

The Van Wylen Library

How a custom API made resource sharing faster and more accurate



An Ex Libris Alma API streamlined loan dynamics for Hope College librarians and patrons, as well as for the largest statewide resource sharing network.



“This API is exactly what we were hoping for ever since we migrated to Alma.”

Brian Yost, Head of Technical Services and Systems



About Hope College

Hope College, established in 1862, is a four-year liberal arts college in the heart of downtown Holland, Michigan. The mission of the college is “to educate students for lives of leadership and service in a global society through academic and co-curricular programs of recognized excellence in the liberal arts and in the context of the historic Christian faith.” Hope offers specialized study in more than 90 majors, minors, and pre-professional programs, as well as more than 300 study abroad programs and countless internships. More than 3,130 students are enrolled at the college, with a student-faculty ratio of 11:1. Hope is in the first tier of the best liberal arts colleges in the nation, according to US News & World Report, and one of only 64 colleges and universities recognized for providing outstanding undergraduate research or creative project opportunities.

About the Van Wylen Library

The Van Wylen Library at Hope College connects students, faculty, and staff to information in all forms and supports teaching, learning, scholarship, and creative endeavors with diverse resources, spaces, and services. Named for Hope College’s ninth president, Dr. Gordon J. Van Wylen, and his wife, Dr. Margaret D. Van Wylen, the library loans materials to the Hope College community and the general public. The Van Wylen Library also offers access to special collections of many unique materials, from rare books to digital art objects. Librarians provide guidance and education to students and faculty, including a Library Instruction Program with approximately 185 research education sessions each year. The Van Wylen Library’s discovery service is Hope Primo, which allows users to search the library’s databases, repositories, catalog, and other online resources from a single interface.

Staying Connected

The Van Wylen Library has a goal of “Providing access to information via quality metadata and systems so users can find the information they need.” In that spirit, Hope College is a member of MeLCat, the Michigan eLibrary Catalog, which is a statewide network of Michigan libraries for resource sharing. Established in 2005, the collaborative project now includes a rich mix of 433 large and small academic and public libraries, school libraries, and several special libraries.

MeLCat is a very important resource for libraries and residents of the state, with a shared catalog, patron-initiated requesting from just about any library in Michigan, and rapid, free-of-charge fulfillment. The network handles over a million requests a year and coordinates 26 different local ILS systems through a central server using the INN-Reach software by Innovative Interfaces Inc.

After migration to Alma

When the Van Wylen Library migrated from Sierra to Ex Libris Alma for its library services management, librarians were concerned that they might lose their seamless connectivity with MeLCat.

The immediate solution was implementing a script enabling NCIP based communication between INN-Reach and Alma. In addition, after the migration, all interlibrary transactions and checkouts at the circulation desk had to be handled via a separate server (known as a DCB or RSB).

Having to use another system in addition to Alma for resource sharing borrowing and lending processes posed several problems. Student workers at the circulation desk did not always access the correct system for checkout (the local Alma instance or the interface for the DCB). The result was a disconnect between transactions carried out successfully in Alma and information on the resource status in the DCB server, causing issues with renewals, returns, holds, availability, and back-end management. Manual follow-up was often necessary to ensure consistency and coherence across the systems, while patrons had to track requested items from the MeLCat catalog through a system separate from the Hope Primo account they used for other self-service activities.

There’s an App for That

The manager of MeLCat approached the Van Wylen Library team and suggested a joint pilot to implement an API to integrate Alma and MeLCat.

“This is the connection we were hoping for ever since we migrated to Alma,” said Brian Yost, Head of Technical Services and Systems for Hope College.

The API, called D2IR, creates a streamlined, direct, and automated workflow from Hope College's Alma platform to MeLCat, bypassing the intermediary DCB server.

Teamwork and experience

Development of the API was a joint effort involving teams from Hope College, Ex Libris, Innovative Professional Services supporting INN-Reach, and the Midwest Collaborative for Library Services (MCLS), which manages MeLCat.

“It was really incredible having such knowledgeable people on the project,” Brian said. “And it was fascinating to see the Alma software progress to work with the D2IR API. I think we've all really learned a lot about resource sharing and Alma.”

The project lasted nine months from the initial agreement to go-live. Weekly meetings and communication through Ex Libris Basecamp ran smoothly, regardless of the logistical issues raised by the Covid-19 pandemic. The teams were able to coordinate from across three states in the United States and Israel without difficulty.

Jackie Licalzi, the MeLCat System Administrator for MCLS, provided a great deal of assistance and input to ensure the API would function as expected. With her extensive knowledge of the various ways local ILS data is exported to the shared MeLCat catalog, she was instrumental in identifying how best to structure information coming from Alma libraries.

Michelle Yost, Interlibrary Loan Associate at Hope College, added, “Jackie was also able to tell us how the changes we're making will impact the greater MeLCat community.”

The MeLCat team at MCLS consists of five people, four of whom manage all the data integrations and import, configuration, library training, and support. The D2IR API relieved much of their burden, leading Jackie to comment, “That's why we're excited about the API. It's amazing.”

All in One Place

The D2IR implementation improved the workflow dynamics for Van Wylen librarians, patrons and the MeLCat network.

The impact on staff

After some initial setup and configuration, the API updates the MeLCat network with Alma records on an hourly basis, rather than daily. The smooth and comprehensive transactions between Alma and MeLCat mean Van Wylen librarians need to do a lot less monitoring of the process and follow-up with

MeLCat personnel. Librarians are saving time on administrative duties and urgent fixes, while the MeLCat catalog is much more accurate.

As every loan activity is managed within Alma - whether for items held locally or only available through MeLCat - student staff and circulation librarians find it easier to process transactions. The confusion at the circulation desk has been eliminated, ensuring loans, returns, and other processes are consistently and effectively concluded.

“It's much more streamlined for both our circulation staff and our patrons,” Michelle commented.

Patrons and Primo

For patrons, of course, the effect of the D2IR API is felt in their ability to discover and request items from both the Van Wylen Library and MeLCat in a single online location. All patron-initiated transactions, including renewing MeLCat items, can be carried out through Primo without accessing any other system.

Privacy

The D2IR API has also added a layer of privacy to the Van Wylen Library transactions with MeLCat. Unlike the previous multi-system process, the borrower's name is not automatically included with the material sent out from library, due to a stricter approach to privacy.

“We appreciate and share the Ex Libris approach to privacy,” Brian said, “which came through during the development project for D2IR.”



MeLCat and beyond

With the introduction of the D2IR API, the MeLCat team at MCLS no longer has to devote time and energy to analysis, editing and approval of data from shared Alma records. Alma now updates the MeLCat system directly, with all of the necessary information, and in the correct format, included automatically.

For the Larger Community

In the state of Michigan, a number of academic libraries have moved or are moving from Sierra to Alma.

“25 libraries use Alma and MeLCat right now,” Jackie noted. “And we’d love to get them on the API.”

Other academic libraries in Michigan have already expressed a lot of interest, according to Brian, such that he believes “within the next year D2IR will be widely adopted among academic libraries in Michigan.”



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