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Collaboration -- No Better Time for Libraries: An Interview with Dr. Camila Alire, President-Elect, 2008-2009, American Library Association

Camila Alire

President-Elect, 2008-2009, American Library Association
(Interviewed by "From the Field" Section Editor, Chris Sugnet)

"There is no better time, with all the challenges we are facing, to promote the concept of collaboration in libraries. We don't want competition to be stronger than collaboration." Camila Alire, Incoming President of the American Library Association and a member of the *Collaborative Librarianship* Advisory Board.

If there is a paragon of collaboration in libraries today it is Camila Alire, and her record reveals very successful approaches to getting people to collaborate. Her career capstone will begin in 2009 after her recent election to the presidency of the American Library Association, but she has held an astounding number of key positions in her career and has participated in many collaborative ventures.

For a full biography see:
<http://www.camilaalire.com/bio.html>

CL: With an involvement over many years in various organizations espousing and exemplifying the values and principles of library collaboration, no doubt you see the importance and value of libraries working together. Could you elaborate on, say, what you see as the top three or four key values of library collaboration?

Alire: I'd like to start with the basic statement that I see library collaboration as folks working together for a common purpose or goal. My frame of reference is in higher education and the academy but I would venture to say that the value of collaboration

crosses all library environments. The setting isn't critical. I have some definite ideas of what key components must be present for collaboration to be successful.

It's been my experience that collaboration starts with trying to solve a problem, and in doing so you need effective teamwork. Another critical aspect is fostering really good and clear communication in establishing the purpose for the collaboration. The principle of respecting each other's ideas may not be foreign to one's thinking, but it is also essential to look for the common ground in values. Everyone has to be on the same page relative to possible actions that might evolve during collaboration. Consensus building is important, but so is understanding each other clearly. I use the analogy that "it's real obvious when I'm talking cheese and you are thinking Tuesday." This has happened to me, when the management team thinks we are all understanding what actions we will take but days later realize it wasn't our understanding. So before we leave the room let's spell out the actions we are taking so we are all on the same page. For effective group collaboration I think we must put decisions in writing so there is no misunderstanding. And then establish how we evaluate the success of our actions. So to highlight these themes:

Communication: There must be a standard of effective communication, whether between two people or more.

Respect: It's essential to have mutual respect for each other and for each other's ideas. When people know each other and

Alire: Collaboration – No Better Time for Libraries

feel comfortable working together, there is no fear around the table; and they can share in a brainstorming session openly. It promotes self-confidence.

Teamwork: Groups cannot have effective collaboration unless the individuals involved are willing to work as a team toward their goal. Teamwork is important everywhere, not just in the local library environment. It's key in committee work, in anything relying on a collaborative effort.

Consensus: The need for consensus may not be commonly thought of when addressing this topic. Maybe not everyone would say this. Consensus can best be achieved in a team environment with effective communication, and it mitigates the need to vote. When a group has to vote, there is the possibility of winners and losers.

CL: What have been some of your most satisfying and rewarding involvements in library collaboration?

Alire: I think the Colorado Alliance is one of the best models. There are many others, like Ohiolink or the California Digital Library, but I am very familiar with the Alliance and thoroughly enjoyed my interactions with the group. The Alliance members are exemplary at taking ideas forward in grass roots style and getting things done.

Another example was the FastFlood cooperative project at Colorado State University Libraries that was the immediate response to the 1997 flood that wiped out almost the entire CSU journal collection. Immediately after the flood, Julie Wessling and others at CSU realized that they could utilize their pre-flood implementation of WebZap, the first electronic document transfer system, to borrow articles from other research libraries. We identified key collections in other ARL libraries and in Alliance libraries that would best support CSU program needs and approached them for help. They were all willing to assist and in a matter of a few weeks it was put in place, with scanners at the partner institutions. I think the fulfillment

rate for requests from CSU users was 83% within 24 hours or less, and 97% in 48 hours. It was the precursor for the RAPID document sharing system, and one of the most successful collaborations I have ever been involved in. We set FastFlood up within 4 weeks.

