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Innovating for Impact: The Next Evolution of Library Consortia

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Abstract

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From the Field

Innovating for Impact: The Next Evolution of Library Consortia

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Abstract

Academic library consortia have traditionally focused on resource sharing and e-resource purchasing as core programs and value propositions for members. However, as academic libraries increasingly look beyond financial value and seek to demonstrate impact on institutional priorities and student outcomes, consortia must evolve to provide services that support those goals. This paper presents selected examples of innovative consortial programs that can have a significant impact on teaching, learning, and research at members' institutions as suggested models for other consortia that may be engaged in reviewing strategic priorities and programs.

Introduction

Higher education institutions in the United States--from community colleges to large research universities--face evolving challenges as they struggle to contain the cost of education, develop educational programs for growing numbers of non-traditional students, and confront growing competition for students. As they approach the year 2020, which marks the end of many schools' current strategic plans, institutions are evaluating how best to address these challenges. For academic libraries, this presents an opportunity to critically assess our services and partnerships with regard to their support for broader institutional missions, and their impact on the teaching, learning, and research activities of students and faculty. This is true not only for individual libraries, but also for the academic library consortia that are cornerstones of many libraries' strategies for improving services and access to resources for our patrons.

When consortia examine their activities and strategic priorities, it is important that they consider the most effective ways to deliver and demonstrate value for their member institutions. While there has been a consistent call over the past twenty years for consortia to evolve, to lead change in library services, and to adapt to new priorities for members,[1] many consortia continue to focus on traditional strengths such as resource-sharing partnerships and e-resource purchasing. As recently as 2011, an informal study of 48 academic library consortia found that many consortium missions still "emphasized [their] purpose in optimizing access to resources in a way that maximizes savings or minimizes costs and reduces duplication."[2]

Although traditional resource-sharing and purchasing partnerships are critical to libraries' abilities to extend limited budgets and improve access to resources, it is difficult to show the value of these activities in a way that moves beyond an output-focused, return-on-investment (ROI)

model. While such ROI calculations provide evidence of responsible stewardship, they do not help libraries demonstrate a connection to student learning outcomes or the impact of library services on student engagement, retention, and success--areas in which most libraries are now expected by their institutions to demonstrate a contribution. Of course, this does not necessarily mean that libraries and consortia should completely divest from resource sharing and collaborative purchasing activities. Beyond their direct value, the efficiencies that are found through consortial partnerships in traditional services can have a significant indirect impact on members' ability to "add value to the student experience" by freeing member staff to develop new local services in support of learning, teaching, and research.[3] However, it will be increasingly important for consortia to develop new initiatives that help their member libraries make and demonstrate significant contributions to student learning and success and also help the consortium itself demonstrate its own contribution to those efforts.

Fortunately, as academic library consortia seek to "reconceptualize themselves,"[4] there are both proven and emerging examples within the consortia community that provide models for how a consortium can evolve to better support members' local engagement in student learning, retention, and success efforts. At the most basic level, consortia can dedicate capacity and resources to "serve as incubators for new services" or to minimize the risk to an individual library when "there is interest in a new product, service, or activity" but the library would not be able to responsibly experiment on its own.[5] As noted above, consortia can also increase the capacity of member library staff to engage in new services through collaborative workforce or professional development initiatives creating efficiency and infrastructure that indirectly supports member contributions to student success. And, where appropriate, consortia can develop

and manage new initiatives that realize the historical benefit of consortia--the ability to do more together than individually in order to offer valuable new services for students and faculty.

While not a comprehensive inventory of innovation within academic library consortia, what follows are examples of areas of engagement for consortia as they expand beyond resource sharing and purchasing programs and identify different ways to strengthen their members' ability to demonstrate a positive impact on student learning. First, an examination of *collaborative work* looks at ways in which consortia are creating intellectual infrastructure and capacity within, and across, member libraries. This is followed by examples of innovative initiatives in three areas related to teaching and learning: *accessibility*, *digital and open content*, and *tools for teaching and learning*. Finally, we consider approaches that consortia are taking to *demonstrate value* of the consortia itself, and of their member libraries to their respective institutions. Taken together, these selected activities provide possible directions for other academic library consortia that are considering how best to evolve to meet the needs of their members and the students, staff, and faculty that they serve.

