Fisk University

A Small Library Optimizes E-Resource Management

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The unique Nashville institution transitioned to Alma for unified resource management, automation and cloud-based services, which improved student, faculty and staff experience.

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A 'Glaring Need' Arises

The Franklin Library at Fisk University was using Sierra library management solutions since 2013. However, by 2020, managing patron registration and electronic resource discovery processes became cumbersome and time consuming for the small library staff.

In addition, the library did not offer off-campus access to databases and electronic resources. Instead, students, faculty and staff could only use the campus network or WiFi for that purpose. A stop-gap measure adopted in response to this situation was a proxy address for students and faculty to access library databases and electronic resources off-campus.

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit, it became even more clear that a systematic solution was needed to curate and provide digital materials and library services to support online research and teaching. Moreover, the library used a portion of the CARES Act Relief Funds to acquire perpetual access to a significant number of digital collections relating to African and African American studies, which added a new set of databases with resources that students and faculty needed to be able to easily discover and retrieve.

According to Dr. Brandon A. Owens, Sr., Dean of the Library, "I saw a glaring need for a new library system that would make electronic resources both visible and searchable within the library catalog."

About Fisk University

Fisk University is the first institution devoted to primary, secondary, and higher education for African Americans in the city of Nashville, Tennessee, and the city's oldest institution of higher learning. Its curriculum is grounded in the liberal arts and offers more than 20 undergraduate and graduate programs in Biology, Chemistry, Physics, and Clinical Psychology with a master's to PhD bridge program through a partnership with Vanderbilt University. Fisk University is a private institution, with a student population of less than 1,000 and 60 full-time and 42 part-time members of the teaching staff.

The John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library is the academic hub of Fisk University, supporting its academic programs and research in the natural and social sciences, business, and the humanities. The Franklin Library's Special Collections and Archives contains some of the oldest and most definitive collections of African American history and culture, including the personal papers of African American luminaries who entrusted custody to Fisk University. The library also endeavors to ensure the preservation and publication of materials by or about African Americans and people of the African Diaspora.

The Solution That Saves Time and Money

The transition to a new integrated library system required careful industry investigations by the staff of the Franklin Library. Research included product demonstrations and evaluations of each system, including the modules, add-ons, features and services they offered. Special attention was paid to those elements that would help the library operate more efficiently and cost-effectively, particularly by way of time- or money-saving modules and add-ons.

With Ex Libris Alma, Fisk University found what it was looking for.

Among the most important changes Alma brought to the Franklin Library is unified and centralized management of print, digital and electronic resources from multiple databases. Students and faculty can search multiple databases at once for their research purposes, finding all relevant resources, related topics and different disciplinary perspectives. This includes the ability to seamlessly search resources available at institutions with which Fisk University maintains academic partnership agreements, such as Vanderbilt University.

Alma's comprehensive support for open standards and rapid integration into the university infrastructure streamlined several other processes, as well. The Franklin Library can automatically add students, faculty, and staff to the library information system through Fisk University's student information system (CAMS Enterprise). The system also allows for automated e-mail communications with students, staff and faculty regarding library services, including personalized notifications regarding borrowed items, requests and the like.

Alma, at the heart of the Ex Libris Higher Education Cloud Platform, provides automatic regular releases and easy collaboration across the cloud architecture. The library was then able to cancel an annual subscription for authority notifications, which are now automatically updated through Alma.

Implementing the Ex Libris solutions was a close, collaborative process between Fisk University's IT team, the library and the Ex Libris project management team. According to Dr. Owens, access to the knowledgeable experts at Ex Libris and the tools they provided, including Basecamp software, "was perfect for our team to navigate the implementation process and meet monthly milestones." The technical expertise of the Ex Libris implementation team, he noted, ensured the library was able to successfully launch the new system. For example, when the in-house IT team had difficulty resolving some network firewall and security issues, the Ex Libris data migration team patiently worked with them over the course of two days to ensure the projected launch date would be met.

In addition, Dr. Owens added, "The on-boarding and training phases of the implementation process made our team feel comfortable, prepared, and confident about using the new system."

Meeting Strategic Objectives for Students, Faculty and Library Staff

By choosing Ex Libris solutions, Franklin Library has aligned itself with Fisk University's declared strategic goal of promoting "a learning-centered environment through immersive educational experiences which facilitate excellence in teaching, research, and creative activity."

Alma and Primo helps promote awareness of the library's resources and encourage use of the library's catalog as a starting point for research. This has also helped "broaden the use of technology within the library and provide innovative learning experiences for our students," Dr. Owens said. "Alma is a great fit for us!"

A small library with a limited budget, Franklin Library has saved both time and money with Ex Libris' cloud-based platform. IT personnel and resources are no longer needed to update library software, servers or processing power for the integrated library system, making management far more cost-effective and hassle-free.

The Ex Libris Alma suite of analytic tools saves time and effort, as well, with centralization of valuable data on activity in the library in a single interface, as well as robust segmentation capabilities. This provides Franklin Library the indirect benefit of easily demonstrating value to Fisk University administrators and influencing data-driven decision making.

Alma and Primo's modern interface and user-friendly navigation system has been praised by faculty and library staff alike. According to one professor, "It has made it so much easier for students to find the empirical research articles they need for their capstone project," as they can filter their search results from multiple databases to meet specific assignment requirements. For the Library Assistant for Access Services, "the best part is not having to manually enter new patron information at the beginning of each semester." Now, student information is automatically updated with scheduled synchronizations between Alma and the university's CAMS Enterprise system.

Dr. Owens, as the Franklin Library dean, also praised Ex Libris customer service and support as "very responsive and proactive." Noting that "business relationships require trust, loyalty, and communication," he said the Ex Libris team has "always delivered on their promises and commitments."