Collaborative Librarianship

Volume 11 | Issue 4 Article 4

2-21-2020

Collaborating Across Consortial Boundaries

Jill Morris PALCI, jill@palci.org

Kirsten Leonard PALNI, kleonard@palni.edu

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Recommended Citation

Morris, Jill and Leonard, Kirsten (2020) "Collaborating Across Consortial Boundaries," Collaborative Librarianship: Vol. 11: Iss. 4, Article 4.

Available at: https://digitalcommons.du.edu/collaborativelibrarianship/vol11/iss4/4

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Collaborating Across Consortial Boundaries

Abstract

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Keywords

consortia, collaboration, deep collaboration, partnership, academic libraries, institutional repositories, resource sharing, usage data, shared print, CC-PLUS, ReShare, Hyku, Partnership for Shared Book Collections

From the Field

Collaborating Across Consortial Boundaries

Jill Morris (jill@palci.org)
Executive Director, Pennsylvania Academic Library Consortium, Inc. (PALCI)

Kirsten Leonard (<u>kleonard@palni.edu</u>)
Executive Director, Private Academic Library Network of Indiana (PALNI)

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It is nearly a given that most academic library directors feel the need to collaborate with other libraries to contain costs, develop new programs, and accomplish their missions; and historically, many have done so by participating in a library consortium, and sometimes in multiple consortia. In this article, the executive directors of The Pennsylvania Academic Library Consortium, Inc. (PALCI) and the Private Academic Library Network of Indiana (PALNI), two long-standing academic library consortia, share their insights and experiences as they have observed the necessity for broadening consortial collaboration through cross-consortial partnerships, moving from coordinated efforts toward deeper collaboration across consortium boundaries. The authors describe and reflect on several recent examples of cross-consortial initiatives in which their respective consortia are involved, examining why consortia are beginning to collaborate more deeply across boundaries and the challenges and opportunities associated with those collaborations.

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Introduction

It is nearly a given that most academic library directors feel the need to collaborate with other libraries to contain costs, develop new programs, and accomplish their missions, and historically, many have done so by participating in a library consortium, and sometimes in multiple consortia. Libraries work within consortial frameworks because they are effective in coping

with tight budgets, limited resources and expertise. Today, those consortial frameworks are being tested and stretched to deal with even larger problems, including market consolidation, declining enrollments, and decreasing budgets. As a result, we, as consortium leaders from PALCI (the Pennsylvania Academic Library Consortium, Inc.) and PALNI (the Private Academic Library Network of Indiana) are finding ourselves looking outside our singular consortial frameworks and forming partnerships that expand



across consortia. We believe these partnerships present important questions about the methods, tools, and resources needed to overcome today's challenges, which we believe will have implications for the way consortia will do their work in the future.

Background

Many have written about the benefits and necessities of collaboration in academic libraries and the increasing importance of library consortia in scaling shared solutions, containing costs, sharing risk, and facilitating innovation, not to mention the benefits of professional networking, and sharing of knowledge and human resources. Libraries across the world have formed many different consortia, each suited to solve particular problems, taking into account their respective environments, funding and political structures, and general raisons d'être. Whether focused on resource sharing, group content licensing, shared systems, coordinated learning support, or other initiatives, consortia are increasingly a mechanism for getting things done that individual libraries cannot accomplish easily on their own.1

Lorcan Dempsey describes the "powers" consortia hold as the ability to scale influence, learning, innovation, and capacity, noting natural tensions that arise around the extent and degree of collaboration occurring as libraries weigh local needs with those of a broader community. Dempsey also observes that as libraries rationalize their commitments to each other, "it is not simply more collaboration that is needed – it is a strategic view of collaboration..." Dempsey's work highlights the variety of reasons libraries collaborate and encourages us to study our commitments to consortia more closely in order to make those collaborations more effective.

