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Tough Economic Times Call for More Library Cooperation: Report on a Wyoming and Colorado Alliance Conference

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Abstract

On April 10, 2009, the Alliance, a consortium of academic, public and special libraries in Colorado and Wyoming, convened a conference on "Cooperation: How to Thrive Despite Reduced Funding." Drawing on the expertise of national and state leaders in the fields of education and economics, conference participants heard from two keynote speakers about the changing environment of libraries and educational institutions. Referencing these changes, then, various local librarians explored ways collaboratively to advance library resources and services. An overview of these conference presentations perhaps may help libraries and their partners in other regions of the United States and elsewhere gain insight into possible collaborative strategies that sustain library development in difficult economic times.

Principles of Sustainability

Jerry Perry, Library Director at the University of Colorado, Denver Health Sciences Library, set the stage for the conference by outlining some key principles of sustainability. Libraries that are to remain viable in information and research centers must avoid the temptation in tough economic times to retreat into isolated silos. Rather, they need to pursue every opportunity to forge partnerships that achieve economies of scale in resource expansion. These opportunities occur in a number of areas including expanded electronic resources, greater interlibrary loan efficiencies, renegotiated consortial discounts, creative shared purchase plans, better-coordinated collaborative collection management and a sustained commitment to courier services. The Prospector network, which provides a unified catalog of holdings in 23 academic, public, and special libraries in Colorado and Wyoming with patron initiated borrowing and delivery of materials to the patron's home library is one existing example of such collaboration within the Colorado Alliance to date. This is to say, sustainability means making the most of the resources we have—human, material and financial.

Funding: The Big Picture

President David Longanacker of the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE)¹, described the "perfect storm" bearing down upon not only libraries but public institutions and service agencies nation-wide. In a 2005 address to a "Summit" of the Colorado Academic Library Consortium (CLIC), Longanacker spoke of another perfect storm but one affecting at that time only a few states, including Colorado². Today, the perfect storm encompasses not only the West but the nation as a whole, and it consists of three massive waves³.

The first wave is of educational change. Higher education attainment is in decline not only in Colorado and Wyoming but throughout all regions of the United States. The country continues to fall behind others in educational achievement and the overarching effect is that the United States continues to lose its competitiveness on many fronts. The younger population is becoming less educated than the older population, a trend most pronounced in the nation's Western states. Returning the country to its former standing, reaching again the 55 per-

centile of the population with a postsecondary degree, will take a great deal of concerted effort and significant resources. One way to help reach this goal would be to encourage an influx of educated foreigners, but the competition among other countries also wanting well-educated immigrants continues to grow. Another way is to strengthen at every governmental level social policy in support of higher education. One way or another, though, United States needs rise to the challenge to become more competitive in educational achievement.

The second wave is financial. Nation-wide, the public revenue—services equation continues to trend toward increasing imbalance. Deficits expand while tax dollars shrink. It is difficult to know how this will affect budgets for higher education, but scenario will not be encouraging. While Federal stabilization funding will help over the next two years, the capacity of the Federal Government to intervene in this way beyond 2011 appears extremely limited and this source of support likely will end. Local initiatives aimed at cost reductions for higher education and libraries are that much more important. The imperative for leaders in these sectors increasingly will be for creative thinking on ways to preserve, adapt and expand services and to improve resources more economically.

The third wave is tradition. The history of education in the United States shows how the country has responded to past threats and challenges in ways that have resulted in positive social change on a wide scale. One of the first such massive changes began with the signing of the "Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944," known commonly as the "GI Bill."⁴ It resulted in an enormous influx of servicemen returning after World War II into the public education system and into specialized training programs. This led to a transformation not only of the structures and capacities of post-secondary institutions, but brought about a new national prosperity. In response to other demands of society, the creation and evolution of the community college system also radically transformed education and along with it the

social fabric of the United States. Now, more recently, we see another radical transformation of education as it moves more dramatically into the online environment, a change represented in the work of Carol Twigg and the National Center for Academic Transformation⁵. How are libraries addressing this most recent advance in education?

While these three waves converge in a perfect storm, libraries and higher education in general need to see this as a time of opportunity. Its leaders need to think more radically about creating more affordable, success-focused and outcome-driven education. They need to address effectively need-based aid to students. They must advance the efficiencies and productivity of libraries and educational institutions that will improve remediation and a better transitioning for students from secondary to post-secondary institutions. In short, the perfect storm is the perfect situation in which to think, and to think again, of opportunities for collaboration. Collaboration is the best way, and perhaps the only way, to get the job done. The challenges are exceptional, but so are the opportunities. Are we up to the task?

