News Release

Orbis Cascade Alliance

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John F. Helmer, founding executive director of the Orbis Cascade Alliance, to retire

EUGENE, Ore. – The Orbis Cascade Alliance announced on July 16 that John F. Helmer, executive director of the Alliance, will retire from his position in March 2016. Helmer has been a part of the Alliance since its beginning in 1993 when it was a grant-funded initiative among five Oregon public universities to create a union catalog. He was part of the team that wrote the founding grant, and then he proceeded to hire staff, oversee system implementation and launch the consortium.

Before being hired as the consortium’s first executive director in 1999, Helmer was head of library systems at the University of Oregon and served in an administrative role for the consortium for several years. That early organization, known as Orbis, steadily added members and expanded into new services areas, and later merged with Cascade, a sister library consortium created by Washington’s public universities, to become the Orbis Cascade Alliance. The Alliance incorporated in 2011, and Helmer became the corporation’s chief executive officer and a member of the board of directors.

The Orbis Cascade Alliance has seen remarkable success over the past two decades and now serves 37 governing colleges, universities and community colleges in Oregon, Washington and Idaho and extends selected services to an additional 200 cultural institutions in seven western states. Signature services include a system for sharing print books among members, courier service across three states, an extensive suite of database and e-journal packages, archival access and management systems, distributed print repository, and demand-driven and licensed e-book collections.
In January 2015, the Alliance completed a remarkable two-year effort to migrate all 37 members from stand-alone integrated library systems to a cloud-based, next-generation, shared library management and discovery platform. As part of this effort, the Alliance partnered with Ex Libris on consortial product development, including creation of a new resource-sharing system and network-level management of bibliographic records. Current Alliance initiatives include development of a new collaborative workforce model designed to share expertise and labor across a multi-state library consortium consisting of both public and private institutions. Along the way, the Orbis Cascade Alliance has become internationally known for its innovative services, entrepreneurial spirit, willingness to take risks, and especially for the close working relationships and depth of collaboration among members. John F. Helmer has played a key leadership role throughout the history of the Alliance and leaves a nimble organization ready to continue its history of success and quickly advance in new directions.

“The Orbis Cascade Alliance is the love of my work life,” said Helmer. “As executive director, I have played an important role but it is very much the work of our member libraries that make the Alliance a success; I help set the table, but they make the party happen.” Helmer added, “There is something intangible about this group of libraries and this part of the world that is special. I have often felt that my job was just to help lead them where they told me they wanted to go.”

“It is difficult to think of the Alliance without John Helmer, who has been an extraordinary leader as reflected in the honor bestowed upon him by his peers as the recipient of the 2012 Hugh C. Atkinson Memorial Award,” said Jane A. Carlin, past chair of the Alliance board of directors and library director at the University of Puget Sound. “John has changed the landscape of library consortia, pushed boundaries and inspired the profession during his tenure as the executive director of the Alliance.”

Commenting on Helmer’s retirement, Faye A. Chadwell, chair of the Alliance board of directors and Donald and Delpha Campbell university librarian and Oregon State University Press director, said, “John Helmer’s steady guidance has helped us create a strong, forward-thinking organization in terms of our governance, finance and implementation of technology. John will be missed, but fortunately we are well-positioned to move into the next decade because of John Helmer’s achievements as our long-term executive director.”
“On behalf of the board, we are grateful to John for building a strong organization that is well poised to conduct a national search for his successor,” said Carlin. “The board is planning a search process and will move forward quickly. The Alliance has only had one executive director so this is a major change for everyone.”

In his announcement to members, Helmer noted that “the fun and excitement of working with Alliance teams and council is what drew me to this position to begin with, and oh what a fabulous ride it's been! I have enjoyed working with you so very much; please know that it has been a huge honor to serve as founding executive director of the Orbis Cascade Alliance.”

About Orbis Cascade
The Orbis Cascade Alliance is a consortium of 37 academic institutions in Oregon, Washington and Idaho that serves faculty and the equivalent of more than 275,000 full-time students. The Alliance helps member libraries to advance institutional missions through collaboration and innovation. Members join together their expertise in seeking efficiency and productivity to strongly promote the success of students, faculty, staff and researchers. They bring multiple perspectives together to challenge traditional thinking and elevate the ability to deliver outstanding services, programs and collections.

The Alliance supports a number of programs that promote this vision including a shared resource management and discovery system; standardized policies and collaborative workflows; a service that allows students, faculty and staff to easily search and request library materials owned by member libraries; courier service providing delivery of library materials in Oregon, Washington and Idaho; enhanced access to archival and manuscript collections in Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, Utah and Washington through a union database of finding aids; an Alliance-distributed print repository; cooperative purchasing of databases and e-journals; and demand-driven and licensed e-book collections.

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