Xan Arch and Isaac Gilman assert that libraries are tasking consortia to innovate further to provide more direct impacts on teaching, learning,

and research.³ Arch and Gilman call for libraries and consortia to develop "new types of collaboration and . . . significant levels of trust within the group" and "to pool limited resources to share risk and innovate in new areas." ⁴ In one example of such collaboration, PALNI has expanded their definition of collaboration to include all aspects of library and information services work, as described in their 2016 "Commitment to Deep Collaboration" statement.⁵

As consortia are being asked to innovate and do more, they are also under intense scrutiny to deliver an appropriate level of value and on-going utility. Where membership in consortia is optional or where members pay a fee, libraries expect to see a return on investment, or the organization risks losing its members. A number of recent examples show membership organizations merging or disintegrating altogether. Roger Schonfeld, writing about these pressures, describes a number of recent collaborative organizations that were at a "crossroads" where restructuring of academic library collaboration was needed. Schonfeld advises that "to remain successful collaborative vehicles will need to navigate a number of major shifts and pressures" with special attention to the transition to Open Access, resource sharing and shared systems, funding and value propositions, and the changing needs of academic libraries.6

For decades consortia have understood the importance of collaboration, monitored trends, coordinated efforts and shared information with each other. The International Coalition of Library Consortia (ICOLC), a network of more than 200 library consortia worldwide, exists to serve these needs, and many consortial staff meet together in face-to-face meetings twice per year, in North America and Europe. The purpose of these meetings is largely information-sharing and networking, but occasionally, problems and the need for shared solutions cut across consortial boundaries in ways that allow



consortia to coordinate their efforts to greater effect. ICOLC is known for developing and delivering written statements signed by multiple consortial leaders to address library needs with content and service providers, such as those listed on the ICOLC website.8 Coordinated efforts around shared issues creates a power dynamic that expands libraries' reach beyond a single consortium to the broader world. Coordinated efforts such as these are focused on alignment and articulation of needs, and take relatively few resources to accomplish, with little or no ongoing commitments, and no mandate to continue beyond any organization's desire to participate. Though relatively simple to accomplish, these efforts have been effective in demonstrating the combined power of consortia.

If the coordinated efforts among consortia have been the hallmark of ICOLC's collective power, it is less frequent that the ICOLC community participates in a deeper level of collaboration representing partnerships between consortia. We argue that, more often, as powerful problem-solving entities under pressure to deliver results to members, library consortia are moving along the collaboration continuum, beyond the somewhat low-barrier-to-entry coordinated efforts of the past, and when possible, collaborating deeply across consortia.

Consortia are well positioned to think creatively and try new approaches that test and stretch the very foundations of their collaborations. In seeking out these new and creative approaches, consortia are increasingly entering new spaces and partnering not just within, but across consortial boundaries to share the burden of risk more widely, support effective innovation, and to develop community-owned approaches. Recent initiatives related to library systems technologies and collections sharing demonstrate a flurry of activity in cross-consortial work, where consortia are under pressure to take collaboration further. In the following pages, we will describe and reflect on several recent examples of cross-

consortial initiatives in which our respective consortia are involved, examining why consortia are collaborating more deeply, and the challenges associated with those collaborations.

PALCI and PALNI's Selected Examples of Cross-Consortial Collaborations

As executive directors of PALCI and PALNI, we are constantly striving to make the best use of our resources, seeking out innovative approaches, and we have a (less than scientific) theory that we may be genetically predisposed to choose collaboration over going-it-alone every single time. We consistently ask our respective members to collaborate as the first approach to accomplishing our work, and we believe in collaborating so much that we have become involved in many cross-consortial initiatives where we actively practice what we preach, seek out partnerships, share what we learn, and work among and across our communities for the betterment of the whole.

Below we report on several selected and recent examples of this type of work, where, with the support of our members, our consortia have engaged in deep collaboration across consortial boundaries.

Cross Consortial Case Study 1: Hyku for Consortia9

About the Project

The Hyku for Consortia project, funded in-part by IMLS (LG-36-19-0108-19) is a partnership between PALCI and PALNI to explore, develop, and pilot an open source, multi-tenant, consortial institutional repository (IR) built on the multi-tenant Hyku platform (Hyrax/Samverabased software). ¹⁰ In 2018, our two consortia developed a plan, funded an initial development phase, and later formalized a partnership with a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to work together and build an open source IR solution. Presented with the opportunity to apply for additional IMLS grant-funding, PALCI and PALNI



further developed the project plan and were awarded an eighteen-month grant of \$172,172 for the software's development. As part of this project, we hired and partnered with a commercial software developer firm, Notch8, which is a well-known contributor to the Samvera community, to build out the Hyku software to deliver an ultra-low-cost option for hosting, discovery, and access to digital material for our member libraries. Ultimately, we aim to create a consortial-scaled IR service that individual libraries may use, customize, and brand as their own, while building the capacity and functionality required to share underlying infrastructure, hosting, and administration costs across institutions and consortia. Because the software is open source, PALCI and PALNI will contribute all the developed code back to the consortial community for re-use and further development by the wider consortium community.

