

11-25-2019

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Recommended Citation

Machovec, George (2019) "What Library Collaboration Means to Me: Perspectives from an Academic Consortium Director," *Collaborative Librarianship*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 3 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/collaborativelibrarianship/vol11/iss3/2>

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What Collaboration Means to Me

Perspectives from an Academic Consortium Director

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Introduction

The founding executive director of the Colorado Alliance of Research Libraries, Ward Shaw, often mused that library “cooperation is an unnatural act.” It is certainly easier to work as a lone ranger not having to worry about cooperative agreements, special billing arrangements, attending meetings, and all of the other details that go into working with others.¹ However, that’s not how most libraries function. Whether formal or informal, library collaboration is now core to most library operations whether it be for resource sharing, shared print agreements, cooperative collection development and licensing, shared storage facilities, digitization programs, shared technical services, digital repositories, educational opportunities, metadata, shared catalogs, virtual reference, or a myriad of other library functions. Libraries are the poster child for institutional cooperation. Shaw’s comment reflects the fact that library collaboration takes effort and does not happen without intent and hard work by everyone in each arrangement.

One of the best overviews of interlibrary collaboration can be found in *Library Consortia: Models for Collaboration and Sustainability*.² This work provides an overview of modern library consortia activities followed by fifteen case studies of real world efforts.

Below are some thoughts about library collaboration, based on my own experience working as the director of a library consortium.

Attitude

Library management sets the attitudes and framework for working together. These attitudes often cascade through an organization. The most effective collaborators are those with a positive and willing attitude who are willing to take risks, try new things, and have a broad perspective for the common good.

Naysayers who habitually express negative or pessimistic views can be damaging to any collaborative effort although they often bring up important concerns which should be considered or addressed. All of us need to think critically to take into account the benefits and challenges with any project or service. However, we all know folks who take it to an extreme and perpetually “have concerns” that often have the effect of slowing a project down or are an indication that the library will likely not participate in a new opportunity. The concern is that when negative attitudes are displayed early in a discussion it sometimes can sway the entire group in a negative direction even when that perspective is not the entire picture.



A positive outlook on working with others engenders good relationships and successful projects. Several strategies can be employed to counter habitually negative personalities. These strategies can be even more effective for a group that regularly works together so that those leading can prepare in advance. Orchestrating and ordering a meeting agenda to allow for a clear explanation of a project or service is a good start. Indicating up-front both the opportunities and challenges will help display a clear understanding of all sides of an issue. Most groups have thought-leaders who are well respected by others. Encourage these folks to speak early to set the stage for others, perhaps even through directed questions to elicit their feedback. When possible, especially for more substantive projects, communicate with key influential people before a meeting to determine their attitudes and concerns. These people will likely determine a project's success or failure. Building enthusiasm for a program or service can be an effective strategy for success whether it be through inspirational presentations, stories or anecdotes, effective presentation of data, or appealing to the interests of participants. It is often joked that teaching faculty want "fame and glory," but librarians are no different. Perhaps an opportunity for a published paper or conference presentation may help bring a library to the tipping point for joining.

Resources

Allocating resources to a program, project, or service are the true test of participation. The old adage, "put your money where your mouth is" is also true for interlibrary cooperative efforts. Resource allocation can be money, staff, or services.

Often a library wants to participate but honestly cannot commit the resources. Being creative and flexible can sometimes help overcome these barriers. For example, can payments be split over fiscal years, can costs be tiered to allow smaller

libraries to participate, or can a library participate through some other mechanism where shortcomings in funding could be offset through staffing or some other technique?

Most libraries cannot cover the costs for another institution. However, it is quite common to work together to leverage the resources of one institution to maximize the benefit for all. Can an institution time the purchase of an e-resource, product, or service to create a bundle to reach a threshold for a discount? It is sometimes the case that if a threshold is reached that a product is less expense on a per-library basis even if some members in the group cannot pay. Allowing these libraries to be in the deal for low or no cost can engender positive feelings. Of course, if a library does this too often the opposite attitude will occur since no one likes perpetual free riders.

Participate as appropriate

There are many different flavors of library consortia and the one truism is that they are all different. The way that an organization is constituted may dictate the level of library participation. Some consortia are state agencies, some are part of university or regional systems, some are informal associations that work on an ad hoc basis, and some are formally organized non-profit organizations. Each of these will have mandates or restrictions which may limit or force participation in the group.

There are different strategies for working with a group depending on these underlying assumptions. If, for example, a particular group is a state agency with substantive amounts of governmental funding, participation in a program or service may be required. These types of all-in programs or licensing will likely proceed even if there are concerns or dissension in the ranks. However, most non-profit consortia or ad hoc groups work on the opt-in model where libraries may choose to participate or not. These types of



opt-in initiatives are sometimes more difficult to manage since putting different groups together for varying activities is an ongoing challenge. However, opt-in groups often bring together like minded cohorts of libraries that really do want to work or license together. They have a choice.

No matter what kind of consortium or group a library is in, the common underlying principle is to participate. It should be obvious but attend meetings, provide feedback on documents, participate in surveys, and talk with your peers. Don't be that person who doesn't participate but complains after the fact.

Colorado Alliance of Research Libraries

The Colorado Alliance of Research Libraries (<https://www.coalliance.org>) began in the 1970s through cooperative purchasing of expensive materials (e.g. microform sets, expensive reference works) coupled with reciprocal borrowing agreements. In the 1980s the group expanded to include the development of an integrated library system (the CARL system) and the Uncover table-of-contents service (both were sold in the mid-1990s). In the 1990s the modern consortial movement began with the advent of the Internet and online e-resources. This opened up the door for wide-scale collaboration which has now expanded into a broad suite of services including a huge e-resource licensing program, a large regional union catalog called Prospector, the Alliance Shared Print Trust, and a variety of other programs and services. The Alliance now includes most of the academic libraries in Colorado and Wyoming and has developed programs and services that extend well beyond its borders. For example, the Gold Rush analytics tool (<https://www.coalliance.org/software/gold-rush>) is being used by groups around North America to analyze their collections to make better decisions for shared print

programs, looking at collection overlap, and prospective purchasing.

The Colorado Alliance is a founding member of the International Coalition of Library Consortia (ICOLC). ICOLC (<https://icolc.net/>) provides inter-consortial collaboration through an active listserv, two annual meetings (North America and Europe), and other specialized programs and activities. This coalition of collaborators has provided important opportunities for all to become more effective.

A Challenge

Although the challenges to library collaboration are legion, one particular area of interest to me is the loss of social capital. The Colorado Alliance hosts many programs, workshops, committees, task forces, and ad hoc groups for its varying programs and services. Colorado and Wyoming are physically large states with libraries spread over large geographic regions. Technology has enhanced collaborative efforts in that many more can participate without having to travel large distances to attend a meeting. Virtually every meeting, if not exclusively virtual, will have a virtual option through a Webinar or conference call.

What has become apparent, however, is that even for some of the groups that regularly meet, the members do not personally know each other anymore. This is particularly problematic as new staff arrive at member institutions and have never made a personal connection in the consortium. If this is coupled with a quiet personality, some of these excellent librarians disappear from the stage. This can be mitigated, to some extent, through video conferencing, social events, or trying to promote periodic in-person meetings - but the loss of social capital may hurt long-term collaborative initiatives since relationships and trust are important elements in working together.



¹ Shaw, Ward, Resource Sharing and the Network Approach. *New Directions for Higher Education*, (1982): 39, 55-60.

² Horton, Valerie and Greg Pronevitz, eds, *Library consortia: Models for collaboration and sustainability*. American Library Association, 2015.

