Virginia Commonwealth University

Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) is an urban, public, research university with a main campus in Richmond, Virginia, and several satellite campuses, including a school in Qatar. VCU has a health sciences campus and 13 schools, including Arts, Business, Engineering, Medicine, and Nursing, and a student body of 31,000. There are two main libraries and several satellite locations. The library staff numbers 176 FTE and the collections include 2.8 million volumes.

Summary of Institutional Benefits:

- Alma facilitates a culture of change and process improvement

- The Community Zone provides centralized e-book management

- Alma Authority Control frees staff for new work and greater productivity

- Analytics supports decision-making and improved service to faculty

Moving to Alma

The VCU Libraries were facing some key decision forks: ageing servers needed replacement, key staff were retiring, and collections were increasingly electronic. Existing workflows were labor-intensive and duplicative, and reporting mechanisms were inadequate. The Libraries needed to consider whether to stay with a system that was stable but developing only incrementally, or take the leap to a new system with potential benefits they could not yet even articulate. VCU had recently undertaken a search for a discovery system, and had selected Primo after looking at the market and industry directions. The opportunity to partner with Ex Libris and other customers as Alma Early Adopters was very appealing. The Libraries were looking for a relationship that aligned with their interests and would result in shared success between vendor and library.

There were many aspects of Alma that were attractive to VCU. While moving to the cloud was initially seen as a risk, it was clear that systems were moving in this direction, and it would free staff from managing everything locally. VCU appreciated the decoupling of the discovery layer from the back end management system and Alma's open structure allowed for building new services using APIs. The Community Zone (CZ) resonated with staff who saw the potential of managing resources centrally and maintaining a local repository only for materials that required local control. Alma's integrated electronic resource workflows promised more efficient management, and Analytics presented a greatly improved reporting capability. The web-based interface meant that staff could use the system anywhere and without the need for systems staff to support multiple configurations that had to be redeployed after upgrades.

Impact of Alma

Library Reboot

As part of VCU's implementation of Alma, the Libraries began an initiative they called, "Library Reboot." Using Alma as an opportunity to evaluate and eliminate legacy procedures, the library staff looked at the possibilities in configurations and options to question existing processes. By asking how to do things better and eliminating unnecessary tasks, they were able to concentrate on what was important and to try working in ways that would advance the Libraries in new directions. All departments looked for possibilities to take advantage of Alma functionality and make the system work for them.

Denise Branch, Head of Continuing Resources, described how early concerns about the lack of serial patterns in Alma became an opportunity for staff to find other ways to manage the expected receiving date of the next issue in Alma. Now that serial prediction patterns are available in Alma, VCU staff have decided not to use them since maintaining patterns was labor intensive. Instead, as part of their Reboot, staff are concentrating their time on new work with electronic resources, link-checking, and problem-solving. Continuing Resources staff have eliminated most of their paper routing forms, since Alma workflows route items automatically to their next step. With task lists, tasks can be assigned within Alma to the next person in the workflow. Similarly, in Circulation, staff continue to look for ways to make Alma work for them. Tracking materials in Alma is much easier, making it possible to see who handled an item most recently

and where it might be located. As part of their implementation, circulation staff made significant reductions in patron and loan categories, leading to some reallocation of staff and duties to take on new work.

Cataloging productivity returned to normal levels after initial training and implementation, even with some vacancies in the department. Staff stopped shelf-listing, and abandoned local authorities processing, relying on Alma's centralized authority files and functionality. VCU library staff were very adaptable, took things in stride, and found ways to take advantage of the system's features. The VCU approach promoted a culture of learning and experimentation. The Acquisitions unit used the Reboot culture to tackle EDI for the first time, and have launched a Patron-Driven Acquisitions (PDA) project after reviewing the Alma documentation of the workflow. VCU noted the efficient way Alma automatically removes e-book portfolios when a PDA program is cancelled.

Electronic Resource Management

Barbara Anderson, Head of Metadata and Discovery, described how she used to spend a significant amount of time checking on the availability of new records for e-book collections, deleting titles that had been removed from packages, loading new bibliographic records, and checking the results of the record loads. The process was burdensome and difficult to manage. With Alma, she now has the ability to "set and forget" Community Zone collections, letting Ex Libris manage titles that are added or deleted by

"Alma Authorities was game-changing"

Barbara Anderson, Head, Metadata and Discovery

the vendor in purchased collections. The centralization of management of electronic resources is a huge benefit to VCU, with staff simply spot-checking records when new ones are loaded into the CZ. Barbara has also come to appreciate the way Alma structures electronic resources through portfolios. Access to the platform is decoupled from the bibliographic record, making it easy to edit or delete titles that are available in multiple packages. Staff can remove portfolios from a platform in batch processes, without editing individual bibliographic records. The structure is very efficient.

Alma breaks down silos among staff and departments that had previously divided the work of managing title changes and ceased titles between Aleph and SFX. There were many redundancies; now changes are made in one place. Alma has safeguards against inadvertent actions that used to require VCU to restrict staff access to SFX. Now, VCU has been able to train additional staff to work on electronic resources, including activating and deactivating resources and updating links.