Purpose for Cross-Consortial Collaboration

Through the ICOLC community, both consortia became aware of our shared institutional repository needs. PALNI had been seeking an affordable and easy to use IR solution since 2012 because its small private academic libraries could not afford existing commercial solutions, and most did not have the staff expertise or resources to develop and use an IR. PALNI developed an extensive vision document that described and documented the consortium's needs.11 At the same time, PALCI's small, medium, and larger size schools had expressed a desire to contain IR costs, reduce maintenance, and find an adaptable solution. In 2017, PALCI participated as a Hyku testing partner in an IMLS grant-funded project (HykuDirect, formerly known as Hydra-in-a-Box) managed by DuraSpace, DPLA, and Stanford University.

The Hyku for Consortia project developed by PALCI and PALNI is actively building on previous grant-funded work to meet individual library IR needs, to be future-ready to adapt to

new formats and workflows, and to allow libraries to work collaboratively not only within one consortium but also to share expertise across multiple consortia. By pooling our expertise, financial resources, and diversity in number and size of libraries, we believe we are better positioned to develop a robust and sustainable solution for maximum impact and benefit to the community.

Learnings and Challenges

As two consortia that are actively involved in many projects, carving out the necessary consortial staff and time is a challenge. Both consortia have added new full and part-time staff for the project with the assistance of grant funds. Member libraries have widely embraced the project, so there has been limited need to spend significant time in communicating value or getting buy-in, but the communications to gather wide ranging specifications, use cases, and priorities continues to be a challenge as it requires further time and investment from member libraries' staff, all while several institutions are facing staff cuts.

In addition, this is a fast-developing software in the broader Samvera/Hyku community worldwide, so keeping up with Hyku development external to the project is essential to supporting our vision, setting development priorities, and utilizing any code development or advancements made elsewhere. We began participating in the Hyku Community Interest Group meetings, and we established monthly watercooler sharing sessions with the British Library, which was actively engaged in a similar consortial-focused Hyku project. Lastly, the partnership of multiple consortia means we have a greater number of stakeholders to serve. The project has a goal of developing workflows to manage and store open educational resources and to develop communication and governance structures to work across two or more consortia. Models for these types of partnerships are new and have to



be created and tested based on the needs of those involved. A high degree of trust between our two consortia has been essential to finding shared solutions. Going forward, timely and time-effective communication, with clear, immediate, and ongoing added value for member libraries across the two (or more consortia) will be vital to success.

Cross-Consortial Case Study 2: Project ReShare¹²

About the Project

A community of libraries, consortia, information organizations and developers, including both commercial and non-profit interests, joined together in 2018 to create Project ReShare, a new and open approach to library and consortium resource sharing. Dissatisfied with existing commercial options, the partners saw an opportunity to build on the existing open source technologies being used in the FOLIO project to improve consortial borrowing programs. The project's vision is to build a user-centered, appbased, system-agnostic community-owned resource sharing platform for libraries that will set the standard for how we connect library patrons to the resources and information they require. A number of consortia, including PALCI, the Triangle Research Libraries Network (TRLN), the Greater Western Libraries Alliance (GWLA), the Alberta Library (TAL), the Midwest Collaborative for Library Services (MCLS) and ConnectNY, among others, including many individual libraries, have partnered together with commercial developers Index Data and Knowledge Integration, and committed funds toward the platform's development, which includes development of consortial shared indexes and standards-based protocols for exchanging unmediated resource sharing requests.

Throughout 2018 and 2019, ReShare partners created a community governance model, participated in an intensive user experience design and development process, developed the ReShare

platform, and engaged the wider community in its efforts. As of the writing of this article, the project is about to announce its first demonstration software release with examples of its working shared index and resource sharing functionality. Additional software releases are planned for spring and summer, with its first minimally viable product (ReShare 1.0) due out by fall 2020.

