

Revisiting ALEPH Support Services Provided by the OLIS *Maureen Zajkowski, OLIS*

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In 2006 the campus migrations to Aleph were completed and 50 campuses were upgraded from v14 to v16. In 2007 two service pack upgrades were installed and work began on a v18 upgrade. The Managed Services pilot also got underway in 2007 with a total of 8 campuses brought into the project over a nine month period.



As the [OLIS](#) and [ITEC](#) have moved from an implementation to a maintenance mode with Aleph, we have begun to evaluate the types of Aleph support provided by the OLIS staff. The delineation of what constitutes Aleph support for the Managed Services pilot highlighted the need to define more clearly the level of Aleph support for campuses outside of the Managed Services Project can expect from OLIS. Further, review of the [Footprints problem reporting application](#) illustrated the significant amount of the OLIS staff time that has been devoted to Aleph support for all campuses including those not in Managed Services.

While it was anticipated that the Aleph implementations would consume the OLIS staff time, it was never anticipated that Aleph maintenance would continue to dominate a significant level of the OLIS staff resources. The challenge is that while the OLIS understands the complexity of Aleph support, there is also the reality that the OLIS is not in a position to provide [extensive first line Aleph support to the campuses](#). Further, an OLIS focus on day-to-day campus Aleph support will prevent the OLIS from focusing on new initiatives. The following are examples of activities that have been proposed as desirable by the SUNY community which the OLIS staff find difficult to address due to the current amount of time spend on day-to-day Aleph support:

- Enhanced Aleph training and investigation of new delivery mechanisms, including online modules
- Implementation of Authority Control across the shared servers
- Enhancements to Aleph reporting capabilities
- New applications – use of Web 2.0 capabilities, enterprise level searching capabilities, new technologies to expand library services.
- Integration with other campus services, e.g. Banner, portals, course management systems.
- Enhancements to digital libraries and repositories
- Coordinated opportunities for cross SUNY collection analysis and cooperative collection management

The goal of this document is to provide information as to how the OLIS will strive to provide a reliable level of Aleph support to the campuses on the shared servers within defined guidelines.

Categories of Aleph Support

Support is required for both technical and functional aspects of Aleph. Given the shared server environment, the OLIS and ITEC must support the technical components.

Regarding the functional aspects of Aleph, it has been a [basic assumption](#) for the SUNYConnect library management system project (based on input from the SUNY community) that campuses would maintain their own local configurations and data. As a result of this expectation, a distributed support model was set up to enable campuses to maintain their own Aleph regions within a shared server environment. Ex Libris was designated contractually and financially to be the provider of first line support. During the Aleph implementation, each campus contact received a logon to the [Ex Libris problem reporting database](#) (now called the [CRM](#)).

Technical Components

Technical components supported by the OLIS and ITEC include all aspects of hardware, operating system, Oracle, Apache, and Aleph system administration support that are necessary and standard for all campuses on the shared servers. In addition, ITEC provides network access in conjunction with local campus computing departments and the OLIS provides support for a Web based Aleph table editor. There is nothing "out-of-the-box" regarding Aleph. A significant amount of staff time is spent on "behind the scene" activities that are necessary for configuring and maintaining Aleph environments that are operational for campuses. ITEC and the OLIS staff support 112 distinct and separate Aleph regions (56 PROD and 56 DEV) for campuses on the shared servers as well as the Union Catalog and multiple regions on a test server that are used for testing various Aleph components, service pack updates, version upgrades and training.



Functional Components

Functional components to be supported by the campuses are necessary modifications to Aleph that reflect local campus policies and preferences. Circulation policies are an example of an area where functional modifications need to reflect local campus practice. The WebOPAC, reports, printed products and New Book lists are examples of areas where functional modifications as well as extensive cosmetic changes are desired by campus staff.

OLIS Aleph Support - Managed Services

- **Summary of support provided by the OLIS:**
 - Schedules a site visit to the library at the beginning of the agreement to assess the Aleph environment and help plan for ensuring that functionality issues are addressed over time;
 - Performs all activities requiring server access through Putty (ssh), Sandbox, and the Aleph utilities (such as Aleph table updates, PLIF loads, checking log files, batch bibliographic record loads for Serials Solutions, etc.) since campus staff has no access to the Aleph servers other than through the WebOPAC and GUI client;
 - Takes action to resolve campus issues (reported through Footprints) and inform the campus of the action. If the OLIS staff cannot address the issue, OLIS will submit SIs and monitor the resolution of issues sent to Ex Libris.
 - Manages campus staff accounts;
 - Makes sure that the current WebOPAC functionality works correctly and will make updates for significant new functionality such as patron empowerment. No other customizations will be made as the WebOPAC customizations are frozen when the campus becomes part of Managed Services;
 - Documents all changes to the campus Aleph environment;
 - Works with the library staff to schedule significant activities and complete tasks. Emphasis is on ensuring functionality over esthetics.
- **Summary of campus responsibilities in Managed Services:**
 - Maintain and upgrade Aleph clients;
 - Perform standard Aleph functions, examples
 - Circulation - run printed products such as recalls, notices
 - Course Reserves - create, maintain, delete records as necessary
 - Cataloging - select, download, and process bibliographic records from OCLC or utility of choice
 - Serials - checkin, update holdings
 - Acquisitions - create budgets, create orders, arrive materials
 - Run reports, programs and other activities available from the Staff GUI Services menu;
 - Have basic understanding of the modules and how they interrelate in order to help troubleshoot and report problems;
 - Report all Aleph related requests or problems through Footprints;
 - Test functionality as a result of service pack or version upgrades;
 - Liaison with local campus computer center staff regarding networking, patron record loads, and PC support;
 - Schedule significant activities such as implementation of new functionality well in advance; work closely with the OLIS to ensure that local campus activities are coordinated with those activities impacting the pilot campuses.

