Primo Standardization and the Orbis Cascade Alliance: A White Paper

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Introduction

Since Alliance institutions first went live in 2013, the Primo discovery system has significantly evolved, most notably with the recent release of the new user interface. Meanwhile, institutions have become (to varying degrees) skilled at working with, configuring, and customizing the Primo interface to achieve their user experience goals, and to improve the overall accessibility of the system, both at the institution and Alliance levels. The Alliance has also taken steps to standardize some aspects the Primo interface through shared normalization rules and shared customizations (such as the Primo toolkit).

Yet, the amount of ongoing effort required for each institution to maintain its Primo instance remains significant, with much of this work duplicated across institutions. While the new user interface offers some improvement over this situation, that improvement is limited to a narrow subset of the full range of elements that must be managed and maintained in Primo.

Opportunities exist for the Alliance to standardize Primo across member institutions. Doing so could lessen the staffing investment that individual institutions need to make in order to maintain their Primo instance, while also improving the overall user experience for patrons. However, these opportunities come with costs and complexity, and represent a range of pros and cons in terms of their outcomes.

The goal of this white paper is to provide a framework for the Alliance's discussion of whether, how, and to what extent Primo should be standardized across member institutions. The document will explore what forms "standardization" could take, what the challenges and costs associated with different forms would be, and what the overall pros and cons would be.

Goals

There are three principal goals that the Alliance could accomplish by standardizing Primo, which can be framed as:
1. Efficiency
2. Consistency
3. Improved functionality and accessibility

Although the impact of these goals would vary by institution, they are related in that the outcome of standardizing would encompass all three to a greater or lesser degree depending on how the scope of standardization was defined.

Efficiency

Of all of the goals that standardization could help the Alliance accomplish, this one would potentially have the greatest impact. The ongoing time and effort involved in maintaining Primo

at the institutional level is significant. The initial implementation is very time-intensive, and even after a institution has gone live with Primo there is a need to monitor the quarterly releases for changes, along with monitoring the monthly Alma releases and their potential impacts on the Primo interface. In addition, training the staff who manage Primo also takes a good deal of time.

Standardization offers institutions an opportunity to achieve a great deal of efficiency in managing their Primo interface. The extent of the efficiencies that could be gained are dependent on how much Primo is standardized across institutions, and what model is adopted for implementing and maintaining this standardization. The greater the level of standardization and the more centralized its maintenance, the greater degree of efficiencies that individual institutions will be able to realize.

These efficiencies ultimately would take several forms. For instance, institutions would need to devote less of their own staff time to maintaining Primo, freeing up staff time to perform other critical work. For those tasks done at the individual institution level, greater standardization could also support more sharing of documentation and training materials. There would also be greater efficiency in troubleshooting and reporting issues to Ex Libris, as there would be less variation between institutions for Ex Libris to have to address in identifying and resolving problems. And a greater degree of standardization in Alliance Primo interfaces would create opportunities for instruction staff at Alliance institutions to share tutorials and other instructional materials developed to help students and faculty use Primo effectively.

Lastly, standardizing Primo across the Alliance would heighten the impact of the annual enhancement voting process. If there were fewer variations between institutions' Primo interfaces, the Alliance's efforts to vote as a block would be simplified, and the enhancements that were implemented would be more impactful for the consortium.

Consistency

A second potential goal of standardization would be to create a consistent user experience across Alliance institutions. Out of the box, all Primo interfaces are ostensibly the same. But they quickly begin to diverge from one another once institutions begin configuring and customizing them.

These differences encompass items as simple as labels ("Topic" vs. "Subject"), to more significant ones such as which search scopes are made available and what they are called, or in extreme cases, the overall design and functionality of the interface. Over time, these differences can be profound, which can be seen if you compare, for example, [Warner Pacific's Primo interface](#) with that of [Western Washington](#).

A more consistent Primo user experience across Alliance institutions would have three notable benefits:

1. Patrons would be more easily able to transition from using one institution's Primo interface to another, when studying at another institution or searching for items as a visiting patron.
2. Troubleshooting Primo issues with Ex Libris would be simplified, as variations between institutions' Primo interfaces would be minimized.
3. Staff-oriented training would be streamlined across Alliance institutions, and patron-related instructional materials could more readily be shared between institutions.

Improved functionality and accessibility

Developing and maintaining customizations for the Primo interface requires an investment of time and skills, and is not a realistic option for all institutions to undertake. Nonetheless, several Alliance institutions have developed a range of customizations and accessibility improvements that offer a great deal of benefit for other institutions if they were able to readily to adopt them.

