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From the Field

Consortia: An Evolving Landscape

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Abstract

Consortia remain a critical part of how academic libraries in the United States (US) collaborate and achieve scale to maximize influence for resource and content acquisition. The US consortia landscape is a complex and vibrant one with increasing levels of intra- and inter-consortia engagement. Evolving licensing and negotiation practices as well as emerging trends in scholarly communication and Open Access all affect how these groups work together. The authors interviewed consortia leaders about changes in library needs occurring over the past several years as well as needs that have emerged since the pandemic.

Introduction

Consortia remain a critical part of how academic libraries in the United States (US) collaborate and achieve scale to maximize influence for resource and content acquisition. Partnerships amongst libraries is certainly nothing new. Union catalogs, interlibrary loan (ILL), shared print repositories, and group purchasing power: these are but a few of the early and continuing examples of library cooperation which consortia have helped facilitate and thrive. Lorcan Dempsey notes in his 2018 four-part blog series about the power of consortia:

“Libraries and related organizations group together in a variety of ways to get their work done. They consort where there are scale advantages: to lobby, for example, to negotiate and license, to reduce costs, or to build shared infrastructure. The ‘soft power’ of such groups is also important – the relationship building, the trust,

the sharing of learning and innovation that comes from working together over time is an important reason that such groups persist.”¹

Indeed, the bedrock principle upon which consortia operate is that libraries can accomplish more together than alone. This article will examine the ways in which academic library consortia policies and practices have evolved over the past three years, particularly regarding resource and content negotiation, as well as focusing on the much more recent changes that have occurred since the COVID-19 pandemic began to significantly affect the United States in March 2020.

Due to the very nature of higher education and federal, state, and local governance infrastructure in the US, it is important to note that many libraries are members of more than one consortium, participating in different groups for a variety of reasons. An individual library might belong to a statewide or regional organization due



to geographic similarities while simultaneously belonging to other groups by virtue of size, research or teaching focus, and public or private designation, along with other variables. This creates a complicated consortial landscape in the US, with groups existing in a delicate balance of competition and collaboration. It is tempting to gaze fondly at other countries such as the United Kingdom, Canada, or Australia with their country-wide consortia (Jisc, Canadian Research Knowledge Network (CRKN), and the Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL), respectively), as these groups function and influence educational policy and practice at a national level in such a way that is simply not replicable in the United States. However, such misplaced longing ignores the variegated opportunities for innovation and cooperation that can and do occur amongst US consortia.

Consortia of all types and sizes do not exist in a vacuum; they learn from and share best practices with each other, both nationally and internationally. One of the main ways in which consortia interface is through the International Coalition of Library Consortia (ICOLC), which “is an informal group currently comprising approximately 200 library consortia from around the world.”² As Celeste Feather explains in a 2015 article, “The organization known today as the International Coalition of Library Consortia (ICOLC) arose in the mid-1990s out of a need for newly formed consortia to exchange ideas and address issues of common concern.”³ While predominantly operating as an informal information-sharing focused organization, ICOLC periodically issues statements which affect libraries,⁴ the most recent of which is the March 13, 2020 “Statement on the Global COVID-19 Pandemic and Its Impact on Library Services and Resources.”⁵

These types of statements seek to help guide the scholarly communication community on the best ways to navigate emerging and critical ar-

eas of interest, including economic crises or vendor or publisher practices and relationships. In addition to public statements, much of the value of ICOLC occurs behind the scenes, as the organization itself is a community for consortia to communicate informally with one another about how they are addressing existing and developing challenges and about how they can work together in new and creative ways to meet such challenges. Ultimately, in any discussion of consortia, whether intra-consortium amongst individual libraries or inter-consortia among groups both national and international, a multi-layered environment of collaboration materializes. The authors interviewed several consortial leaders and staff regarding their thoughts and insights on this intricate environment. What surfaces from these conversations is that each consortium has its unique concerns, often due to its funding structure and mission, but commonalities do prevail, and such commonalities paint a broad picture of libraries striving to work together for their continued relevance.