Purpose for Cross-Consortial Collaboration

Resource sharing is an inherently collaborative activity requiring the coordinated efforts of multiple libraries. Consortia have for many years been instrumental in building resource sharing efficiencies across libraries, and many manage consortial borrowing systems on behalf of member libraries to speed delivery time to patrons and improve sharing capabilities. Consortia using such systems often participate in software user groups and coordinate efforts to improve systems. With only commercial options to choose from though, consortia primarily worked within the construct of each vendor's user group to improve these existing systems. The broadening of consortial partnerships around consortial resource sharing systems occurred in 2017, when the Big Ten Academic Alliance (BTAA) released its vision for a "Next Generation Discovery to Delivery System" which advocated for improvements to resource sharing using standards-based protocols that could enable sharing not only within consortia, but also across consortia in service to patrons. As more consortia desired standards-based, system-agnostic approaches, and as a direct result of market consolidation occurring between 2017 and 2019, Project ReShare gave a home to those who felt disenfranchised from making improvements in the commercially-governed resource sharing space. As the project developed, ReShare found its strength in the numbers of participating community members throughout its various committees, representing multiple consortia and



hundreds of libraries working together for community-owned resource sharing solutions. The act of building out community-owned infrastructure was seen as an opportunity for consortia to band together to offer an alternative technology solution, and as a chance to influence what libraries need from their various library technology (e.g., ILS/LSP, discovery, resource sharing) providers.

Learnings and Challenges

Like any open source software project, Project ReShare continually faces challenges around finding the needed resources, funding, expertise, and on-going commitments to build and sustain the technology. Partnerships such as Re-Share require models for ownership of intellectual property, and mechanisms for managing shared financial resources, which have taken significant trust, time, and resources to develop. Even basic infrastructure, like project management software, shared filing systems, a project website, email lists, and meetings are conversations that require a high degree of coordination and agreement across many groups. ReShare has dealt with many of these challenges by remaining lightweight in its governance, operating under a "lazy consensus" model early on, and building on the efforts of other open source projects. The Open Library Foundation, home to the FOLIO project, has provided helpful infrastructure to the project, though is still in early days as it finalizes its approach to supporting projects like ReShare. Discussions around establishing the project's legal status are ongoing, and may be highly beneficial to its long-term viability. Additional challenges lie in the increasingly consolidated and competitive nature of the resource sharing space, where commerciallyowned solutions have a strong hold and influence on the market.

Despite these challenges, the greatest strength of the partnerships produced within Project Re-Share has been the formation of a strong and

committed community of trust. Libraries are able to directly impact the software being produced through a highly interactive UX design process, and take ownership of the resulting platform. ReShare's multiple committees and leadership teams meet multiple times per month, with contributions coming in the form of financial commitments and other forms of infrastructure, time, and expertise. The combined commitments of partnering consortia have allowed participants to effectively partner with commercial developers who share a philosophy around community-owned software and hold mutual long-term financial interests. Since Project ReShare formed, additional consolidation has occurred, and the changing environment continues to require a high degree of coordination and attention to the changing needs of libraries.

Cross Consortial Case Study 3: CC-PLUS¹³

About the Project

CC-PLUS is an open source software, community, and administrative tool set for usage statistics management that will support libraries and consortia in data-informed decisions and effective stewardship of electronic resources. In 2017, PALCI was awarded a planning grant in partnership with seven other consortia to develop prototype software for management of library usage data at consortial scale. Today, the partnership consists of more than ten library consortia actively developing the open source software platform, and was funded in-part through a second IMLS National Leadership Grant for Libraries (LG-70-18-0205-18) to manage the harvest, ingest, management, display, and analysis of COUNTER usage statistics. The CC-PLUS open source platform will enable consortia worldwide to manage their libraries' usage data through a single interface, automate data harvesting, and make data-informed decisions regarding investments in electronic resources.



Purpose for Cross-Consortial Collaboration

Historically, library usage data has been problematic for both libraries and consortia to manage. In 2016, several members of the ICOLC community partnered to survey more than 45 consortia worldwide and found that there was widespread agreement on the need for shared tools in this space. 14 A variety of home-grown systems and spreadsheet management techniques were developed by multiple libraries and consortia, but few were widely replicable. Survey respondents reported limited bandwidth and resources to manage this data that is so important to consortial eResource license negotiations. With the most recent release of COUN-TER's Code of Practice (Release 5), in which a consortium report is no longer required, consortia found it increasingly important to have tools to help in this process. In 2018, PALCI was awarded a second project grant of \$247,500 from IMLS to complete development of a productionready tool for this purpose. Just as important as the funds required to complete the technology development has been the formation of a community of practice around how consortia coordinate efforts to advocate for improved service and data integrity in the library usage data space.