Technical Services Efficiencies

As part of the Library Reboot, VCU looked at their previous practices around authority files and authority record processing. Staff had invested significant effort in maintaining local copies of Library of Congress authority files with weekly record processing involving librarians, staff, and students. Alma Authorities was game-changing. Authority records are in the CZ, and they automatically match up with headings in bibliographic records.

VCU also loaded and replaced MeSH headings once a year. Now MeSH is available in the CZ, updated automatically. Staff no longer need to create duplicate headings to manage them locally. As a result of using Alma Authorities, staff are doing more non-print cataloging, and the department has trained their student workers to do simple copy cataloging. In general, cataloging staff have time to do more complex work as a result of implementing Alma.

Alma has introduced efficiencies and, at the same time, has expanded the scope of the cataloging staff's work. Import profiles and record loading functionality distribute the capability to load files of records from multiple devices and locations. Instead of depending on systems staff for this work, every staff cataloger has workflows that include record import processing. Alma has broadened the staff's view, enabling them to work with files of records and adding a layer of interest to their traditional work of cataloging one item at a time. VCU is excited about a recently developed option in import profiles to skip loading records if the incoming record is an older version than the existing one in the system. This makes it possible for them to load records that have been updated to RDA to replace existing bibliographic records without fear of overlaying records with more recent modifications. VCU staff also appreciate Alma's set management capabilities, with the creation of logical and itemized sets, as well as the ability to perform repository searches that combine different types of records, such as bibliographic, holdings, items, and portfolios, in one search.

Technical Services staff have a better understanding of the big picture, and can see the whole process and how various actions interrelate. Continuing Resources staff understand how the order has been set up and how the order type controls the workflow, enabling them to solve problems. Acquisitions staff can search OCLC from within Alma to bring in records directly, without needing to use a client or learn another system. To assist in troubleshooting electronic resources, Alma provides a widget to display the Primo view for staff to see how changes they apply will look to their users.

Fiscal rollover is much less painful. Staff no longer need to depend on systems staff for rollover, and with the available reporting mode, they can see if they need to make adjustments ahead of time instead of spending days cleaning up after the process has been run.

Analytics

The VCU Libraries make extensive use of Alma Analytics for everyday needs, special requests, and formal reports. Amanda Echterling, Acquisitions and Fiscal Management Librarian, creates reports on the fly several times a day, including budget forecasts and spending patterns. If she feels she will reuse a report, she saves it, but even if she needs data she didn't save, it takes little time to rebuild the report. She exports her data to Excel to manipulate as needed. Amanda has eliminated several manually generated reports, since the data out of Alma is current and accurate. Continuing Resources uses Analytics for everyday workflows. Staff can identify orders with the wrong order type, a particular problem with electronic

resources, and can set up cleanup projects. Reports assist managers in evaluating purchasing decisions by providing data on materials supplied by vendors as compared to direct orders.

Data exported from Analytics can be reloaded into Alma to create a set for projects. For an inventory project after a major weeding of government documents, staff identified titles in a call number range in a location, created sets from the barcodes, scanned the barcodes of items on the shelf, and compared the sets to find items missing from the database. Cataloging statistics have been simplified, reducing the categories they were reporting on manually, since staff can get most of the data needed out of either an Alma search or Analytics.

During a library construction project, VCU used Analytics data to inform decisions about which materials to store offsite and where to move others for user access. Staff routinely run circulation reports for various purposes; for example, a report on circulation of course reserves gives faculty feedback about whether particular titles should be on reserve, or whether more copies might be needed. Simple requests are answered quickly, such as reporting on loans by format or collection. Dashboards make reports available to staff on the reference and circulation desks. Circulation staff run a regular report on missing items to provide a search list for overnight staff to check the shelves. Emily Owens, Systems Librarian, created a widget for liaison librarians showing how e-books are supporting the curriculum and how much it costs to provide them.

Alma Analytics is helping the Libraries provide reports to the Business Office on invoices for lost materials, which helps get materials returned and may assist in decisions about how to charge for replacement costs. The University is looking at cost-center management, with the Library treated as an expense to the academic departments. Amanda Echterling is confident that she will be able to use Analytics to show costs of the libraries for this purpose.

Culture of Change

The staff at the VCU Libraries are proud of being the third library in North America to go live on Alma. Jimmy Ghaphery, Head of Digital Technologies, says that being Early Adopters reinforced their organizational culture of embracing change, trying something new, reaching. Vendors see the VCU Libraries as cutting edge and seek them out to pilot new services. Staff realize how well Alma has allowed them to address customer needs in new ways. The Libraries are using the technology to make things easier for their users. As they become more comfortable with Alma's capabilities, staff are emboldened to ask for features they want to see. The monthly updates encourage them to think about how to do things and to ask whether they can do things differently now. Alma promotes this culture of change and supports staff efforts to make a difference at VCU.