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What Collaboration Means to Me

How We Do & Don't Collaborate at The Library Collective

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Abstract

The Library Collective is a non-profit organization devoted to redefining the library professional development landscape by providing low-cost, high-value learning opportunities for librarians. At the heart of *The Library Collective's* efforts is a unique style of collaboration. The following column outlines how the Co-Founders and Co-Directors use and don't use collaboration to create a professional development environment that embraces creativity, celebrates failure, and doesn't cost a fortune.

Keywords: professional development, librarians, creativity, learning, The Collective

In 2014, a group of librarians, frustrated by the high cost and lackluster content of library conferences, decided to stop bitchin' and do something about the problem. The result was *The Collective*, a low-cost, high-value annual gathering now in its fifth incarnation where librarians network, gain practical skills, and actually have fun in the process! We have somehow managed to create a professional development environment that embraces creativity, celebrates failure, and doesn't cost a fortune. But the innovation hasn't stopped there. We've since evolved into our own non-profit organization, *The Library Collective*, that seeks out, develops, and supports collaboration year-round in addition to our annual gathering each March. We try to foster online and in-person opportunities to achieve our motto: *Learn. Create. Collaborate*. Indeed, our unique style of collaboration is at the heart of how we're redefining the library professional development landscape.

1) We don't expect perfection but we constantly strive for it.

We consciously set out to get right what so many professional organizations seem to get wrong: librarians crave meaningful interactions and opportunities for tangible skill-building and shouldn't be expected to tithe thousands of dollars each year to take part in the organizations and conferences that define our profession. And for five years we've been making that happen without charging hundreds of dollars in membership fees--proof that it's not a mission impossible!

We hold ourselves to an incredibly high standard, taking each tiny bit of criticism from emails and our annual survey seriously and exploring any ways we might address it. We believe our events are unparalleled in terms of overall quality and return on investment but that doesn't



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stop us from making improvements year after year.

2) We make mistakes and admit to them, often very publicly. But we don't call out individuals.

When you break molds and experiment continuously, you're bound to make mistakes and missteps. And when you embrace irreverence and sass in your marketing style as we do, you're bound to ruffle a few feathers. We don't always hit the mark that we're aiming for so sometimes we have to take a step back and regroup. But we believe taking even these small risks is an important part of not becoming stale and colorless.

While we don't shy away from public criticism of large organizations and corporations, one thing we don't do (and don't condone) is participate in a callout culture directed towards individuals. We don't engage with Internet and social media trolling, no matter which side of the political spectrum it might fall upon. We think that people grow and evolve when criticism is delivered constructively and in the right environment (which almost always means individually, not publicly). We're a small group of 100% unpaid volunteers who devote countless hours to making our profession more awesome. So, whenever possible, we deliver feedback in the way we'd like to receive it, acknowledging our own fallibility and unavoidable humanness!

While we strive for perfection, we don't pretend to be perfect. That's one of the reasons we program the "Failure Confessions" session each year--a series of lightning talks about how seemingly good ideas went spectacularly wrong, followed by an open mic of real failure sharing. (Kudos to our first year programming team member Kris Bronstad who originally dreamt up this idea!)

3) We put ourselves (and our data) out there. We shine light on our processes.

We're the only library organization we know that shares uncensored survey feedback from each and every year.¹ (If you know of any other doing this, please let us know!) Why? Because we think that kind of transparency is important and for all the reasons in #2. It allows future participants to get a genuine glimpse at the quality of our content and it helps us see where we can make improvements.

Likewise, we encourage uncommon openness in our programming process. It all starts with a public first round of session ideas, with a low barrier to entry (i.e. a short and easy submission process). This public phase encourages idea sharing, networking around like-minded ideas, and commenting/feedback even before the idea is fully developed. We love how many ideas come to Round One without a fully formed set of conveners; we like to help participants forge new connections with open CFPs after our program is announced.

Next, in round two, all proposals undergo a blind peer review. While reviewers can't see the submitter identities and we avoid any conflicts of interest, we do publish the names and bios of our review team each year on our website. Again, we think this kind of transparency is important--it lets participants see who's making the decisions and the diversity (or lack thereof) of expertise and individuals who are behind those decisions. If we do all this behind closed doors, then we're also closing ourselves off to the feedback and criticism that might help us continue to grow and evolve.