OLIS Aleph Support - Campuses not in Managed Services

For campuses not in Managed Services, the OLIS will play a "triage" role. The OLIS will attempt to diagnose and troubleshoot issues by checking the standard causes of problems. If after this review, OLIS/ITEC cannot determine the problem and if other campuses are not experiencing the same problem, the campus would be referred to [Ex Libris](#). What the OLIS will not do is expend extensive time trying to determine a source of a problem that no other campuses are experiencing, or do the work for a campus (update table, run data loads, etc.), or provide support (other than pointing to documentation and standards) for new initiatives the campuses wishes to undertake, or do customizations requested by a campus.

All campuses (whether part of Managed Services or not) are asked to report all Aleph problems to [Footprints](http://service.sunyconnect.suny.edu/footprints/help.html) (<http://service.sunyconnect.suny.edu/footprints/help.html>). The OLIS request this because it is not uncommon that a problem reported by one campus may be a symptom of a larger problem impacting other campuses.

Listed here is a summary of Aleph Support Services. There will be changes between version 16 and version 18 so there are sections for each as indicated below:

Version 16

- Aleph Table Configuration questions/Troubleshooting/Functionality related questions for the various modules
- OLIS will do a quick analysis of reported problems, suggest possible solutions, and point campuses to documentation and standards; lengthy support is not automatically provided;
- If OLIS cannot determine the problem and other campuses are not experiencing that problem, OLIS will recommend that the campus submit their question to Ex Libris via their Ex Libris [CRM](#) accounts;
- In response to questions on what Aleph changes to make to update configurations or add new functionality, OLIS will provide campuses with quick instructions and/or point them to documentation but will not do the updates for the campus;
- If OLIS cannot readily provide advice on how to edit the Aleph tables or how to implement new features, OLIS will recommend that the campus contact Ex Libris through the campus [CRM](#) account;

WebOPAC

- OLIS has provided significant and ongoing customization support to most campuses including the v14 to v16 upgrade; this level of support is not sustainable. Consequently, the support focus is on troubleshooting reported problems with functionality;
- OLIS is now providing reduced customization support for v16;

Batch processes - printed products, PLIF, data loads

- OLIS will provide instructions and/or point campuses to documentation
- Campuses are responsible for editing and running applicable programs

Reports

- additional customized reports have been added to the Services menu in v16; this is part of a process for OLIS to evaluate report requests as to their applicability across multiple campuses and create customized reports when feasible;
- requests for campus specific custom reports are evaluated within the context of SUNY-wide needs
- requests for SQL queries to be run (either reports or data manipulation) are evaluated as to their feasibility

Version 18

- Aleph Table Configuration questions/Troubleshooting/Functionality related questions for the various modules
- Continue practices as outlined for v16
- OLIS will create policies on what files should not be edited at the campus level so that these files can be edited centrally across all campuses; benefit is to support troubleshooting and maintenance. The focus will be on Aleph tables in the 01 and 60 libraries because these areas are driven by MARC and other standards.

Examples

- Aleph files associated with the bibliographic library for indexes, z13 and other possible Aleph tables
- if campuses which to change these tables, they would be responsible for making the changes and for making re-edits after service pack and version upgrades; the OLIS would refer the campus to Ex Libris for troubleshooting and functionality questions
- problems caused by campus edits are resolved by restoring original files that were delivered at the time of the v18 upgrade
- Use of Sandbox web editor rather than direct access to the servers

New Book List and RSS feed

- In v18 a standard new book list will be delivered along with the capability to implement RSS feeds for it
- if campuses desire other functionality they would be responsible for making the changes and for making re-edits after service pack and version upgrades; the OLIS would refer the campus to Ex Libris for troubleshooting and functionality questions

