access to headings used by other consortium members.
- Administrators can assign granular permissions among consortium members for updating and adding new bibliographic and item records.

PAC ADMINISTRATION

- Libraries can configure their default searching to be at the library level, the consortium level, or even the state level.
- Search targets can be local, remote (using Z39.50 or similar protocols), or a combination of both.
- Each library in a consortium can manage its own default search indexes, menu and arrangement of search resources, and its own way of grouping and displaying search results.
- Each library in a consortium can manage its own linkages to enhanced content, such as bookstores, Google, Zinio, OverDrive, OneClickDigital, etc.

SPLASH PAGE PRESENTATION MANAGEMENT IN UX (USER EXPERIENCE) ADMINISTRATION

- Each library in a consortium can arrange its own splash page welcome screen, containing its own widgets that are relevant to the specific library.
- For more centralized consortia, the administrator can distribute and replicate splash page templates to all members. This makes the task of customization somewhat simpler.
- UX Administration enables each library in the consortium to select its own color scheme, branding, logo, and other library specific identification
- UX Administration lets each library configure the type of results presentation (gallery, list, or grid), how results are aggregated (clustered or merged) and how facets are sequenced and displayed.

CIRCULATION POLICIES

- User transaction policies can be based on the user's home location or on the location where the transaction is taking place.
- Holds pick up location does not need to be a library user's home location. Users can select their hold

pickup location both in the OPAC and in circulation.

- Shared user records mean that the user is registered only once – not multiple times.
- Holds can be placed on any title or item across the entire consortium (subject to policy).
- VERSO counts and reports on holds fulfillment at non-home libraries for reimbursement purposes.
- The system supplies detailed 'in-transit' reports including information about what's coming to the library, and what has been sent to other libraries.
- System supports both temporary and permanent item transfers of holdings among and between consortium members.
- Upon check-in, the system will route an item to the next consortial request for that title, without needing to send the item 'home'.
- The system allows re-routing of an item on reserve to a different pickup location regardless of the ownership and status of the item.
- Individual library policies allow each library to create different circulation parameters for patrons registered at different libraries.
- Each individual library in a consortium can configure its own wording on receipts, notices, and other communications from the library.
- Libraries can set up their own Reserves Fulfillment queue process, perhaps checking a nearby library before a distant one.
- Libraries with floating collections can designate specific library / branch / location and material type parameters for what is to float, and when the floating thresholds are to be invoked. Staff can also identify a 'backstop' floating library for use when a threshold is reached.

STATISTICS AND REPORTS

- The system counts transactions by user category, user group, and location of checkout or checkin.
- Each library can determine non-home-user traffic in the library.
- Reports and notices can be run for a single library in a consortium or with proper permission globally for all members.

SERIALS

- Libraries can share prediction patterns for serial subscriptions among consortium members.

ACQUISITIONS

- Selection lists allow staff at one library to determine whether other members of a consortium own, have ordered, or have placed a title on that library's own selection list.
- Acquisitions files including orders, fund accounts, etc. are all segregated in a consortium environment, making the purchasing and financial aspect of the transaction much more secure.
- Multi-branch libraries in a consortium can create their own Branch profile distribution lists for quantity purchases.
- Each library in a consortium can decide for itself whether and when to make new purchases visible to the public.

V. Conclusion

The idea of library cooperation is not new. Melvil Dewey, in an 1886 [Library Journal](#) article, wrote of the “enormous benefits of library cooperation ...” A hundred years later, former ALA President Michael Gorman, writing in [American Libraries](#), noted that “Cooperation is as essential to a library as is water to a fish or air to a mammal.” A generation after Gorman and 125 years after Dewey, the benefit of libraries cooperating with each other is even more apparent. Economic and political forces make the financial benefits of cooperating in consortial library delivery structures ever clearer. Increasingly more sophisticated customer and patron needs place new demands on libraries to deliver more and better resources even more quickly than before.

A-G agrees that libraries benefit – both financially and in satisfying their patrons and customers – by acting cooperatively through consortia. As detailed above, our design philosophy is to build consortium functionality into all of our products. As libraries struggle to do more with less, A-G is committed to developing software that streamlines workflow for staff, provides a better user experience for patrons and allows libraries within a consortium to leverage each library's individual advantages for the benefit of the group.

By listening to the needs of a diverse range of library consortia, A-G strives to provide intelligently designed systems that allow collaborating libraries to offer a greater depth and breadth of resources and services without additional funding to the communities that they serve.

About the Author

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Mr. Koppel has served in the technology and technical services industry for over 31 years. Prior to joining A-G, Mr. Koppel served as the chief product developer for the UnCover online index and delivery system for CARL Corporation. Mr. Koppel holds a Bachelor of Science from Georgetown University and a Master's of Science (MS) in Library and Information Science from Case Western Reserve University.



Software that Powers the Library