An evolving landscape

When asked how policies have evolved to meet changing demands for resource and content negotiation over the last three years, consortia staff indicated that there has been both a contraction in the number of new offers being negotiated with a concurrent and increased focus on re-negotiating current group subscriptions. Celeste Feather, Senior Director of Content and Scholarly Communication Initiatives at LYRASIS, noted that the uptake of new products that have entered the market for higher education library content has dwindled. The majority of American library budgets either remain flat or decrease from year to year, thus libraries often must cancel a resource in order to add something new. Such lack of new offers may also be attributed to the consolidation of library vendors and publishers, particularly with regard to ProQuest and EBSCO and their ongoing acquisitions; Feather further stated, “The number of times I have used

the phrase ‘the market is saturated’ has greatly increased in the last three years.” Rather than the previous priority on scouting for new content opportunities, LYRISIS has evolved to working with existing content providers to provide better, more accessible business models. Feather specifically pointed to the new evidence-based acquisition (EBA) models for e-books as well as an expanded emphasis on opportunities for Open Access (OA).

Rick Burke, Executive Director at the Statewide California Electronic Library Consortium (SCELC), and Jason Price, Research and Scholarly Communications Director at SCELC, stated that library budgets are simply maxed out; the number and types of offers are fewer, and there is elevated focus on existing subscriptions and renewals. Burke and Price explained that pre-pandemic they saw a shift amongst their libraries to OA and scholarly communication issues, particularly regarding transformative licensing agreements that seek to address the ever-increasing availability and need for more OA in scholarly publishing. Many librarians have watched with great interest the ongoing negotiations the California Digital Library (CDL) is conducting with large publishers such as Elsevier and Springer Nature (<https://cdlib.org/news/>). The CDL’s successes and challenges with transformative agreements for OA have been remarkable and have the potential to lead others through the difficult process of breaking up or re-imagining the Big Deal. However, the more heterogenous the consortium, the more types and sizes of member libraries, the greater the challenge to expand the definition of “transformative.” A tension looms between “read” or teaching-focused institutions who do not have as much publishing output and “publish” or research-focused institutions who produce a significant quantity of current scholarship. If a consortium subscription group includes mostly read institutions or includes both read and publish institutions, then it is incumbent upon the

participating libraries and consortium staff to figure out a way forward that allows everyone to participate in supporting OA through economic contributions. Individual libraries within consortia are more engaged than ever in this conversation, as evidenced by a 2020 report by a SCELC member, Paige Mann at the University of the Redlands. This report discusses the Open, Just, and Sustainable (OJS) Project, which “aims to help the SCELC consortium of libraries explore related concerns, questions, and opportunities” regarding value in “an increasingly digital and open-access world.”⁶

Joni Blake, Executive Director of the Greater Western Library Alliance (GWLA), also noted that in 2020, a GWLA transformative agreements task force released a statement of principles which serves as a companion to their GWLA Model License.⁷ Blake went on to explain that even within a consortium that may outwardly seem more homogenous, not all institutions are prepared or ready to move forward with a transformative agreement, which creates a bifurcated licensing situation: two tracks, running in tandem, one transformative and one more traditional. Blake also echoed LYRISIS and SCELC staff in that their new offers tend to be less content-focused and more tool-based, such as UnSub (<https://unsub.org/>).

Anne Osterman, Director at VIVA, the academic library consortium of Virginia, summarized her answer to the question about policies changes within the past three years:

“VIVA has put an increasing emphasis on Sustainable Journal Pricing (<https://vivalib.org/c.php?g=836990&p=608433>), incorporating a holistic view of VIVA collection development priorities and a wide range of considerations, from Virginia faculty authorship, to Open Access support, to the usage rights of the materials. We are deeply interested in negotiating for the rights libraries need to share content effectively and efficiently with one

another, such as whole e-book lending, as well as the rights our faculty and students need to engage with the content in their research, such as text & data mining. What we negotiate for and seek out is much broader with regard to formats and licensing terms, in large part because our users are expecting more. There is also a greater awareness of the value and relevance of our faculty's content creation to our resource acquisition and negotiations, and this has framed our approach as more of a partnership with publishers rather than simply as a consumer."

