

ICOLC OCLC Task Force Report

Background and Highlights

May 25, 2021

What is ICOLC?

The International Coalition of Library Consortia (ICOLC) is an informal group currently comprising approximately 200 library consortia from around the world. ICOLC supports participating consortia by facilitating discussion on issues of common interest. From time to time ICOLC also issues statements regarding topics which affect libraries and library consortia. For more information, visit <https://icolc.net/>.

What is the ICOLC OCLC Task Force Report?

The ICOLC OCLC Task Force was created by the ICOLC Coordinating Committee to communicate member experiences with OCLC services and programs to OCLC with the goal of improving overall service to libraries. ICOLC members reported experiencing problems with several OCLC programs or services and were frustrated with the responses received.

The final report delves into four main areas of concern: Pricing and Cost Transparency; WorldCat Quality; Standards and Interoperability; and Marketplace and Culture. The report also recommends action items to help resolve these concerns.

What has happened so far?

ICOLC members have participated in two meetings with OCLC staff: an early, informal meeting in January 2020 (ALA Midwinter); and another with formal questions provided ahead of a meeting in July 2020 (ICOLC Virtual Meeting). OCLC provided high-level answers to those questions. After the July 2020 meeting, the task force began work on a report for OCLC that would provide background and context for them, and to make specific requests for action. Throughout this process, ICOLC has surveyed its membership several times and provided opportunities for discussion.

The final report was provided to ICOLC members and OCLC in March 2021. OCLC has not yet provided a formal response to the report to ICOLC, although they have communicated to some ICOLC members via email and video, and have reached out to individual libraries to discuss the report. ICOLC has agreed not to publicize the full report further while OCLC is still reviewing it.

What's the end goal?

OCLC has historically been a strength of, and an asset to, the library community. However, recent trends are of serious concern, and it is important that the library community be able to constructively express these concerns to OCLC. We believe OCLC, as a “member-focused, member-driven” library cooperative, best meets the needs of libraries by recommitting to its stated values (especially those of open communication, sharing, and trust) and by returning to the role it has historically held—a robust, member-focused nonprofit organization.

What are the concerns with Pricing and Cost Transparency?

ICOLC members have expressed concern that OCLC's current pricing model seems primarily focused on increasing revenue in ways that mirror for-profit vendors rather than nonprofits. As a nonprofit, member-driven organization, OCLC could greatly increase libraries' trust in its pricing models by

providing transparency into the actual costs required to support the service (including technology, infrastructure, and services) as well as a reasonable cost for development and overhead. Any annual increases should be predictable and justified.

Action items for Pricing and Cost Transparency:

1. Pursue a primary goal of creating and managing solutions that reduce overall library costs
2. Provide transparency into the underlying costs to support the services OCLC provides
3. Provide a transparent, predictable, tier-based pricing structure clearly tied to standard library metrics
4. For libraries that cannot afford base-level pricing, provide alternative methods of participation so that they can continue to bring value to the cooperative
5. Allow libraries to subscribe to single products, rather than bundling them

What are the concerns with WorldCat Quality and Sustainability?

ICOLC members expressed concern that WorldCat may have difficulty fulfilling its stated goal of “accurately reflect[ing] the full holdings of libraries, museums and archives.”

Many libraries around the world can no longer afford to keep their holdings up to date in WorldCat. As these holdings decrease, the product becomes less valuable to libraries, potentially forcing them to choose other services to meet their needs. Many in the library community think it is unreasonable to ask libraries to pay a substantial fee to catalog their holdings in WorldCat, when it is their time and effort that creates the records. Also, libraries are then asked to pay another fee to have these holdings displayed in WorldCat.org, which discourages participation by libraries in WorldCat.org and so diminishes the quality of that product.

Action Items for WorldCat Quality and Sustainability:

1. Investigate ways to make the underlying WorldCat catalog an open (and/or free) product
2. Immediately begin to display all WorldCat holdings data in WorldCat.org at no additional charge to libraries
3. Consider additional revenue streams for WorldCat.org to offset costs for libraries (e.g., advertising, revising non-library partner agreements)

What are the concerns with Standards and Interoperability?

Although we appreciate OCLC’s efforts in maintaining and developing standards, there are many cases where OCLC products have not met established standards, or do not interoperate well with other products. In some instances, OCLC’s insistence on non-disclosure agreements has hindered libraries from implementing interoperable product solutions that best meet their needs.