Funding: The Colorado Scene

In focusing the question of funding more directly on the situation in Colorado, David Skaggs, Executive Director of the Colorado Department of Higher Education (and six-term Member of the United States House of Representatives) addressed what likely will transpire over the next few years. As the State of Colorado grapples with an increasing loss of tax dollar revenues due to the deepening and protracted recession, cuts to higher education and to public funding of library services may be hit harder as State budgets are analyzed and trimmed even further. While government support for higher education in Colorado has improved during the tenure of Governor Ritter, the years leading up to his election were rather bleak. As late as 2006, Colorado was 8th nationally in income generation but it was an abysmal 49th in state funding for higher education and 50th in total higher education

revenue (state support plus tuition). Another interesting contrast noted by Commissioner Skaggs is that Colorado ranks 4th in overall post-secondary educational attainment when accounting for adult migration into the state, but only 45th when accounting for the state's native-born population's post-secondary educational attainment. With a renewed commitment to higher education (but with limited ability to tap into federal stimulus money), to avoid a further decline in higher education in Colorado, the unhappy scenario will likely be a rise in tuition for State-funded colleges and universities.

Colorado has faced chronic underfunding of higher education and the current economic crisis makes the situation that much more dire. As Longanecker stressed, we are challenged to rethink and re-create ourselves as library and education providers that deal effectively with these realities.

The Way Forward

In 2009, Alliance libraries will spend over \$8 million for electronic journals, databases and other types of electronic resources. Alan Charnes, Executive Director of the Alliance, and Terry Leopold, Electronic Database Manager for the Alliance, led a discussion on how the consortium can expand its programs to improve cost savings and leverage our considerable collective purchasing power. A six-pronged approach should be followed. First, conduct thorough analyses on costs, pricing and vendor options. Second, renegotiate licenses and contracts wherever and whenever possible. Referencing the ICOLC "Statement on the Global Economic Crisis and Its Impact on Consortial Licenses"⁶ may be helpful in approaching vendors. Third, rethink collective purchasing by assessing regularly the common needs and interests of participating libraries. Always keep in mind advantages of multi-year deals as well as the basic question, "Is a joint purchase better than a single purchase?" Fourth, cancel smartly. This means not only consulting with members of the Alliance consortium but cancelling whenever possible print journals in favor of elec-

tronic. Fifth, consider alternative sources of information and avoid legacy subscriptions simply for the sake of maintaining a legacy. Six, address your customer base by bringing teaching faculty into collection development decision making processes and by emphasizing the importance and value of library partners. Get used to saying, "I'm sorry, we don't have that but I can get it for you."

Using funds and resources more smartly means making better use of the materials libraries already own. Peggy Jobe, Associate Professor and Faculty Director, Government Publications and Engineering Libraries at the University of Colorado at Boulder, addressed the matter of underutilized microform collections. While the preference today clearly is for electronic materials, in reality our libraries have significant holdings of microform materials that have high research value but little use. The key to improving use rests on new technologies that convert microfiche to an electronic format. Equipment designed to transform fiche to electronic costs in the range of \$90,000 to \$120,000—and the best way to obtain this technology and establish the service is to do it collaboratively. Sharing the cost, sharing the collections, and jointly providing the service will greatly expand research possibilities. While a number of questions in developing such a service would need to be addressed (where the equipment is housed, what are the policies governing its use, how are the services requested, would there be a fee-based component for non-Alliance participants, and what would be the workflow), for relatively low cost to consortia members, we actually could see a significant expansion of research options available to our users.

Continuing to thrive despite tough economic times should lead reference librarians to examine the need and role of indexes and abstracts. George Machovec, Associate Director of the Alliance and Chris Sugnet, Assistant Dean for Scholarly Communication at Colorado State University, pointed out the need for librarians to at least raise the question of the role of abstracting and indexing (A&I) resources. When should this

type of resource be retained and what criteria should be used for making such decisions? Could full-text electronic materials meet access and research needs if A&I resources covering these materials are cut? In addressing these and related questions, it would be important to consider the cost of the relevant A&I resources, the actual use data for abstracts and indexes, which of these resources are not being maintained sufficiently and are being phased out, and what overlaps exist in A&I holdings. The Alliance has a number of useful tools available to gather and analyze data on use, costs and overlap. While looking at the question of A&I resources, it would be important to draw into the discussion the library's prime users of abstracts and indexes, but in the end, librarians may need to take "bold action" to balance the budget.