Osterman's comments further support and elucidate the insights of other consortial staff. While OA remains at the forefront, it is but one initiative among others in which libraries and consortia are in partnership with publishers and vendors to navigate new terrain. Staff at LY-RASIS, SCELIC, and GWLA affirmed this notion of partnership with vendors, remarking on the similarities between the disruptive nature of initial, large-scale digitization of e-journal scholarship in the mid- to late-1990s and the current disruption of OA and current and impending financial difficulty presently. Consortia, individual libraries, and publishers were sailing in unfamiliar licensing waters during those early days, and they find themselves revisiting those rocky seas.

Maurice York, Director of Library Initiatives at the Big Ten Academic Alliance offers a broad and inclusive notion about collective action, both pre- and post-pandemic: what might once have been a collaboration of convenience – giving libraries and content providers the opportunity to engage with one negotiation point rather than multiple ones for both licensing terms and pricing – has transitioned into a critical survival point. Libraries and consortia alike are faced with balancing the self-interest of the institution and the collective power of the group to affect change. York states, "It's an unknown problem, it's chaos, but we can actually introduce order into the center and build a strategy

for survival." Moreover, York emphasized that "we must share priorities and we must be intertwined with one another in a way that we never really had to be before." Fundamentally, collective and interdependent strategies are in flux, but the dictum holds true: The one constant is change.

And then the pandemic

Speaking of change, libraries, by virtue of their parent organizations, and the consortia who represent those libraries are facing a nearly unprecedented situation. York at the Big Ten perhaps sums it up best: "I'd say the fear and the panic is universal, and the knowledge about what's going to happen is very inconsistent." But rather than succumb to the uncertainty and panic, York went on to comment that this global health and economic crisis presents a rare moment to pivot and take a new point of view, commenting that libraries and consortia can productively use this moment to accomplish things that might have been unimaginable six months ago. Previously accepted timelines for negotiation of content (e.g., seven to nine months or more to reach an agreed-upon contract) and collaboration (e.g., months of wrangling siloed consortia committees and individual institutions to communicate productively) are no longer viable. York urges consortia to take advantage of this crisis, indicating that "you don't have to invent the use case anymore. We don't have to invent the argument. We're living at it."

There is a tendency during moments of crisis to turn inward, to focus on self-interest and self-preservation. Certainly, self-interest is no small matter. The institution must determine what its future entails given significant budget shortfalls. Yet, there is a space here for consortia to take a leadership role, and across the board, they have stepped up to the plate. The aforementioned ICOLC "Statement on the Global COVID-19 Pandemic and Its Impact on Library Services and Resources," along with the accompanying

spreadsheet outlining individual providers and their respective responses (https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1pFSA-yEDixl5ZKtQmEUOuW_vdD-FLdzDbhjP5CjrkaJo/edit#gid=0), has created an uncommon occasion of peer pressure amongst vendors and fodder for consortia to advocate for their subscriber groups.

Overwhelmingly, consortia are requesting either flat or reduced pricing from vendors and publishers and such requests have been met with varying results. Blake at GWLA remarked that some content providers are proactively reaching out with flat pricing while Feather at LYRISIS noted that some of the innate animosity of negotiations has slipped away because “people are confused and don’t know what to do,” which creates more opportunities for collaboration. While individual libraries are contacting content providers with such requests that rival or exceed those of the 2008-2009 financial downturn, many libraries also participate in group deals via consortia for content. Consortia have been successful in leveraging the power of the group to work with content providers in order to maintain the most business possible while synchronously maintaining the most content for the least possible cost. Librarians are currently faced with a staggering number of quotidian and practical issues that seemingly morph almost daily, so whatever role consortia can and do play in alleviating this burden is of value.