Learnings and Challenges

Initial challenges at the start of this project centered around identifying funding for the work. PALCI became involved as an interested partner and one of the few consortia that could apply for grant-funding from IMLS because of its 501(C)(3) status and a low overhead requirement. The CC-PLUS community has now benefited from multiple grants from IMLS, which supported its initial and on-going development. It is unlikely this project and partnership would have had the strength it needed without the external financial support of this effort, making involvement in the community a relatively small

and practical commitment of time from each consortium.

Other challenges have come from coordinating communication with the project's large number of stakeholders, the recent changes in the COUNTER Code of Practice, and the tools being used or developed to deal with those changes. To mitigate these challenges, the project began working more closely with the COUNTER organization than in its earlier phases, and is actively collaborating on efforts to produce complementary tool sets for libraries. The CC-PLUS Advisory Board also voted to work with a commercial partner, ConsortiaManager, as a way of securing needed technology integrations consortia desired. Lastly, because the most recent COUNTER Code of Practice Release 5 is new as of January 2019, few vendors have successfully implemented it, making testing difficult and requiring a high degree of communication and information sharing with other international efforts, such as Jisc's Journal Usage Statistics Portal (JUSP) team.

Cross Consortial Case Study 4: Partnership for Shared Book Collections¹⁵

About the Project

The Partnership for Shared Book Collections is a federation of U.S. and Canadian-based monograph and shared print programs with a common goal of coordinating collaboration to support cost-effective retention of and access to print book collections. The Partnership aims to ensure long-term preservation, accessibility, and integrity of scholarly print resources and grew out of set of meetings hosted by the Eastern Academic Scholars Trust (EAST). Initial meetings were funded by a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and included staff from over twenty shared print programs, funders, vendors, and others interested in the preservation of print books. Over the past two years, participants have met to assess priorities and direction



and to develop needed infrastructure. The Partnership officially launched at the Print Archive Network meeting in January 2020.

Purpose for Cross-Consortial Collaboration

The preservation of print books within individual shared print programs has a high cost to those involved. Preserving print books through coordinated efforts across North America is even more costly and challenging as many areas lack shared print programs altogether. The Partnership seeks to reduce costs of these initiatives through shared retention commitments and deduplication of effort. This cross-consortial partnership supports the development of emerging shared print programs, enables the development and promotion of evidence-based best practices, increases the effectiveness of communication, and allows for large scale projects and research out of reach for individual shared print programs by leveraging scale and expertise.

Learnings and Challenges

Funding is a particular challenge at the individual shared print program level as well as the Partnership level. The Partnership has launched with a lightweight infrastructure consisting of a half-time coordinator and in-kind contributions of expertise and infrastructure like web hosting, financial management, software, and meeting technology. One of the goals of the Partnership is to provide best practices in communicating with stakeholders and funders to gain adequate funding for programs and to provide shared infrastructure for managing metadata and enhancing discovery of shared print commitments.

Discussion and Future Opportunities for Cross-Consortial Collaboration

The cross-consortial collaborations discussed above started with specific problems felt widely by multiple groups of libraries and resulted in a number of benefits that expanded the scope and scale of problem-solving. In each of the initiatives described, the partnerships provided some degree of financial benefit through cost-sharing or group-funding, external grant-funding opportunities, or savings experienced from sharing infrastructure and de-duplication of effort. The authors note that in our experience, grant funders prefer evidence of strong partnerships showcasing broad community needs and commitment to the issues at-hand. Cross-consortial collaboration may be one way to increase the opportunities for external awards that spark innovation and problem solving.

These cross-consortial partnerships also sprang up where shared needs were not being met by other entities or existing solutions, and where libraries lacked a high degree of control of systems, software development, and/or cost-containment. Working together cross-consortially gave an increased sense of agency when working individually was too costly, and where there were gaps in necessary staffing or skills. Additionally, the traditional benefits of consortia (economy of scale, shared expertise, the diversity that comes with multiple participants, shared risk, de-duplication of effort, and leverage) are magnified when multiple consortia work together through deepened partnerships and collaboration. Lastly, we are happy to report that there are other less tangible benefits of cross-consortial collaboration, including the joys of networking, building relationships, and leadership opportunities, as well as the professional growth participants experience as we work with our colleagues in these new capacities.