Collaborative Work

Collaborative work has been a cornerstone of library consortial activities but the idea that working together will make the consortium, and its individual members, stronger is being put into action in increasingly innovative ways. In order to create a collaborative infrastructure, consortia are supporting tools that facilitate information sharing, providing repositories of resources for member use, and helping to develop capacity within staff at member institutions.

Newly available tools are moving collaboration beyond email listservs to allow member libraries to share work and request help from others through asynchronous chat forums

and documentation platforms. The California State University system recently migrated to Alma and Primo, aided by a suite of online tools including Slack and Confluence. Slack provides topic-based discussion forums so teams can ask for information and share knowledge quickly across institutions. Confluence is a platform for collaborative documentation that can be shared across a consortium and quickly and easily updated. The State University of New York (SUNY) consortium uses Slack as well for discussing library technology questions of interest.

In some cases, consortia are also functioning as repositories for member-created resources that can be shared within the group. The Library Toolshed is hosted by the British Columbia Libraries Cooperative (BCLC) and brings together library programming, training, and instructional resources. From videos about how to run a children's storytime to PowerPoint slides on how to make the library more accessible, the Toolshed has a broad variety of brief targeted resources contributed by BCLC member libraries and available to anyone in the world. Another example is the California Digital Library's (CDL) Instructional Materials repository. Incorporating public services librarians and staff into consortial activities can be challenging but consortia like the CDL have started efforts to build resources for reference and instruction. Videos and handouts on topics such as how to cite sources, how to find articles, and how to use specific databases provide a jumpstart for new librarians in the consortium as well as material for anyone to reuse and remix to enhance their public services work.

Beyond providing collaborative tools and repositories of resources for member work, some consortia are focusing on the members themselves as a resource for both the consortium and for the profession as a whole. As consortia develop new strategic plans, they are increasingly indicating that providing ways for member staff to grow as librarians and contributors is a top priority. The

2018-2022 Ligue des Bibliotheques Européennes de Recherche (LIBER) strategic plan calls out "Diversifying Digital Skills of Library Staff Members and Researchers" as a priority. Along with their existing leadership programs, LIBER hopes to develop "an educational programme, in order to further the digital skills of library staff members."[6] The growth in digital skills for consortium members will allow for more innovative group work as well as an increased ability for member libraries to create strong digital programs at their home institutions. Another example is the Greater Western Library Alliance (GWLA), which lists one of its five strategic initiatives as "Work collaboratively to improve the diversity of GWLA member libraries and create a climate for recruiting a diverse workforce; support succession planning for member libraries; support development and mentorship of early-career librarians."[7] This forward-looking language responds not only to the need to cultivate the talents of member staff but also reflects a desire to contribute consortium resources to solving the wider issue of diversity in librarianship as a profession.

Accessibility

Colleges and universities are paying increasing attention to the need to ensure the accessibility of their services to students with a wide range of abilities. As providers of core academic resources, libraries have become important players in these efforts, critically examining the ways in which our users can access the content we provide. Initial work to help library users physically navigate our buildings has expanded to include review of how library users can successfully navigate our electronic platforms, as well as explorations into libraries' role in partnering to create accessible content.

Consortia have the potential to contribute to these efforts, both by supporting libraries in their accessibility work and by using their collective influence to negotiate with vendors. One

example is the Big Ten Academic Alliance's (BTAA) work with e-resource accessibility. Their concern that electronic resources were not sufficiently accessible to users with print disabilities has led to several projects aimed at improving the landscape for all libraries. One initiative is determining model license accessibility language to be requested in e-resource licenses, both by individual libraries and by the consortium. The consortium has established ideal language as well as modified versions for cases when the vendor will not accept the ideal language. Even if the accessibility language is not accepted by the vendor at all, advocating for changes in the accessibility of electronic resources signals to vendors that this is important to libraries and institutions and pushes the industry toward a greater awareness of how to serve users with disabilities. The BTAA is also funding third-party evaluations of the accessibility of electronic resources with the goals of helping vendors understand what improvements are needed and helping libraries understand where these e-resources may lack accessibility. Given their collective purchasing power and the efficiency of negotiating only one set of licensing language, having consortia engaged in this level of advocacy is likely to be much more effective than individual institutions working with vendors toward the same end.