Finally, everyone who submits to round two receives feedback from the review, whether the submission is ultimately programmed or not. We feel that offering feedback is yet another way to allow light into the selection process and shows respect and appreciation for the time that went into the proposal.



4) We partner across boundaries--some of them quite literal.

Despite our intentionally small size (we limit our annual conference to 300 people for the best participant experience), each year's cohort is incredibly diverse. In 2018, we saw participation from forty US states, Canada, and four total continents, with over 160 different organizations represented.

Unlike many events, we don't target a particular discipline or type of academic librarians. We program each year around a broad theme with hopes of encouraging lots of cross-pollination among academic librarians and archivists!

Also, we share *a lot* about how we do things. We published an open access article about our process and regularly consult with other conference organizers.² We don't worry about competition because we think our profession should demand that all professional gatherings strive for the level of awesomeness that we do. There's no reason to accept anything less!

5) We don't let money dictate our content or define our projects.

We don't sell our email list (because, obvious to us but apparently not to all, professional organizations should protect individual privacy!), provide a vendor expo area, nor accept sales pitches disguised as case studies in our conference program. Instead, we program real, thoughtful, and in-depth discussion opportunities for librarians and vendors to connect as people in our annual "Let's Get Real with Libations" session. We focus on the commonalities between libraries and library-targeted businesses and the common goal we share of providing great access to information and how we can better work together to achieve this goal.

We also invite vendor representatives, especially user experience experts, to join in as full conference participants throughout our event so that

they can connect one-on-one with librarians and hear their concerns. (We think it's sad and unproductive to quarantine reps to expo areas, which seems like a poor way for them to learn about what's happening in libraries.)

Our conscientious approach combined with our very modest sponsorship fees means that we don't privilege one product or service over another, allows smaller businesses and start-ups to participate on equal footing as established companies, and results in exchanges of ideas and the start of meaningful relationships as opposed to empty swag exchanges on a sales floor.

We even encourage vendors to submit session ideas to our event so long as they collaborate with one or more librarians. Since all proposals at The Collective go through a blind peer review process, there's no "pay to play" content diluting our program.

6) We try to keep it local and even our swag has soul, thanks to collaborations.

A big part of our affordability has to do with the relationships we've cultivated with the fine businesses and partners in Knoxville, Tennessee. Each year, our event brings tens of thousands of dollars to the local economy and we direct as much of it as we can to small businesses. We do this through thoughtful programming of our opening night reception (local arts venue, local catering, local band, etc.), partnership with the Visit Knoxville tourism office for our closing night pub crawl, promotion of local businesses through our door prize raffle and custom restaurant map, and even partnering with local artists, commissioning original work for our swag bag and shop items!

7) We don't do everything by consensus.

While we solicit lots of feedback and input from participants and volunteers, we don't make all our decisions by consensus (gasp!). We have a few really good reasons for this:



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First and foremost, we believe consensus kills creativity. Dissent and constructive disagreements are part of pushing boundaries and breaking out of preconceived molds and mind-sets, so sometimes it's a really good sign when we don't all just agree.

Second, deadlines anyone? Sometimes time constraints mean we have to make a quick call or game-day decisions. Not only does this keep us on our toes but sometimes that audible might even lead to a quirkier, more interesting idea than our group think might have lead us to.

Finally, "crazy" ideas are often only deigned "crazy" because no one has tried them before. Part of our process means trying things out, so sometimes that means going with an idea that might reveal itself to be a spectacular failure (see #2).

8) But we don't go it alone--we're truly a collective of inspiring librarians.

All of the work that goes into our annual event and our year-round newsletter and pop-ups wouldn't happen without the time and generosity of many a librarian. We solicit volunteers through an open call each year and super simple application process and attempt to place anyone with a real passion in a position where they can best contribute. The one immovable requirement? Applicants must have participated in one of our events so that they understand what we're all about :)

And if you take a peek at each and every individual volunteer's skills, enthusiasm, and commitment to our profession, you'll truly be inspired as we are every day!

Endnotes

¹ The Library Collective, Reports. <http://www.thelibrarycollective.org/reports> (accessed September 26, 2019).

² Ashley Maynor and Corey Halaychik, "The Collective Approach: Reinventing Affordable, Useful, and Fun Professional Development," *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*. <http://www.thelibrarycollective.org/reports> (Accessed September 26, 2019).