Despite the many benefits and reasons to collaborate deeply across consortia, challenges exist, and just as the benefits of collaboration within a single consortium can be magnified through partnership across consortia, so too can its challenges. In the examples named above, it has been challenging and time consuming, but necessary, to develop strong and flexible govern-



ance mechanisms, identify shared understandings around decision-making process, and have appropriately set expectations in establishing workflows across groups where the norms of collaboration may be different. Even small issues, like naming conventions and the terms used in project management can add confusion and frustration when consortia do not have experience working together. Investing time early in cross-consortial projects, establishing shared management practices, and developing communication workflows is time well-spent to keep miscommunications to a minimum and allow each group to work to its full potential for the benefit of the whole.

The time needed to support cross-consortial collaboration is also easy to underestimate as each group has competing demands. It takes time to ensure alignment in priorities, timelines, governance, communications, and expectations, and to build the trust necessary for success. Project participants may find that all needs will not be met equally in cross-consortial collaboration and therefore participants must value the process of working together.

Lastly, the limited existing infrastructure supporting cross-consortial initiatives can present challenges. Within the United States especially, consortia have no national, legally-recognized organization, mandate, or funding structure that binds us together. This means each time consortia wish to partner for grant funding opportunities, share staff and resources, or work on joint projects, we have to seek out organizations that have the capacity to partner, reinvent ways of working together each time, develop mechanisms for sharing, and create new MOUs and agreements. In the future, it is possible that ICOLC or other organizations could increasingly offer tools to facilitate such partnerships while leveraging the accountability and closeness to libraries and areas served through individual consortia.

Overcoming the challenges of cross-consortial collaboration is doable, if a few key requirements needed for cross-consortial collaboration exist. These requirements are not unlike those needed within a singular consortial environment. The most critical element of successful cross-consortial collaborations is the development of a transparent, high trust environment where partners are assured that each organization will put the best interests of the project at the center of decision-making, and where communication happens early and often. Additionally, alignment around goals, motivations, and timing needs facilitate easier planning and allow groups to work across their usual boundaries with some confidence that each group is equally committed to the work and that the work will be effective in meeting their needs. External funding, such as grant-based opportunities, can provide additional motivation and can often be the kickstart that is needed to allow for additional investments of time and resources that crossconsortial collaboration requires. Lastly, consortia should choose partners who have demonstrated the will to collaborate and appreciation for it. Choosing partners carefully is key to ensuring that shared goals exist and will be met.

It is important to note that there are many other examples of cross consortial collaboration happening in other consortia, and we believe we will see even more cross-consortial collaboration in the future. One emerging area for growing cross-consortial collaboration may center around support for accessibility issues related to library systems and content. Several consortia, such as the BTAA and the Association of Southeastern Research Libraries (ASERL) are already actively partnering in this space. 16 Accessibility issues touch all libraries and consortia, and due to recent court cases, there is a high level of urgency in finding additional shared solutions. Cross-consortial collaboration around accessibility may provide an opportunity to address the problems we are collectively experiencing and



create more effective structures at the point of need.

Conclusion

As noted by many, including Lorcan Dempsey, "collaboration is hard. Effective collaboration is even harder."17 And, we would add that effective collaboration across multiple consortia requires even more adept leadership and efficient structures. It will be critical to document, track, and assess the methods and practices used in cross-consortial work in order to build on what we have learned and avoid future duplication of effort. But with thoughtfulness around the needs of the communities we serve, and a strong desire to scale our efforts, share our already shared risk, and build greater capacity, we have the opportunity to work together more closely than ever before to achieve shared goals. More research is needed to determine what initiatives are most in need of this form of deeper collaboration, what infrastructure would add important and needed efficiency and supply important collaborative working models. We urge consortia who are interested in engaging in this style of work to start first on initiatives that have easy wins where trust is high. The trust implicit in collaboration is what will ultimately allow our diverse and distinct consortia to break down our boundaries where it makes sense to do so and shape the future for academic libraries.



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