WebOPAC

- In v18, OLIS will distribute and provide support for standardized WebOPAC which will allow campuses to have
- unique indexes, logo and colors, local navigation links, virtual bases, error messages, help text, and 856 fields
- 30+ unique tables and HTML files that will be known and considered during all maintenance and upgrades; campuses that edit files outside these identified tables will be responsible for all ongoing support/updates
- Campuses receive edit privileges for WebOPAC files after the campus library director approves authorization agreement
- support for cosmetic customization is not available from Ex Libris or OLIS
- problems caused by campus edits are resolved by restoring original files that were delivered at the time of the v18 upgrade; this restore will not include any campus customizations outside of the 30+ unique tables referred to above

Batch processes

- Continue practices as outlined for v16

Reports

- Continue practices as outlined for v16

OLIS Staffing Considerations

The OLIS is in the process of requesting authorization to recruit a full-time Aleph systems librarian to provide backup and additional support for current OLIS staff. The decision was based on a review of Footprints entries which highlighted the significant volume of questions related to Aleph functionality and configuration issues. This also ties in with our investigation to determine the level of support needed to increase the number of campuses in Managed Services.

So far, in the Managed Services pilot, we have learned that there has been start-up time required to address functionality and configuration issues at the campuses. However, once this is in place, ongoing updates are based on specific needs (library hours change, PLIF load) which are documented and scheduled. Further, while it is understood that campuses require some level of customization based on their local policies, the OLIS is working with campuses to use standards and common practices as much as possible to streamline ongoing support. It is important to highlight that because ongoing edits to the Aleph configuration are documented and only performed by OLIS/ITEC, troubleshooting problems becomes significantly less time-consuming. Campuses in Managed Services give up a level of autonomy by having the OLIS assume updates to their Aleph environment. In other words, they may not have everything they want regarding how Aleph is cosmetically configured, but will trade that for the security of not having to worry about functionality that breaks.

A key consideration in the evaluation of OLIS staffing needs is that there will be fundamental changes in Aleph support provided by the OLIS (as summarized above) in conjunction with the v18 upgrade for campuses not in Managed Services.

The OLIS staff will not be responsible for providing support to third party services (including but not limited to ILLiad, Serials Solutions 360 Link, and questions regarding electronic journals that need to be directed to the appropriate vendor). Where there is an Aleph component, such as the Z39.50 configuration files in Aleph to enable an application such as ILLiad to be a Z39.50 client, the OLIS will ensure that configuration files are edited correctly or that the appropriate information is provided to the campus as required. Campuses will be asked to direct their questions third party services to the vendor.

Consideration of Possible Fees in Ongoing Aleph Support

Managed Services

If any fees are charged, they would be for services beyond the scope of making sure that Aleph is functioning. The basic assumption for Managed Services is that while the Aleph system is important to a campus to support library functions, it is also recognized that the catalog is an increasingly smaller portion of campus library resources. Consequently, services provided by the OLIS are focused on streamlining activities and making sure that the Aleph configuration is configured to effectively support basic Aleph services (circulation, technical services, public access to the catalog, etc).

Campuses not in Managed Services

The OLIS is in the exploratory stages of considering possible fees for campuses not in Managed

Services. If any fees are charged, they may be to campuses that request Aleph support beyond the parameters and for requests such as specific Aleph training for new systems librarians or new library staff at the campus. While the OLIS requests all campuses to submit Aleph questions/problems to Footprints so that similar problems impacting multiple campuses can be addressed expeditiously at a global level, it is not possible for the OLIS to provide extensive, detailed support for all the individually customized versions of Aleph. [Further, as part of the SUNY/Ex Libris Aleph contract, Ex Libris is paid approximately \\$427,000 a year for providing first line support for each campus.](#) The assumption is that campuses that wish to maintain access and control of their local Aleph environment take responsibility for being familiar with the Ex Libris documentation and training materials, follow guidelines provided by the OLIS system librarian training, follow national and SUNYConnect standards, and have solid troubleshooting skills.

Next Twelve Months

The major projects for the upcoming academic year will be the v18 upgrade; evaluating the Aleph support needs of the eight campuses in Managed Services to determine the feasibility of increasing the number of Managed Services campuses and the resources necessary for providing an expanded service; and reviewing the "triage" concept of Aleph support for campuses that are not in Managed Services.

The OLIS goal is to create an environment that makes Aleph support more manageable. Regardless of the number of staff that the OLIS might have, the current expectations for Aleph support from the SUNY community cannot be sustained indefinitely. A more manageable Aleph support environment that OLIS is starting also implies that basic functionality with customization limited to address required campus needs becomes the norm. However, the benefit of providing clear parameters to Aleph support is to enable better planning of time and resources so that initiatives can be explored that will provide enhanced services to the greater SUNY library patron community. The logic driving this revision in Aleph support provided by the OLIS is that while the Aleph system is important to a campus to support library functions, it is also recognized that the catalog is an increasingly smaller portion of campus library resources.



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