Action Items for Standards and Interoperability:

1. Ensure robust interoperability between WMS and external (non-OCLC) resource sharing systems
2. Support full resource sharing interoperability between OCLC and external (non-OCLC) ILL systems

3. Engage in an open effort to standardize the exchange and sharing of holdings information (including records providing detailed information about electronic subscriptions) to facilitate consortial resource sharing and local and collaborative collection analysis
4. Ensure that all relevant OCLC databases are COUNTER-compliant
5. Provide access to OCLC products and services via standard authentication methods (SAML, Shibboleth) and other vendors (OpenAthens)

What are the concerns with Marketplace and Culture?

There are two main areas of concern: 1) OCLC not adhering to its stated values, and 2) OCLC operating as both a nonprofit cooperative and a vendor.

In the presentation to ICOLC on July 22, 2020, OCLC said: “We are a cooperative *and* a vendor.” At a minimum, the tension between these two roles leads to trust issues with the community OCLC serves and results in an organizational culture that resembles that of a commercial vendor rather than a nonprofit. If there are areas where OCLC must compete as a vendor (e.g., in the ILS marketplace) we suggest differentiating those efforts to protect core services that should be managed in a nonprofit manner.

Action Items for Marketplace and Culture:

1. Transition to a model of developing open and/or free solutions that meet library needs, with revenue-generating support services
2. Discontinue the use of non-disclosure agreements (NDAs)
3. Examine current governance practices to ensure that they are more closely aligned to those of a nonprofit organization than a vendor [*Note: Preferred first step is an independent outside review*]

What data do you have to back up these four areas of concern?

ICOLC has surveyed its membership several times on their concerns with OCLC and provided opportunities for discussion. The results of an early survey were provided to OCLC in June 2020, including comments regarding these concerns from members. Early drafts of our report detailing the identified concerns were shared and discussed with multiple small groups representing a wide range of library organizations. A full draft was shared with ICOLC membership in February 2021, asking members to provide feedback and rank the action items on its importance. Fifty six (56) complete and unique survey responses were received, and the resulting comments and suggested changes were integrated into the final report.

Three action items were ranked as essential or high priority by more than 90% of survey respondents; another four were ranked as essential or high priority by over 85%. All of the action items in this report were ranked as essential or high priority by at least 70% of respondents (with the exception of the COUNTER action item, which was added post-survey). Most concerns were equally supported by respondents in and outside the Americas, with the exception of items that refer to OCLC’s nonprofit status (OCLC is not a nonprofit outside the United States).

The final report, with feedback and comments incorporated and action items ranked, was then shared with the ICOLC membership again in March 2021. Sixty (60) consortia with membership approaching

12,000 libraries voted to approve sending the report to OCLC; none voted against sending it. More than 40 consortia asked to be named as an endorser or sent letters supporting the document to OCLC.

Where do we go from here?

The ICOLC Coordinating Committee and ICOLC OCLC Task Force continue to suggest that OCLC engage in a substantive discussion to talk through these concerns and identify next steps. Existing OCLC governance channels (Global and/or Regional Councils; the OCLC Board of Trustees) also would be excellent forums to move this discussion forward. Some of the recommended actions are straightforward; others will require reimagining services or realigning priorities. While it may be difficult, we believe that this is a necessary effort if OCLC is to continue to serve as a trusted partner for libraries worldwide.

Which are the most critical action items?

All the action items were ranked as essential or high priority by at least 70% of the 56 survey respondents, with the exception of the COUNTER item which was added post-survey. However, these are the highest-ranking items, in order:

- Pursue a primary goal of creating and managing solutions that reduce overall library costs
 - *95% of survey respondents rated as essential or high priority*
- Provide a transparent, predictable, tier-based pricing structure clearly tied to standard library metrics
 - *95% of survey respondents rated as essential or high priority*
- Examine current governance practices to ensure that they are more closely aligned to those of a nonprofit organization than a vendor
 - *93% of survey respondents rated as essential or high priority*
- Immediately begin to display all WorldCat holdings data in WorldCat.org at no additional charge to libraries
 - *89% of survey respondents rated as essential or high priority*
- Allow libraries to subscribe to single products, rather than bundling them
 - *87% of survey respondents rated as essential or high priority*
- Support full resource sharing interoperability between OCLC and external (non-OCLC) ILL systems
 - *86% of survey respondents rated as essential or high priority*
- Engage in an open effort to standardize the exchange and sharing of holdings information (including records providing detailed information about electronic subscriptions) to facilitate consortial resource sharing and local and collaborative collection analysis
 - *86% of survey respondents rated as essential or high priority*