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What Collaboration Means to Us

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What Collaboration Means to Us

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What Collaboration Means to Us

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When we took over as editors of *Collaborative Librarianship* at the beginning of 2016, we decided to initiate a new column, “What Collaboration Means to Me.” Since Emily Drabinski kicked us off in Volume 8, Issue 1, we have published ten columns, representing the voices of a range of different librarians and others who work closely with libraries. The concept of the column is simple: tell us, in your own voice, and from your own experience, why collaboration matters to you and how it has informed your work and your career. Over the past ten issues, including this one, we’ve heard from twelve professionals – seven at academic libraries, and one each from a state library, a public library, a community college consortium, a standards-based organization, and a consultancy. These speakers come from a range of places in their careers – from early on to positions of seniority. Together, these works provide a complex and nuanced view of the values and challenges of collaboration.

In the current issue, Rhiannon M. Cates states that “libraries are inherently collaborative spaces.”¹ And James Wisner believes that “no matter where you find yourself in our profession, you must collaborate with many others in order to do your job well.”² We are used to working together both within and outside the library, and most librarians would agree that collaboration is one of our strengths. But collaboration can be hard, it can be frustrating, and it can even feel burdensome. What follow are a few insights from the first ten “What Collaboration Means to Me” columns.

Cates observes, “to me, true collaboration is characterized by its intention as well as the ways it embodies and is marked by values of community When aspects and outcomes of our work are developed and framed collaboratively, hierarchical authority is, in many ways, replaced with shared agency and responsibility.”³ When done right, collaboration can break down some of the barriers that hierarchy imposes, giving everyone a say in solving a problem. But that’s not easy to achieve.

Linda Ueki Absher and Melissa Cardenas-Dow entitled their piece, “Collaborative Librarianship: A Minority Opinion,” and made the important observation that “for those who do not fit the current, overwhelming demographic of our profession (white and female) collaboration is never about choice: it is about practicalities and survival.” They continue, “what is considered collaboration is, for many of us, code switching.”⁴ Collaboration, for those not from the dominant demographic group, can feel forced – a mode of trying to fit (uncomfortably) into that group. It is important for all of us to recognize that collaboration may not feel the same for everyone involved.

Drabinski makes a similar point: “Collaboration requires building an in-group, one that includes collaborators and not others and collaborators caught up in the magic often don’t take the time to stop and see who is on the outside looking in.”⁵ If we’re not careful, collaboration can close off people within the organization who are not part of the original group. We should challenge ourselves to make sure that we are truly

open to all participants and all voices in our collaborations.

As Maureen Cole points out in her column, you may not always get to choose who your collaborators are and often you do not get to control how the collaboration may play out. Learning to compromise and truly listen to collaborative partners often leads to more substantial efforts and outcomes.⁶

Wiser offers hope along this line of thought, stating, “Successful collaboration also necessitates that we fight the understandable human impulse to seek input primarily from people who are like ourselves.”⁷ To the extent that we reach out beyond our comfort zone – the original collaborative group or those who look or act or believe just like us – our collaborations will lead to greater success. Absher and Cardenas-Dow make the important observation, “Librarians of color bring a unique viewpoint to collaborative librarianship. We listen, we speak, and we negotiate. But we keep in mind the importance of the other, the ones who have spent their lives creating a sense of place and belonging within the dominant culture.”⁸

Wiser observes that “For many (most?) of us, working collaboratively has not come naturally.”⁹ This is partially because “the personality trait that may be most needed for a person to excel at collaboration is humility,” a trait that most of do not possess.¹⁰ But humility allows us to accept the help that is inherent in collaborative work.

Humility is something we should think about as we consider whose voices matter. Ali Versluis and Lillian Rigling note that “to be collaborative, we have to hear multiple voices. It turns out that we, as a profession, are not particularly good at listening.”¹¹ If we only invite big name librarians on stage at conferences or into meeting rooms or into our professional publications then we end up without new ideas or new voices. We need to

create open spaces for collaboration beyond the traditional modes of engagement – something that we hope to accomplish through this column.

Ultimately, collaboration is our future. As Absher and Cardenas-Dow conclude, “Librarian collaboration is about survival: survival of not only our profession, but educational and cultural survival of the people we serve or hope to serve.”¹²

It has been a pleasure for us to read over these ten columns and reflect on them as a body of work. Understanding how various librarians think about collaboration is important and helps us develop a deeper understanding of collaborative librarianship. It gives us pause to consider other avenues and paths to open up within this journal for future volumes.

We are always looking for contributions and ideas about “What Collaboration Means to Me,” and we are particularly interested in giving the widest range of voices as possible a say in this collaborative project. As editors, we want to help with Versluis and Rigling’s goal of “passing the mic” to early career librarians, those in non-traditional positions, those in non-librarian positions, those from historically underrepresented groups, and others who have had fewer opportunities to publish. If you would like to contribute your own ideas about collaboration or to suggest another author, please contact us. We would love to hear from you.

¹ Rhiannon M. Cates, “What Collaboration Means to Me: Partnership as Praxis,” *Collaborative Librarianship* 10, no. 2 (2018): 73-75.

² James Wiser, “What Collaboration Means to Me: Seeking Humility in an Insecure World,” *Collaborative Librarianship* 8, no. 2 (2016): 60.

³ Cates, 73-75.

⁴ Linda Ueki Absher and Melissa Cardenas-Dow, "Collaborative Librarianship: A Minority Opinion," *Collaborative Librarianship* 8, no. 4 (2016): 161, 162.

⁵ Emily Drabinski, "What Collaboration Means to Me: The Infrastructure of Welcome," *Collaborative Librarianship* 8, no. 1 (2016): 6.

⁶ Maureen Cole, "What Collaboration Means to Me: Collaboration as a Cocktail: Shaken and Stirred," *Collaborative Librarianship* 9, no. 2 (2017): 74-76.

⁷ Wisner, 61.

⁸ Absher and Cardenas-Dow, 163.

⁹ Wisner, 60.

¹⁰ Wisner, 61.

¹¹ Ali Versluis and Lillian Rigling, "What Collaboration Means to Me: Passing the Mic," *Collaborative Librarianship* 9, no. 3 (2017): 164.

¹² Absher and Cardenas-Dow, 163.