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Whither Library Consortia?

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Since the 2008 recession, library consortia have been struggling. Research for an upcoming book¹ found that 21% of consortia surveyed in a large 2007 American Library Association survey had closed or merged. Of particular note, was the well-known merger of SOLINET, PALINET, NELINET, and BCR into LYRASIS. Regional library systems were particularly hard hit by the loss of state funding, with some systems closing in California and Texas. Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Illinois combined regional library systems into small organizations. Clearly, a lot has been happening in library consortia in the past few years as borne out in several recent surveys on library consortia in America.

The Boom and Bust Cycle

Evidence of library cooperation goes back into the 1880s, though the word 'consortium' did not reach library literature until the 1960s. In 1972, the U.S. Department of Education commissioned the first study to try to understand how these new cooperative models were developing. The study found 125 academic consortia had been formed since 1931, with 90% of them created after 1960.² The study also showed that the need to streamline cataloging and the introduction of rudimentary automation systems were driving forces in early library consortia creation. By 1996, Kopp³ found that many of the activities of the early consortia were still taking place twenty-five years later, such as reciprocal borrowing, catalog record creation, and delivery services.

During the heyday years of consortia development in the 1960s and 1970s, many large-scale consortia formed. Three large-scale bibliographic utilities were created during this period: OCLC, Western Library Network (WLN), and the Research Libraries Group (RLG). All three focused on automating library records and facilitating interlibrary loan. By 2006, RLG and WLN had merged with OCLC. A number of

multistate systems were also formed in this era, including Amigos, PALINET, Minitex, and BCR (the oldest, created in 1935). During this growth phase, a number of academic-focused consortia started serving public, school and special libraries as well. It was also a time for the development of regional library systems. About half the states created regional systems with a mission of serving all types of libraries within a specific geographic area. Most regional systems provide consulting, technology assistance, online catalogs, and continuing education.

In the 1990s and the early part of 2000, a second wave of consortia growth took place. The new driver for library consortia growth was access to online resources and databases through the Internet. Also during this second wave, many established consortia became larger, both in number of dollars managed and in the number of participating libraries. By negotiating for group purchasing from database vendors, many of the existing multistate and regional consortia grew into multimillion dollar operations as they managed database access for hundreds, if not thousands, of libraries. Academic "big deal," high-cost journal packages were flourishing as well. Niche consortia also started forming during this period, serving either a specific function (i.e., delivery), filling a limited geographic setting (i.e., metro area libraries), or providing specialized online resources (i.e., medical or legal databases).

In 2007, the extensive ALA ASCLA "Library Networks, Cooperatives, and Consortia Survey" (LNCC)⁴ had found a strong and growing library consortia marketplace. The survey discovered that consortia were divided by regional (61%), local (26%), or statewide (12%) boundaries. Most consortia served multiple types of libraries and had clearly defined geographic limits. The survey also found the main services offered were:



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- Resource sharing/interlibrary loan
- Communication
- Professional development/continuing education
- Consulting and technical assistance
- Cooperative purchases (primarily databases)

Other services identified in LNCC survey included: Automation (networking, tech support, and online catalogs), advocacy, information and referral services, courier and document delivery services, support for standards, support for special populations, professional collections, rotating or shared collections, digitization and digital preservation.

By 2008, the great recession had hit and library consortia were heading for a period of significant struggle. Early in the economic crisis, Perry⁵ argued that, "consortia cannot survive if 'business as usual' is the mandate during this economic downturn." Perry also found evidence of recent growth in international library consortia during this time period. She identified five critical functions of consortia:

- Shared catalogs
- Interlibrary loan
- Cooperative acquisitions
- Budget management
- License negotiations

Perry's research focused on members of the International Coalition of Library Consortia (ICOLC). Since 1996, ICOLC has been an important player in the development of database licensing and big deal journal negotiations. The informal group has several hundred members from all over the world and from all types and sizes of library consortia. Consortia staff met twice a year, once in North America and once worldwide, to share information about consortia trends, new practices, and vendor negotiation strategies. Today, ICOLC, along with the American Library Associations' division for library networks (ASCLA), are the two main sources of continuing education and shared discussions for consortia staff.

Are Library Consortia Still "Withering"?

In the past few years, a number of surveys have been conducted among library consortia. As mentioned earlier, an examination of the consortia survey as part of the large LCNN study found that 21% of those organizations have either merged or closed outright. These closures were often due to either the loss of state funding or the loss of OCLC affiliation. However as library budgets were strained during the period, the ripple effect also impacted consortia budgets as libraries had to cut back on all spending. Comments from consortia employees in an as yet unpublished 2013 library consortia survey highlight the problem:

- "Most of the programs are now... funded with federal LSTA funds, and member fees have been increased by 35%."
- "All of the five cooperatives use reserve funds to remain operational."
- "Funding ... has decreased by approximately 50%. We have moved [to a new location], renegotiated contracts, reduced staff, and eliminated services."

