Boston University
Making Digital Resources More Accessible to All

BOSTON UNIVERSITY

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"We are now doing things that would have been difficult or impossible with our previous system."
Jack Ammerman, Boston University

About Boston University
Boston University, with roughly 33,000 students in over 15 schools, is a private, urban research university with three campuses and an internationally diverse student body. It has a central library with six branches, as well as four specialist libraries. Library collections include 1.25 million print and nearly 2 million electronic resources, managed by a staff of 150.

The Need for 'Disruptive Change' at Boston University

The library staff at Boston University noted the inefficiencies of the ad-hoc way in which their digital resources were being handled. They needed to work with a homegrown system for managing electronic journals, while theses, dissertations and articles by university students and faculty are held in a remotely managed DSpace repository. The descriptive metadata for the digital items in DSpace duplicated but was not synchronized with the metadata for the original physical items in Alma.

Meanwhile, complicating the situation further, the hardware used to store digital images and music for course reserves was reaching end of life. In addition, for the university's print materials stored off-site, retrieval costs remained quite high.

Boston University was finding it more and more complicated to manage its rich digital collection effectively.

The librarians, therefore, developed a set of criteria for updating their technology and processes. A primary goal was to minimize the number of systems needed to manage electronic and digital resources. As it was expressed by Jack Ammerman, BU's Associate University Librarian for Digital Initiatives and Open Access, "We wanted to introduce some disruptive change."

Another goal the university set was to change the way students and faculty use library resources. This meant creating a more interactive experience accessing the resources. For the library itself, it also meant bringing on board tools that could provide automatic statistical analytics of resource use.

Alma: When Less is More

In light of the university's positive experience with Ex Libris' Primo® discovery and delivery solution, Boston University adopted Alma as its next-generation resource management system in November 2012. Within a short time, the university's Boston-based libraries shifted to using Alma for managing their digital collections, which increased efficiency, streamlined workflows, changed organizational structures and allowed them to develop new services. As the practical benefits of Alma became known within the university, BU's London campus also adopted the solution and went live with Alma in August 2016.

"The openness of Alma is one of its great advantages for addressing needs that we are still trying to imagine."
Jack Ammerman, Boston University

Currently, Boston University is using Alma to manage digital objects stored both in third-party systems and locally, within Alma. The ability to manage assets coherently in such a hybrid digital environment is critical to three key solutions Alma hasprovided for BU:

- BU migrated all of its course reserves - primarily PDF-format documents, but also images and music files - to Alma. The reserves are now completely managed and stored within Alma. This has created a new workflow for the university, in which a brief bibliographic record is created for a reserve resource and then, once the resource is digitized, a digital representation is added to the management system.
- Student theses and dissertations, as well as journal articles published by university faculty, are currently maintained in a DSpace repository. Using Alma, BU has been able to match these digital objects with their respective metadata, improving search capabilities and streamlining accessibility. At this time, all new theses are submitted electronically, maintained in a DSpace repository, and catalogued and accessed via Alma.
- In order to provide students far greater access to their print collection, BU is maintaining digital representations of publications in the public domain within Alma's repository. The process of migrating these print assets to a digital format is facilitated through the university's participation in the Internet Archive and HathiTrust, projects for preserving millions of digitized titles from libraries around the world.

By centralizing and simplifying the management of electronic content, Alma increased efficiency and expanded digital options at Boston University libraries. This saves the university money and resources by allowing the library to send print copies to storage, while also cutting down on costly retrieval requests for titles that are now available digitally.

The openness and flexibility of the Alma system provides BU libraries a way to interact with an array of records that is coherent, stable and easier than in the past. Moreover, Alma's robust API has been a significant factor in tailoring the solution to meet the specific needs of BU's digital librarians, providing the tools to customize search and records management.

The Future of Digital Librarianship

As Boston University is investing more and more of its budget in creating, maintaining and managing electronic records, the robustness of Alma in handling all variety of digital assets is clearly advantageous for maximum cost-effectiveness. In addition, it makes Boston University a more active contributor and beneficiary of its participation in the Open Content Alliance (OCA), a global collaborative effort to build a permanent archive of multilingual digitized text and multimedia material.

In light of this shift, Boston University's digital librarians have indicated their consideration of moving all currently remote repositories to Alma as well. The convenience, consistency and ease of using Alma opens up the possibility of replacing the third-party repository with a local one, for example, rather than continuing to work in multiple systems.

Peering further into the future, Ammerman believes that physical resources will have a much smaller footprint at major research libraries. Print assets are being digitized rapidly and new media collections are expanding with each advance in modern technology. This indicates that the focus of academic research will continue to shift to digital scholarship, with an emphasis on data mining, analysis, and synthesis. Alma, with its centralized, scalable and flexible resource management capabilities, provides Boston University with the tools to meet these changing academic standards.

About Ex Libris

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