Beyond advocacy for product or platform-wide accessibility improvements, libraries are also increasingly engaged in supporting the accessibility needs of individual students. Often, this includes partnering to obtain or create accessible versions of course texts, a service that would otherwise mean duplicative and redundant effort across individual institutions. The Ontario Council of University Libraries (OCUL) has developed an innovative approach to addressing this area of need. Their Accessible Content E-Portal program (ACE) is a repository of texts in accessible formats for users at any OCUL mem-

ber library. Libraries can submit digitization requests on the behalf of their users and the resulting accessible format texts are incorporated into the repository, ensuring they are available for future students. Currently, the ACE repository has over 6,800 texts available. OCUL also provides an accessibility toolkit for libraries to use in examining their local practices, taking into account legal obligations as well as best practices from other libraries in the consortium.

Digital and Open Content

Consortia initiatives have traditionally focused on expanding (and preserving) access to commodity content--books, journals, databases, and more recently e-books--through resource sharing, collective licensing, and even shared print repositories. However, the past decade has seen an increasing emphasis on empowering member institutions to efficiently share unique and local content, particularly in digital formats.

One of the most common approaches is centralized consortium support or management for member library digital repository platforms, which allows institutions to showcase and disseminate student and faculty scholarly and creative works. A precursor to the broader scope of current institutional repositories is seen in shared digital collections of theses and dissertations (ETDs), with OhioLINK's ETD Center (created in 2001) one of the best examples of a library consortium-supported ETD repository. Other regional consortia or state university systems (e.g., Texas Digital Library, California Digital Library) support similar shared ETD repositories. Most consortia-supported digital repositories now focus on creating institutionally-branded portals (rather than shared collections) that include faculty publications, student scholarship, and other unique and locally-created or curated content. Digital repositories are supported by different types of academic library consortia and library systems. For example, the

California State University (CSU) system's Digital Library Services offers centrally-supported repository services called ScholarWorks to all CSU libraries, while the British Columbia Electronic Library Network (BCELN)--a consortium that includes members ranging from small technical colleges to large research universities--provides a shared repository platform that offers individually branded portals and federated search across all member repositories. Both CSU and BCELN use open source platforms (CSU is currently migrating to Samvera/Hyrax, while BCELN uses Islandora), leveraging shared, centralized support to configure and manage software that would not necessarily be feasible (or desirable) for individual members to maintain on their own.

The growth in academic library engagement with open access publishing is also driving interest in consortia support and management of platforms that facilitate formal publishing processes beyond the simple dissemination of a repository or digital asset system. Some library systems or consortia, such as the University of California's California Digital Library, host multi-function platforms that provide institutions with not only repository functionality but also editorial workflow management for peer-reviewed publications. The CDL's eScholarship platform, which has long served as a central repository and publishing platform for the UC system, has recently been re-engineered to offer what the CDL describes as "a robust consortial model: a single aggregated repository with custom access layers and a strong brand identity for each of our ten UC campus sub-repositories."[8] Other consortia, like the Texas Digital Library, support stand-alone publishing services for journals or other publications. The TDL offers central hosting for Open Journal Systems, and frames the value proposition of its service in a series of questions: "What if libraries and universities could bypass the high costs of print journals by providing less costly outlets for

scholarly work? What if any faculty member with the willingness to do the work could start up his or her own peer-reviewed journal without prohibitive start-up costs? What if scholarship were available to the many instead of the few?"[9]

Closely related to digital repositories and open access publishing has been increasing library support for researchers' data management needs. Library consortia are well-positioned both to promote shared best practices and to provide shared infrastructure. As institutional support for data curation and management is relatively nascent, consortia support can help mitigate the risk of an institution spinning up a new education program or service before a critical mass of local users exists. One example of a focus on best practices is seen in the Ligue des Bibliothèques Européennes de Recherche (LIBER), which has identified "data stewardship" (defined by LIBER as "development of criteria and guidelines regarding data stewardship and data curation"[10]) as a strategic priority for the consortium. In addition to partnering with other European organizations to create data management infrastructure, LIBER has a Research Data Management Working Group that "collects good practices and lessons learned in the area of Research Data Management (RDM) in libraries." Moving beyond best practices, other consortia are already providing data curation platforms for researchers at their member institutions. The Ontario Council of University Libraries (OCUL) hosts the Scholars Portal Dataverse Network, an installation of Harvard's Dataverse platform available to OCUL members. Similarly, the CDL hosts Dash, using a similar multi-tenancy model to its eScholarship platform, which allows each University of California school to have its own branded portal for researchers' data while preserving federated search of data sets across the university system.