Standardizing Primo would offer the Alliance an opportunity to identify those customizations and improvements that would benefit many Alliance institutions, and to develop a streamlined workflow for implementing them in each institution's Primo interface. In this way, the Alliance would be able to leverage the work done by individual institutions to improve the Primo user experience at all institutions. This work could be organized on an ongoing basis through the existing team structure, and could ensure that all institutions had the opportunity to benefit from the creative work done by each institution.

Constraints and limitations

The Primo environment does not fully lend itself to standardization in a consortial setting. Each Alliance institution has its own Primo instance, which needs to be individually configured and maintained. There is an Alliance-level Primo administration console, but the range of elements that are maintained through this is very limited.

In general, standardization for Primo would need to take a shape very similar to the establishment of consistent cataloging practices across the Alliance. Standards would need to be identified and agreed upon as either mandates or as recommended best practices. After this, a decision would need to be made about who would implement these standards, particularly if they were going to be mandated for all institutions. This work could be done centrally, either by Alliance central staff or designated Alliance institution staff, or by each institution individually. Depending on the degree of standardization that is pursued, the extent of the work required could vary substantially.

An additional challenge would be determining the nature of the standardization. Would this be opt-in or required? Would it take the form of a defined *baseline* Primo interface that institutions could then build upon? Or would it be a *full* interface design and configuration to which all institutions would have to adhere?

Several institutions have invested a great deal of time and effort in modifying their Primo interface, through interface customizations and added functionality, and have significantly improved Primo relative to the out-of-the-box experience. Any discussion of standardization would need to recognize that these institutions would potentially have to invest added time and effort in unwinding their work to align with a mandated standardized interface. This impact, however, might be lessened if standardization were to coincide with institutions' transition to the new user interface.

Ultimately, any discussion of standardization would need to consider the differing impacts on both those institutions that have limited capacity to manage and customize their Primo interface and those that have both the capacity and the initiative to do so.

Models for standardizing Primo

The range of options for what could be standardized in Primo and how this could be achieved essentially represent a continuum of options. One end of the continuum represents small steps that could be taken and which would have a limited effect on institutions and central staff while still having an appreciable impact on institutions' Primo interfaces. The other end of the continuum represents a number of larger steps that would have a significant staffing impact on institutions and central staff, and which would have a drastic impact on institutions' Primo interfaces. As a result, there are a wide range of points along this continuum that the Alliance could aim for.

For the purposes of thinking through the potential ramifications of standardizing Primo, the following models represent specific points on this continuum. But it's very important to note that they are just examples of the models that could be articulated or implemented. Other potential modes of implementation lie between these.

Model One: Self-service and opt-in

In this model, a number of customizations for the Primo interface would be created and shared by member institutions using the new central package functionality. The process for this would be steered by an Alliance team, with the work of developing and maintaining customizations falling to individual institutions. In parallel, recommended configurations for specific Primo Back Office (PBO) and Alma settings would be compiled by Alliance team(s) and shared with member institutions.

Institutions would be able to evaluate the range of shared customizations and choose whether to implement any of them. They would also be able to evaluate the recommended PBO settings and opt whether to implement any of those. The work to implement the customizations and PBO

settings would be the responsibility of the institution themselves. In the case of customizations shared via the central package functionality, doing so would be highly streamlined.

This model lies far to one end of the continuum. The level of standardization that would be achieved is potentially meaningful, but the likelihood of achieving it is unpredictable given institutions needing to opt-in and implement the changes themselves. In addition, this model would do little to reduce institutions' investment in staff time to maintain their Primo instance.

This model is also fairly similar to where the Alliance is at the moment. The Systems Team has coordinated the creation of a range of Primo customizations and facilitated them being shared through the Primo Toolkit (and with the new user interface, via the central package functionality). The Discovery & Delivery Team has made recommendations concerning some PBO configurations and has coordinated the sharing of stylesheets and material type icons.

But for the most part, institutions have had to opt-in to taking advantage of these items. As a result, uptake has been uneven. Nevertheless, when an institution has opted-in to any of these, there has been a time-savings, as local institution staff have not had to either develop the customization themselves (only install it) or figure out the PBO settings on their own.

Model Two: Self-service with a mandate

This model builds upon the previous one, wherein Alliance teams coordinate the creation of a core set of shared customizations and/or configurations. The critical difference with this model is that the implementation of these would not be optional. Instead, institutions would be expected to implement these shared items and implementation would be done by local institution staff.