The pandemic has also introduced avenues for new and expanded member engagement. Burke and Price of SCELIC note that they have hosted many more library-driven, virtual town halls and forums to determine the needs of their members. Other consortia experiences are parallel, either through similar, virtual office hours or greater community building via heightened inter-communication amongst previously siloed committees or task forces. Community and member engagement are not only limited to broadened communication channels. Osterman

at VIVA and Blake at GWLA pointed out that as institutions moved to increased online education, this has affected the need for streaming media and e-books, other course content, and educational technology integration. Similar comments from consortial staff reflect this trend, and while new offers aren’t necessarily on the table, transitions to more electronic content, which is available regardless of location, is of the highest priority.

Working together for effective change

There is no shortage of examples of inter-consortia collaboration in the US. Listed below are but a few of the examples of the innovative ways in which consortia are working together as evidenced by the initiatives mentioned during the authors’ conversations with consortia staff. Some of these originated from emerging licensing needs (e.g., accessibility) while others were born of necessity both pre- and post-pandemic.

- Hyku for Consortia: <https://www.hykuforconsortia.org/>; https://digitalcommons.du.edu/collaborativelibrarianship/vol11/iss4/4/?fbclid=IwAR3ivsjsG6cC26DIF_kJ9JtoS36G3Ux-hHCU4YsRHczXJDfaBEBYWG-so4
- Library Accessibility Alliance: <https://www.btaa.org/library/accessibility/reports>
- Professional Development Alliance: <https://louislibraries.org/services/training/pda>; <https://www.atla.com/blog/professional-development-pda-september/>; <https://blc.org/professional-development-alliance-pilot-project>
- Project ReShare: <https://projectreshare.org/>
- ORCID US Community: <https://www.lyrasis.org/Leadership/Pages/orcid-us.aspx>

Whether it is projects such as those listed above or participating ICOLC organizations working in concert, it’s clear that consortia are eager to

engage their members and other consortia in new and exciting ways.

The best of all possible best practices that the authors perceived from their respective conversations was transparency: transparency of mission, process, and intent. Expanding communication amongst our communities of subscribers and members, discovering different ways to cooperate and collaborate – these are the hallmarks of a relevant future for libraries. Intra- and inter-consortia alliance is crucial. If libraries truly subscribe to the concept that more can be accomplished together than alone, then they must balance self-interest with ideological sustainability through community enterprise.

Authors' Note: Thank you to all those we interviewed for this article. Your insights are invaluable, and we were inspired beyond measure by our conversations with you.

¹ Dempsey, Lorcan, "The Powers of Library Consortia 1: How Consortia Scale Capacity, Learning, Innovation and Influence," Lorcan Dempsey's Weblog, OCLC Research, February 28, 2018, <https://blog.oclc.org/lorcand/the-powers-of-library-consortia-1-how-consortia-scale-capacity-learning-innovation-and-influence/>.

² International Coalition of Library Consortia, <https://icolc.net/> (accessed October 9, 2020).

³ Feather, Celeste, "The International Coalition of Library Consortia: Origins, Contributions and Path Forward," *Insights* 28, no. 3 (2015), <http://doi.org/10.1629/uksg.260>.

⁴ International Coalition of Library Consortia, ICOLC Statements, <https://icolc.net/statements> (accessed October 9, 2020).

⁵ International Coalition of Library Consortia, "Statement on the Global COVID-19 Pandemic and Its Impact on Library Services and Resources," March 13, 2020, <https://icolc.net/statement/statement-global-covid-19-pandemic-and-its-impact-library-services-and-resources>.

⁶ Mann, Paige, "Open, Just, & Sustainable Project: April 2020 Report," InSPIRe@ Redlands, University of Redlands, <https://inspire.redlands.edu/>.

⁷ Price, Gary, "Greater Western Library Alliance (GWLA) Adopts Licensing Principles Document," infoDOCKET, *Library Journal*, June 16, 2020, <https://www.infodocket.com/2020/06/16/great-western-library-alliance-gwla-adopts-licensing-principles-document/>.