While digital repositories, open access publishing, and data curation are among the most common consortia-supported services for digital content, there are many other examples of innovative programs and services. For example, the Orbis Cascade Alliance has created a harvesting process, supported by metadata standards developed within the consortium, for aggregating unique digital content from member repositories and digital asset management systems to feed into the consortium's shared integrated library system as well as external platforms like DPLA. And focusing on a different type of aggregation, OCUL's Scholars GeoPortal, launched in 2012, brings together licensed geospatial data from different sources and allows users from OCUL institutions to search across and share the data. These, and other examples, point to ways in which the traditional consortium concept of a shared collection can be extended to meet new needs.

Tools for Teaching and Learning

The library has always been at the center of academic life for colleges and universities. As institutions look for opportunities to consolidate student services and libraries explore new ways to support student learning, the scope of many libraries' activities has expanded to include educational technology, writing and tutoring services, and other new services. This, coupled with increasing pressure from their institutions to more explicitly demonstrate a connection between library services and student learning outcomes, creates an opportunity for library consortia to explore new initiatives related to teaching and learning. While some current consortial initiatives include direct student support, like BCELN's WriteAway online tutoring service, most focus on creating infrastructure or educational content.

For libraries that have assumed responsibility for academic technology, or have merged with

information technology units on campus, oversight of the institution's learning management system (LMS) can be a core responsibility. As with other content platforms, there is an opportunity for library consortia to support their members by providing centralized hosting or support for a LMS like Moodle, Sakai, or Canvas. The Norwegian consortium BIBSYS provides access both to Canvas for hosting courses, as well as to edX, which offers another avenue for hosting or participating in MOOCs.

While relatively few library consortia are currently providing centralized support for a LMS, there is growing interest and involvement in support for course materials like open educational resources (OER). A 2017 ICOLC survey found that support for OER was at the top of planned services for consortia, with 35% indicating planned support.[11] The type of engagement with OER varies by consortium. The Louisiana Library Network (LOUIS) created the Affordable Learning LOUISiana project, which is intended to "save students money on education by reducing the costs of instructional materials through the use of eTextbooks, Open Educational Resources (OER), and other open access materials."[12] Among other projects, parts of the initiative include training for librarians, faculty, and staff to facilitate OER adoption at their institutions, as well as a project to map available OER to the Lousiana higher education core curriculum. Similarly, the GeorgiA LIbrary LEarning Online (GALILEO) consortium is a leader in the Affordable Learning Georgia initiative which, among other projects, provides access to OER created by Georgia faculty through a repository hosted by GALILEO. Other consortia have focused on facilitating access to existing OER by making them more visible in library discovery systems. BCELN has an ongoing project to create MARC records for open textbook titles published through BCcampus, a provincial open education initiative. The records are made avail-

able for libraries to add to their integrated library systems and are provided in both AACR2 and RDA.

Demonstrating the Value of Libraries and Consortia

As cost centers for academic institutions, libraries are consistently required to demonstrate their value to their administration, both in financial terms and in relation to impact on student success. Consortia have come to libraries' aid, to not only help libraries show their own value, but to also help libraries explain the return on investment (ROI) of consortium membership fees to their administration. To this end, consortia are creating documents, toolkits, and infographics to help libraries demonstrate their value to their institutions as well as help libraries justify consortium membership dues or participation in specific programs or services to their administration.