When OCLC surveyed over a hundred library consortia in 2012, they found that the majority have at least 40 members, serve multiple types of libraries, have operated for more than 30 years, and the large majority employ full-time staff.⁶ There were other findings:

- Consortia leaders think professional networking is one of the most valuable aspects of membership in their organizations.
- Three points of organizational focus are: 1) facilitating resource sharing, 2) increasing efficiencies through collaboration, and 3) improving leadership through collaboration.
- Other benefits reported by consortia respondents include costs savings, e-content purchases, shared integrated library systems, training, technology solutions, and professional development.

The survey also asked consortia leaders about challenges. Not surprisingly, the biggest challenge was funding. Other challenges included lack of collaboration among members, remain-



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ing relevant in changing times, selecting a new shared catalog system, materials inflation, and inadequate staffing resources.

According to the OCLC survey, most consortia receive their funding from a variety of sources including state funding (tax dollars), consortia membership fees, participation in service fees, and federal funding. The top services offered are:

- Resource sharing/ILL/document delivery: 45%
- Shared online catalog/union catalogs: 41%
- Cooperative purchasing: 38%
- E-content licensing: 33%
- Training: 31%
- Technology management: 28%
- Professional or leadership development: 24%.

In 2013, Pronevitz and Horton conducted a yet-to-be published survey of over eighty consortia. Top services reported in the study are:

- Training/continuing education/professional development
- Shared electronic content (e.g., group database licenses)
- Group purchases (e.g. supplies, computers)
- Integrated Library systems
- Resource sharing and Delivery

Other services offered less widely include cooperative collection development, shared digital repositories and digital services, and shared off-site print repositories.

There was some good news in the 2013 study, however. Fifteen respondents reported their consortia grew or were newly created since 2008. The new consortia tended to be small and have specific purposes, usually online catalog management. One respondent said, "We will be two years old in November and have had rapid growth over that time." A few consortia reported either membership growth, or that they had picked up new services after the closure of nearby consortia.

There are many similarities among the recent surveys, but also significant differences in either the ratings on 'importance' of a specific service to a consortia, or on those who report 'engaging in' a specific consortial activity. For instance, the 2013 survey found the top service that consortia offered was continuing education, while Perry's ICOLC survey found database licensing coming first, and OCLC listed resource sharing as the reported top service. Given that ICOLC focuses on database licensing and that resource sharing is critical to OCLC's mission, perhaps these results are not surprising.

The difference is likely explained by a combination of how questions were posed and the type of consortia that participate in each survey. Overall, it's clear, however, that many consortia engage in:

- Resources sharing/delivery
- Cooperative purchasing/licensing
- Integrated library systems
- Continuing education/training.

Conclusion: Whither Library Consortia?

There were two significant waves of consortia growth; the first in the 1960s and 1970s, and a second in the 1990s and early 2000 spurred by access to online resources. Library consortia numbers declined significantly after the 2008 Great Recession, and many consortia are continuing to struggle. The stability of existing funding sources remains a major concern across all remaining library consortia, even well-established and well-funded consortia.

On the plus side, times of change can bring about times of creativity, and many consortia are actively reinventing their roles and mission. Examples include, Orbis Cascade Alliance's new, next generation catalog which will hold ownership of materials within the collective rather than the individual libraries. This concept is revolutionary and likely could not have developed without the recent downturn. The Wisconsin Library Services (WILS), a former OCLC affiliate, was a major resource sharing player through a connection to the University of Wisconsin at Madison. In the past year, after losing the connection to UW-Madison, WILS has radi-



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cally reorganized itself into a leaner, meaner organization that is developing creative new revenue sources. Another example is the Colorado Library Consortia (CLiC) which has more than doubled the number of services offered and quadrupled its staff in the past five years. CLiC has added a shared catalog for forty libraries; a major human resource management function, management of a statewide database package; and support for two shared eBook systems.

There are signs that the national situation for consortia is stabilizing, but it would not be surprising if more consortia were lost over the next few years. State funding is still precarious over much of the country. But on the hopeful side, Perry found a burst of new international consortia forming, and the 2013 U.S. survey found several new organizations forming in the past few years. As one respondent in the 2013 survey stated, "We must cease certain functions to make room for new, currently relevant functions and create room for future functions." The final answer to "Whither Library Consortia?" is not yet certain, but if past is prologue, the future of library consortia should be interesting to watch!

Endnotes

¹ ALA Editions will publish a book on consortia management by Greg Pronevitz and Valerie Horton in early 2014. A study of 80+ consortia was conducted for the book and results are included here. Note: certain aspects of this editorial will also appear in the book.

² Dana Delanoy and Carlos Cuadra. "Directory of Academic Library Consortia." Systems Development Corporation Report, 1972.

³ James Kopp. "Library Consortia and Information Technology: The Past, the Present, the Promise." *Information Technology & Libraries*, v 17, n 1, 1998.

⁴ Denise Davis. "Library Networks, Cooperatives and Consortia: A National Survey." ALA Report, December 3, 2007.
http://www.ala.org/offices/sites/ala.org/offices/files/content/ors/lnc/interim_report_1_may2006.pdf

⁵ Katherine Perry, "Where Are Library Consortia Going? Results of a 2009 survey," *Serials*, v 22, n 2, 2009.

⁶ "<http://www.oclc.org/reports/us-consortia.en.html>