Jina Wakimoto, Associate Professor and Faculty Director, Cataloging and Metadata Services, University of Colorado at Boulder, dealt with two key issues related to cataloging and processing. First, it was noted, cataloging continues to be integral to the structure and operations of libraries but we need to consider ways to increase its efficiencies. For instance, do mechanisms need to be developed that aid in sharing the expertise of our catalogers of foreign languages materials? Can we better draw on the expertise of catalogers within the Alliance that have unique experience in dealing with special formats and with more obscure subjects areas? How can we share more effectively and efficiently our skills as catalogers as well as the metadata we create? Second, being good stewards of our library resources, and in the interest of preservation, Alliance libraries should collaborate on ensuring "last copy retention" of print journals holdings. In doing so, a set of issues needs to be considered, such as the role of PASCAL (Preservation and Access Service Center for Colorado Academic Libraries, a remote compact storage center for large collections of bound journals), when and what library should bind the last copy, the purpose of last copy holdings in relation to e-journal preservation services such as Portico

and LOCKSS/CLOCKSS, the Center for Research Libraries (CRL) and the California Digital Library (CDL).

Concluding the conference, Michael Levine-Clark, Associate Professor and Coordinator of Collection Management at the University of Denver, addressed basic questions of how libraries can work more closely with each other and with vendors on obtaining tools and improving techniques for conducting better joint purchases of monographs. Although in recent years the Alliance has devoted considerable time, energy and funding to exploring various options in joint monograph purchasing, still there remain other possibilities worth considering. These include new possibilities of demand-driven purchase plans for e-books now in development by some vendors, a more extensive coordinated approval plan that can benefit by newly developed collection analysis tools such as Library Dynamics' Spectra Dimension, and possibilities for multi-vendor approval plans. The question of unnecessary duplication of titles helped by Alliance libraries must continue to be addressed, and weeding projects on the local level need to be coordinated more intentionally on the consortium level. The objective in all of this continues to be finding and implementing solutions for buying more items of more use across the Alliance.

Conclusion

Given the daunting challenges facing Alliance libraries in Colorado and Wyoming, every effort and all our resources must be marshaled to maintain and expand library materials and services cost-effectively. Three of the Alliance Libraries (CU Boulder, Auraria, and Colorado State University) have had R2 Consulting conduct research – and across all of those institutional reports there is a theme for increasing collaborative work wherever possible, a theme further reinforced in a separate recommendation to the Colorado Alliance of Research Libraries Members Council. In the time since the April 2009 Alliance conference, several efforts to further and expand collaborative efforts have been undertaken. These include

a revived commitment to finding sustainable models for coordinated, less-duplicative purchasing of monographic works, last-copy strategies for existing monographic collections and print journals, and continued exploration of a more consolidated approach to metadata creation and associated processes.

Endnotes

1. The WICHE commission consists of 15 High Plains and Western States working to improve access to higher education for the populations of those states and ensure student success. [Http://www.wiche.edu](http://www.wiche.edu) (viewed July 2009).
2. Longanacker, David A. "Colorado's Perfect Storm", (June 3, 2005). http://www.wiche.edu/PPT/CO_AcademicLibrarySummit_060405.pdf (viewed July 2009).
3. Longanacker, David A. "Déjà Vu All Over Again, Perfect Storm or Perfect Opportunity", (April 10, 2009). http://www.wiche.edu/PPT/041009_CO_CARL.pdf, (viewed July 2009).

4. See page 'GI Bill History' for a brief explanation of the post-WWII legislation, http://www.gibill.va.gov/GI_Bill_Info/history.htm (viewed October 2009). Current GI Bill programs and services can be viewed at: <http://www.gibill.va.gov/> (Viewed October 2009).
5. The National Center for Academic Transformation. <http://www.thencat.org/index.html> (Viewed October 2009).
6. "Statement on the Global Economic Crisis and Its Impact on Consortial Licenses", (January, 19, 2009), International Colalition of Library Consortia (ICOLC). <http://www.library.yale.edu/consortia/icolc-econcrisis-0109.htm>, (Viewed August 2009).

Editorial Note: If your library or library consortium is considering or has adopted plans or programs that rise to the challenge of tough economic times, please send a report to: Section Editors of From the Field, Collaborative Librarianship, or contact Chris Sugnet, Chris.Sugnet@colostate.edu