The British Columbia Electronic Library Network (BCELN) provides an excellent example of communicating ROI and value of a consortial program. BCELN has created a document outlining the achievements of its collaborative digital repository Arca. *The Focus on Value* portion provides a look at the costs avoided by individual institutions through participation in the repository, the number of items available through the repository, and a "value spotlight" on one institution's savings through its membership in the program. BCELN's use of statistics and graphics provide libraries with an easy way to show administrators how the repository is contributing to the institution. Similarly, OhioLINK provides a brochure, *The Value of OhioLINK*, that lays out the consortium's ROI in bright infographics. While a library could use the existence of a resource-sharing program to help justify consortium membership fees, an infographic that shows the cost of purchasing an academic book versus the cost of shipping it to the library via courier is a quick and convincing

illustration of the value of this resource-sharing program. A graph that shows the amount of electronic content available to member institutions versus the content available before joining the consortium is another impactful illustration of return on investment.

While there is value, particularly for financial administrators, in communicating consortial value based on an input/output, ROI model, this approach alone is not sufficient to communicate the full value of libraries or of consortium participation. Other approaches and measures are needed to assess the impact of library services in areas such as student engagement, retention, and success.[13] It is vital for libraries to be able to demonstrate a direct impact on student learning outcomes, engagement, and retention and academic library consortia have the potential to develop initiatives that increase their members' capacity to do just that.

Some consortia, in fact, have begun this work by creating tools for libraries to demonstrate their broader value and impact to administrators. For example, the Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL) has a Quality & Assessment Committee that put together a bibliography and survey of available resources to help librarians start the process of demonstrating value within their own institutions. Consortia can also be leaders in producing evidence that can be used to demonstrate the impact of libraries as a whole. For example, GWLA's Student Learning Outcomes Task Force is collecting library instruction and student data from eleven member libraries to create a longitudinal dataset that can be analyzed for the effect of library instruction on student retention and success. The results of this work will bolster advocacy for library instruction within institutions and has benefits far beyond GWLA member libraries. With both CAUL and GWLA's efforts, the ability of the consortium to compile trusted resources from multiple sources and institutions results in a product that is more valuable to

member libraries and the professional community than what an individual institution could create on its own.

Conclusion

It is clear that there are ample opportunities for consortia to expand beyond the well-trodden ground of resource sharing and electronic resource purchasing in order to help member libraries strengthen their respective contributions to student success and advance their institutions' missions. However, to do so, consortia and their members must be prepared to experiment with new types of collaboration and develop more significant levels of trust within the group. This "deep collaboration," defined by Horton as "…organizations contributing substantial levels of personal or organizational commitment, including shared authority, joint responsibility, and robust resources allocation, to achieve a common or mutually-beneficial goal,"[14] is necessary if consortia members are to pool limited resources to share risk and innovate in new areas. One consortium that has made that commitment explicit is the Private Academic Library Network of Indiana (PALNI), which has a "Commitment to Deep Collaboration." This statement makes clear the group's desire to find new ways to share work, with the goal of "enabl[ing] staff to focus, explore, and innovate to more effectively address needs and provide better service to students and faculty."[15] The new areas of engagement explored here, such as strong collaborative infrastructures, innovation in teaching and learning, and demonstrating the value of libraries and consortia, will require other consortia to make a similar deep commitment to shared work and shared resources if they are to continue to evolve. But the benefits and possibilities for member libraries and the institutions they serve are vast.

Consortia and Library System Sites Consulted

- Big Ten Academic Alliance. https://www.btaa.org/library/
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- BC Libraries Cooperative (BCLC). https://bc.libraries.coop/
- California Digital Library (CDL). http://www.cdlib.org/
- Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL). http://www.caul.edu.au/
- GeorgiA LIbrary LEarning Online (GALILEO). https://www.galileo.usg.edu/
- Greater Western Library Alliance (GWLA). http://www.gwla.org/
- Ligue des Bibliotheques Européenes de Recherche (LIBER). http://libereurope.eu/
- Louisiana Library Network (LOUIS). http://www.louislibraries.org/
- Ohio Library and Information Network (OhioLINK). https://www.ohiolink.edu/
- Ontario Council of University Libraries (OCUL). https://ocul.on.ca/
- Orbis Cascade Alliance. https://www.orbiscascade.org/
- Private Academic Library Network of Indiana (PALNI). http://www.palni.org/

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