
Upgrading Your OPAC with VuFind

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Asbury Seminary is a stand-alone, interdenominational seminary offering graduate certificates, master's degrees, and research degrees. The B. L. Fisher Library at Asbury Seminary has a significant collection for ministry and research in the form of both physical and digital items. As any modern library knows, the variety of resources can pose a difficulty in how these resources are discovered. Various discovery solutions are offered by big companies and open source products alike. We have been working to answer this question for years. Now we have decided to embrace the open source solution of VuFind to provide a fast and effective online public access catalog. VuFind is not the only system out there, but it uses technology that our team is comfortable with already.

The primary goal is to achieve a search experience that blends the professional-level desires of our library staff and the ease of use and aesthetics expected by our patrons. We find that, much of the time, the built-in OPAC in the ILS is not as customizable or aesthetically pleasing as we would like. Not only that, but the indexing seems to not meet the expectations of our professional librarians, making training faculty a frustrating chore.

VuFind is an open source software designed to be a highly customizable user interface for your library's online public access catalog, or OPAC. It has been largely developed by Vilanova University and is used by other academic libraries with great success. There are other options. Blacklight is a notable option but it uses Ruby on Rails, which no one on our team knows. Why would a library want to "replace" their OPAC with a VuFind interface? It may be that the OPAC associated with your library system (integrated library system, or ILS) may not be as customizable as you would like or the aesthetics don't match what your institution requires from a branding perspective. Perhaps there is search functionality that you desire, like a specific kind of browse search that your ILS will not allow for. VuFind's search capabilities are incredibly fast compared to systems that query a much busier database. Perhaps your library is a proponent of open source technologies and this fits the software ecosystem of your

library. VuFind has a great community of support and activity. These are all good reasons to consider a third-party and open source OPAC.

However, there are reasons not to choose VuFind and open source software in particular. While VuFind does the basics “out of the box,” it will require a great deal of time to make it what you and your institution wants in an OPAC. Hosting it yourself is not terribly difficult if you have the servers or the budget for cloud services. Open source technology is free like puppies. Sure, you can download and install it for free, but then all of the problems are yours and yours alone. Paying for hosting may be a better option and may be less expensive than using your own staff hours to build and maintain it.

Open source products take time, possibly a lot of time. I have been working on this project for a year now and we still do not have VuFind connected into our ILS because of limitations of VuFind’s connectivity with our specific ILS. It is not impossible, but we have to make significant use of external help and expertise to get it up and running. It is important to make sure that VuFind supports your ILS before beginning. While there is support for most major systems, always check.

So, what do you need to get started?

First, you need a server. For our implementation, we have an Ubuntu (Linux) server in a development environment in-house and the production environment in the cloud. We have chosen to hire a hosting and support company, but you could easily host it yourself if you have the skills. Server management is its own set of particular skills that can take a while to master. Jumping into this kind of a project without those skills would be unwise. VuFind has a page of potential companies to consider (vufind.org/vufind/support.html). If you choose to try it all yourself, the VuFind community through the listserv is very active and responsive. Also, confirm with your ILS admin that VuFind will work with your system.

Second, you need knowledge. Even hosting it with support can require that you know some about the technology behind VuFind. The basics of HTML, CSS, and PHP would be very helpful. If you really want to understand what makes it work, Apache Solr is what you really want to dive into. Ultimately, any system is best understood from the perspective of its database. The answer to the question of why a search in a system is not returning what you expect comes down to how the database is structured and how a query to that database functions.

Third, you need time. Any open source system takes time. If you are hosting the system yourself, it can take a lot of time (installation, configuring, customizing, debugging, tweaking the indexing, etc.). Even if you have someone host it for you and they provide support, it still takes your time, perhaps less but you are now replacing your time with money. Which one is more important in your context?

Having a highly customizable, fast, and affordable OPAC to interface with your ILS can really be a benefit to your patrons. We have been able to make significant progress in customization and indexing by using VuFind. We expect to have our system up and running for the public by the end of 2020. In the end, finding information is the goal. Use the system that works in your context.