In a way, this would be similar to the Alliance's policies related to cataloging in Alma. The Technical Services Working Group and its predecessors have drafted these policies, and the expectation is that institutions will adhere to them when working in Alma. The policies are mandated, but each institution is conducting its own cataloging and so must follow them as part of its local practice.

This model moves the Alliance farther along the continuum in terms of the degree of standardization that would be accomplished. Primo interfaces across the Alliance would be more similar to one another in terms of user experience and functionality. But the impact in terms of the amount of staff time that each institution would need to invest in its Primo interface could grow substantially (relative to how many customizations and configurations were mandated).The amount of time invested at the Alliance level, in terms of Team and central staff, would vary depending on how many items the Alliance would aim to coordinate centrally and establish as mandates. Local and central impact would also vary over time, being greater as Alliance institutions migrate to the new UI, respond to major releases, or possibly elect to do an

Alliance-wide overhaul to enhance usability or update the look and feel. There would also be periods of greater stability, when fewer changes were needed.

This model reflects a central challenge with pursuing standardization - that the greater the level of standardization the Alliance pursues, the more time and effort will need to be invested to accomplish it. This time and effort can be distributed in varying ways across Alliance central staff, Team members, and individual institution staff, but can also increase significantly as the goals for standardizing grow.

Model Three: Standardized Primo facilitated centrally

As with the previous model, this one builds upon the above two that have already been described. The chief difference between this model and the preceding one is that in this instance the work to implement the mandated standardizations is performed by Alliance central staff or Alliance Team members. In addition, the work of developing and maintaining customizations and mandated configurations would be coordinated by these same staff, with the actual development and testing work likely being distributed across the Alliance.

Similar to the above model, this model would result in Primo interfaces across the Alliance becoming much more standardized relative to one another than we see them today. And, once again similar to the above model, the degree of similarity across Primo interfaces would depend on the extent of standardization that was mandated and implemented.

But in this case, with the work being done by Alliance central staff and/or Alliance Team members, individual institutions would have the opportunity to recoup staff time currently dedicated to managing Primo. While this would be dependent on the extent of standardization that was implemented, it is reasonable to assume that the standardization effort would include a sufficient number of elements common to all Primo interfaces such that a notable amount of staff time would be recouped by each member institution.

There are two principal challenges with this model:
1. Centrally managing Primo instances for all Alliance institutions is a time-consuming effort, and it's unclear where this responsibility would fall. Alliance central staff are probably the most likely and appropriate people to conduct the work of implementing and maintaining the standardizations, given their ability to access all institutions' Primo Back Offices. But there are other ways this could be accomplished.
2. Currently, there is no efficient way to centrally manage 39 different Primo instances. Whereas the new central package functionality does enable the efficient management of centralized interface customizations, this is just a minority of the full range of elements that would need to be centrally managed in this model. At this point in time, managing the full scope of Primo settings would require manually setting them in all 39 Primo instances.

In a sense, this model represents one end point along the spectrum of standardization. Alliance institutions' Primo interfaces could be highly standardized (depending on how far this was taken in the mandate), and with the work being done by Alliance central staff or Teams, institutions would recoup a (potentially) great deal of staff time that is currently dedicated to maintaining their Primo instance.

Pros and cons of standardization

As the discussion of the various models above indicates, there are critical tradeoffs associated with an effort to standardize Primo across the Alliance. This applies regardless of the extent to which Primo is standardized, as any such effort will necessitate weighing the pros and cons associated with the outcome.

But standardization involves pros and cons on a higher level, outside of the specific model implemented. These can be summarized as follows.

Pros
- Standardization has the potential to save individual institutions' staff time that is currently devoted to managing Primo. This would vary based on the extent of customization that is adopted and how it is implemented, and how much time each individual institution currently dedicates to management of Primo. This last element is a key consideration, as there is significant variation in this across the Alliance.
- Primo interfaces would be more consistent across Alliance institutions, which would benefit patrons who are concurrently enrolled in multiple institutions or who may transfer between Alliance institutions, enhance institutions' ability to share instructional materials with one another, and strengthen our communications with Ex Libris when reporting issues that affect all Alliance institutions.
- Institutions would be able to more easily leverage advantageous customizations, accessibility improvements, or configurations developed by other Alliance institutions.
- Primo-related training could be better streamlined across the Alliance, both for Primo administrators and reference/instruction staff.
- The results of assessment activities could be applied more broadly across Alliance institutions' Primo interfaces.

