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Collaboration in a Time of Crisis: Lessons from COVID-19

Collaboration in a Time of Crisis: Lessons from COVID-19

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Just a few months ago, most of us learned the term “social distancing,” which is more aptly called “physical distancing,” since we’ve realized we can still be social while apart. Our lives have been upended as we’ve withdrawn into smaller worlds centered on our homes and families, leaving behind our daily commutes, our travel to conferences, and our regular interactions with colleagues or students in the library, on campus, and in our local professional networks. For many, this time has been accompanied by uncertainty about personal health and financial futures. This transition has been difficult and stressful, for us as librarians and for the communities we serve, but it has also shown that libraries and librarians can continue to do important work, even as our physical collections, our buildings, and our workspaces are inaccessible. Much of this work remains collaborative and requires more consistent engagement in our online environments.

This journal is about library collaboration in all of its forms - librarians working together at their own institutions or with colleagues at others, librarians partnering with offices or services on campus or in the community, or librarians working with publishers or vendors. The fact that *Collaborative Librarianship* is now starting its twelfth year of publication shows that collaboration is a vital element of our work. And yet, here we are, in an environment that has challenged how we can work together. What are the im-

pacts this pandemic will have on library collaboration in the short term and further into the future?

In some very obvious ways, this pandemic has had a negative impact on library collaboration: interlibrary loan (ILL) services have been cut back as most libraries have been unable to lend physical materials or even scan materials to be delivered electronically. Couriers, which regional networks rely on for sharing of resources, have been unable to operate. And in-person conferences and meetings, which we rely on for relationship building and which often serve as springboards to more meaningful collaboration, have been curtailed.

At the same time, we have perhaps discovered new ways of collaborating. Requirements to work at home have equalized opportunities to network with colleagues, since conference attendance no longer requires the expense of travel and lodging. We can participate in professional meetings and listen to conference speakers from our homes. And the social activities that are such an important part of conferences have been replaced by Zoom happy hours. In an environment where all meetings and activities happen virtually, it is just as easy to engage with colleagues in other states or countries as it is to meet with colleagues from your own institution. This leveling of interactions may make connection beyond the institution easier, and may lead

to new types of collaborations between colleagues. Hopefully we will be able to learn from and draw upon these experiences as we define what our new realities are.

Most of us are planning for a return to our physical spaces, with a very gradual re-opening of our library facilities. Most immediately, this return is centered on our physical collections. We may be bringing staff back to library buildings, but often we're planning to keep them closed to the public. We are focusing on getting a backlog of books and technology loans returned and back to the shelves and planning for the distribution of physical collections to our users. This may entail just scanning and document delivery initially, it may include curbside pickup and distribution of books and other materials, or it may be the opening of ground floors of libraries for the circulation of resources.

Once we are back in our facilities, we can consider expanding ILL, which has long been a particularly important aspect of library cooperation. ILL hasn't stopped completely; most of us have been sharing PDFs from our licensed digital collections while working from home, but relatively few of us have been able to share scanned material from our physical collections. As we move back into our buildings, we will gradually commence scanning material to share with other libraries. The question of when we can begin sharing returnables is up in the air. The ILL network for print materials essentially shut down when the pandemic hit. Many libraries will be slow to reinstate this service because of concerns about transmitting disease, about the reliability of delivery and receipt - especially on campuses where mail services may still be shut down, and because some may simply not have the staffing levels available in the short term.

Another type of library collaboration may be impacted: shared print programs have been predicated on the idea that libraries can share the risk

and cost of storing older print materials. By entering into agreements where libraries promise to retain a copy of a title for the good of a group, everyone else can then confidently deaccession their own copy of that title. Collectively, libraries are preserving material for the future while also allowing them to free up scarce and valuable space. Since these programs rely on the ability to share print materials, and may also be perceived as "nice to have" rather than essential, it is easy to imagine administrators cutting back on these initiatives.

We are entering a period of significant financial uncertainty. It is clear that budgets will be cut at almost every library, but not yet clear how deep those cuts will go and for how long they will last. In a time of budget decreases, libraries need to rethink all of their services. In cases where services involve investments across institutions or departments, cutting a service might impact not just the library but many departments and not just one library but an entire consortium. Libraries considering cutting a subscription that is negotiated within a consortium may negatively impact access for the entire group. Budget cuts can ripple beyond the library and affect partners as well.

But budget cuts can also be an impetus to double down on collaboration. Shared resources, whether in the form of collections, services, or people, can spread scarce dollars further. What one library could not do alone, several can do together. In an environment where working remotely becomes common, it is easy to imagine some library staff working in another state or even country. And if that's the case, why not have one librarian who works for three institutions who each get part of her expertise while sharing the expenses?

It seems likely that we will come out of this crisis with a new understanding of how to work together remotely - something that can lead to more meaningful collaboration. It seems equally

likely we will all rethink how our print collections can serve our communities. Will we decrease our commitment to shared print? Will we increase our emphasis on digital collections and on ILL of those digital resources? As our budgets decline, how will we think strategically

about collaboration? Will we commit what few resource dollars we do have to supporting open content initiatives? We would love to hear your thoughts.