

What... Serve on Another Committee? Search & Discovery Tools

by Pamela Flinton (Oneonta)



Cover Story

(Editor's note: Pamela Flinton also served on the [Aleph Shared Services Task Force](#), of which the SSDSC was a sub-committee; we thank all committee participants for their efforts in support of SUNYConnect.)

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Do I really want to serve on another committee? That was one of the questions I asked myself as I read John Schumacher's e-mail inviting me to become a member of a, then unnamed, committee whose charge was to investigate tools for search and discovery of information. Do I have the expertise to contribute anything? Do I have the time to take this on? Is it something I'm interested in? These questions and more flooded my thoughts as I prepared to answer John's e-mail. Since I'm writing this article it's obvious that I said yes, although I'm still not sure about the answer to the "expertise" question.

The Shared Search & Discovery Services Committee (SSDSC), as it came to be known, was charged by the [SUNYConnect Advisory Council](#) to tackle the following:

"Evaluate and recommend enterprise-level search and discovery tools for SUNY library resources.

Task: Recommend procedures and applications for improved and unified discovery of campus library holdings, SUNY-wide library holdings and electronic resources. Identify enhanced services for patrons.

Goal: To establish a 21st century vision for shared library services that integrates with teaching, learning, research and administrative activities on our campuses."

The SSDSC consists of [members](#) from various SUNY institutions. Represented are community colleges, four-year colleges, university centers, and the Office of Library and Information Services (OLIS). The amount of knowledge, expertise, and creativity that was present each time we met was mind-boggling for me. The drive to identify the best options to complete our charge was electrifying. I highly recommend that if you ever get the chance to serve on such a committee that you leap at the experience. It can be extremely rewarding and you gain some of that much coveted "expertise".

Catalog overlays, federated search tools, and enterprise search tools were the product groups we considered. As is often the case with software tools, there was overlap between the products. I had to clarify the difference between a federated search and an enterprise search tool myself. For those in the dark, much as I was, a federated search tool allows for sending one search to multiple databases with results being presented within a single interface. On the other hand, an enterprise search tool has the capability to search multiple resources via a single index. You'll recognize many of the products we reviewed including: AquaBrowser Library, 360 Search, eContent Searcher & Analyzer, LibraryFind, MetaLib, Research Pro, and WebFeat.

After many phone conferences, webinars, meetings, and much reading, the group made its recommendations. Including, that the [360Search federated search](#) software be made available to all SUNYConnect participants as it performed as expected, is already in use by a significant number of SUNY institutions, and our relationship with the vendor has been a positive one. In addition, to provide the robust catalog functions that patrons have come to expect we've also recommended that [AquaBrowser Library](#) be provided as an enhanced interface for SUNYConnect libraries and the [SUNY union catalog](#).



AquaBrowser[®]

The tools of the information trade are only as good as the data that is the basis of the searching. I, for one, could not properly catalog an original record without first going back to the books, and even then I'd still turn to an expert to check my work! Only with accurate and usable data can any tool perform optimally. Emphasis on the development and maintenance of enhanced and authorized library data

that complies with SUNY, national or international standards, was a recommendation of the group that I saw as vital.

In addition to fantastic software packages, we looked at the expertise and creativity of the people within the SUNY system. The group in the SSDSC is only a small sampling of the intellectual capital that the SUNY system harbors. Many individuals, as well as groups within the system, are currently pursuing open source software options within their environments. As a consortia, SUNY cannot take full advantage of this expertise for many different reasons, including differing policies between campuses, differing resource capabilities, and diversity and compatibility of platforms. In recognizing this, the group recommended that SUNY begin to create the infrastructure, policies, procedures and resources needed to promote and establish [open software development](#) specifically to enhance the search and discovery of library resources. By providing the environment in which our brightest and most creative people can develop solutions we can ensure the tools meet our consortial needs more fully. SSDSC's recommendations for commercial software are geared towards a relatively short-term need, based on the opportunities for developing open source solutions once the infrastructure and other items are in place to support development within SUNY.

Search and discovery tools will only prove as valuable as the ability of our patrons to use them. Continued and renewed emphasis on the need for instruction related to the full utilization of library resources is a must in today's information overload culture. There was much discussion as to how the instruction should be provided. The face-to-face model seems to be much more difficult to use widely in today's "I want it now" scene. Delivery methods from traditional classroom settings to web-tutorials and even Second Life classes were discussed. Given the variety of resources available at different campuses, I believe that it is impossible to recommend a specific suite of methods consortia-wide, that has to be a campus decision. However, as professional instruction in the use of library resources and information literacy is paramount to the success of any academic library endeavor the recommendation for emphasis on instruction was one we could all agree on.

Not all recommendations that come out of such a group are of equal imperative. When looking at OCLC's "Find in a Library" capability available via a [WorldCat](#) subscription, we determined that such a subscription would enable a search and discovery feature for all SUNYConnect participants. This feature directs a searcher back to their library's holdings, when appropriate, after retrieval via Google, Yahoo and other major Internet sites. While many campuses have this subscription, not all do. A consortial purchase may result in overall cost savings for SUNY and SUNY libraries. However, we came to the conclusion that if implementing this recommendation would be at the cost of losing [current SUNYConnect databases](#), we'd prefer not to do it at this time.



One group that I cannot forget to give accolades to is SUNY's Office of Library and Information Services (OLIS). Many times throughout the meetings we could almost get to agreement, but it came down to who would do the actual work involved. As a fairly new member to SUNY, I looked to the OLIS staff to do "the work." I've learned that the OLIS staff is extremely responsive to the library needs within SUNY; however, they are a finite resource. Other groups, such as [LISUG](#) and [SUNYLA](#) will need to step up to the plate to make this large academic library consortium (largest in the U.S., I believe) work most efficiently. The non-OLIS members in the group pushed for a final recommendation, which the OLIS members agreed would be extremely beneficial; to add to the resources available to SUNY's Office of Library and Information Services to allow for the implementation and support of SSDSC's other recommendations.

I hope I've roughly summarized [the recommendations](#) the group has submitted to SAC, without getting too detailed. To fully summarize the hours of webinars, phone conferences and meetings would take many more pages than any of you would want to read! While the time commitment was substantial, the rewards I've received in new friendships, becoming aware of new search and discovery solutions, and realizing the depth and breadth of experience and expertise we have within SUNY made it all worthwhile. I'd like to thank all of those who sit on the SSDSC with me for their contributions and patience.

To end, if you get an email asking to assist on a committee don't automatically say No (or Yes). Think about what you can contribute, where your interests lie, and the benefits that you, your institution, and the consortium will derive from your input on the committee. It takes everyone, at some time or another, to make a consortium work!



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