Cons
- Standardizing the Primo interface will necessitate a potentially significant amount of work, whether that work is done by individual institution staff or Alliance central staff. In either case, this may be work that would not otherwise be done by these staff, and so standardization is likely to increase someone's workload.
- Some design, configuration, and labeling elements that are currently unique to each institution will be standardized. As a result, institutions will lose the ability to tailor their

Primo interfaces to the needs of their local populations. The extent of this would vary depending on the extent of what is standardized in Primo.

- If the approach to standardizing Primo were to result in eliminating institutions' use of existing customizations or limit their ability to add new customizations, this overall loss in creativity and functionality would be to the detriment of the Alliance.
- The effort to find the balance between the goals of Alliance-wide efficiency and portability without unduly hindering individual institutions' ability to meet local needs will be a challenging undertaking for the Alliance, and may ultimately call for compromises in individual institutions' goals for Primo.

Recommendations for next steps

With many institutions planning to transition to the new UI this summer, this is an optimal time for the Alliance to consider and potentially implement some level of standardization. The new UI is largely a blank slate for institutions, and many of the steps that they've taken to customize their current Primo interfaces will not directly apply to it. Therefore, this is an ideal opportunity for the Alliance to define a level of standardization before institutions have diverged significantly from one another.

But to do so, the Alliance will need to move quickly. Primo Day 2016 is scheduled for mid-June, and a number of institutions will begin implementing around that same time. In addition, many will be running public betas that are sure to begin in early summer as well. With many institutions expecting to launch in August or September, the window for completing this work is narrow.

In addition to these considerations, there are a few recommended next steps that build on the themes explored in this document thus far:

1. **Fully define the Alliance's goals for standardization.** This document proposes three high-level goals, but the Alliance and this effort would benefit from a more thorough discussion of what it wants to achieve through standardization. Fully defining these goals will be a critical step at the outset of this process.
2. **Prioritize the goals of standardization.** Different Alliance institutions will invariably place a different level of priority on the goals that are identified. For instance, some institutions have a desire to reduce the amount of time they spend maintaining Primo, while others may place a greater emphasis on maximizing the user experience for their patrons. Similarly, consistency across Alliance institutions may benefit some institutions' users more than others. The model and level of standardization that the Alliance would move towards will vary depending on how these goals are prioritized relative to one another.
3. **Evaluate the Alliance's ability to support a standardized Primo.** As discussed earlier, standardization will result in some level of work and responsibility that will have to be distributed across Alliance central staff, member institution staff, or some combination

of the two. It will be important to evaluate what capacity exists for this work and what additional capacity would need to be created in order to support it going forwards. In particular, if the Alliance's goals for standardization are incompatible with the currently available capacity to support them, the Alliance will need to identify a sustainable direction for moving forward.

4. **Evaluate work practices of other consortia.** There are other consortia who have implemented or are are working towards implementing standardized Primos.

There are surely other important steps that will need to be taken if the Alliance moves ahead with a project to define a level of standardization. But these three steps are keys to framing a process that can result in a positive outcome for the entire Alliance.

Looking farther ahead, if the Alliance does opt to pursue standardization on any scale, it should work in parallel to engage with Ex Libris regarding the needs of consortia relative to the Primo user interface. On one level, this will call for monitoring the ongoing development of the tools and systems for managing the Primo interface and how these will impact consortia. On a second level, the Alliance will want to engage both directly with Ex Libris and through the Consortia Systems Special Interest Group to advocate for the needs of consortia who are seeking to more efficiently manage their Primo environments.

Conclusion

Primo standardization offers real and potentially significant benefits for the Alliance. But "standardization" will mean different things to different people, and the outcomes that are achieved will not be felt equally across institutions. Those outcomes also won't be valued equally across institutions, with each institution placing different emphasis on the gains that could be achieved through standardization.

At the same time, the current Primo system does not readily lend itself to standardization in a consortial setting. As a result, standardizing will incur a greater level of time and effort than with a system intended for such an outcome. Pursuing standardization will therefore mean that the Alliance would need to find a sustainable balance between the goals that it sets for the Primo interface, and the capacity for carrying out the work involved.

The Alliance has already taken some initial steps in the direction of standardization, through projects carried out by the Discovery & Delivery and Systems Teams. These promising efforts are demonstrations of what can be accomplished in this area, and the level of investment that would be needed for further standardization.

In the end, standardization is unlikely to be a panacea for the Alliance. But if approached thoughtfully and pragmatically, it is also a goal that could bring valuable benefits to all Alliance institutions.