The third example was during Nancy Bolt's tenure as Colorado State Librarian. In the early 90s, she invited about 20 of us to at a special session in the mountains, and we agreed to establish a state library card and hammered out the policies and procedures to establish it. Many said that would never happen. Under Nancy's leadership and with representatives from every type of library, we also established a statewide resource sharing program that is still going strong.

The fourth example is ARL's diversity collaboration called the Library Career Development Program (LCDP), a program that started in 1996/97 to support seasoned minority librarians in their efforts to move up in their organizations. It's still going strong. They do a cohort every two years, and it is a great example of collaborative creativity within a large national organization.

CL: How about learning from the past? What collaborative initiatives didn't work well and what can we glean from their failure?

Alire: One example that I am aware of grew out of a great concept to bring together the five academic libraries in New Mexico that had research collections. At the time I arrived in New Mexico there was an established group in the state that included all academic libraries but it didn't really address needs in the research area. I think we called the new group the New Mexico Research Library Alliance and included the University of New Mexico, the UNM Law and Health Sciences libraries, New Mexico State University and New Mexico Tech. Unfortunately, not everyone in the group of deans and directors shared the same values, nor did we all share a common understand-

Alire: Collaboration – No Better Time for Libraries

ing of what teamwork entailed, so the group failed to find common ground. In retrospect, it would have helped us to discuss basic guiding principles first and then move on to bylaws and specific projects. It really highlighted the need in successful alliances to establish shared values before going into the details.

CL: Libraries have a long and impressive history of working together, but inter-library cooperation is not the only type of collaboration. What other types of partnerships and networking do you see as important to growing, thriving libraries?

Alire: Librarians work concurrently with colleagues at the local, state, regional, national and international levels already. Look at the successful organizations in our environment that reach across geographic boundaries, organizations like the Greater Western Library Alliance that encompass a large number of academic libraries regionally. At the national level, an example is the division within the American Library Association that is the state libraries group, COSLA-ASCLA, that includes state libraries (COSLA) and other organizations like OCLC and BCR (ASCLA). A great example of international cooperation is certainly IFLA. Another that I am very familiar with is that when I was president of ACRL we established an international sister library program for academic libraries. We started in Mexico and by the time I left office there were six programs in place with institutions like San Diego State and the University of Maryland.

Successful collaboration isn't new to the library arena, it is widespread in our environment but it isn't necessarily a given in other environments. In the academic world, for instance, deans from other colleges may see competition as their natural environment. In almost every position I've been in sharing a table with other deans has pointed out to me how far ahead librarians are with this concept. I think libraries in universities and colleges would be well served to continue to explore collaboration with other

units on campus, including the student groups, and introduce the values that result in their success. Public and special librarians probably do the same thing with other units in their parent organizations and school "teacher-librarians" can continue to work with the teachers and with parent and community groups.

CL: What do you believe are some of the greatest current challenges to library collaboration?

Alire: The first challenge that comes to mind, especially in the current economic environment, is lack of resources. If the local economy isn't producing tax revenues then public, school, and academic libraries suffer. I hope I am wrong, but I think it will cause more competition among institutions and that competition for limited resources could be stronger than teamwork. This could occur in any alliance, and it's too bad, because we have been so successful at multi-type library cooperation. There's a saying that "when the trough goes dry the horses start biting" and I hope that isn't an accurate metaphor for what lies ahead. Could a lack of resources push libraries together to accomplish what they can't do individually? That's where I think we are now. That's what I tell the deans of other colleges -- that libraries have been doing this for years out of necessity. But how will we respond when it gets really rough, if we break through a threshold and get to a level we haven't yet experienced? What would happen to smaller libraries if the IMLS funds get cut, for example? In consortia like the Colorado Alliance, smaller libraries can get things they can't otherwise get and larger institutions often pay the lion's share of expenses. It's the collaborative philosophy that has led to cooperative collection purchasing. Will this continue?

CL: Looking toward 2020, what new challenges for libraries do you see on the horizon? What current and potential collaborations hold the greatest promise to successfully meet these challenges in the future?

Alire: Collaboration – No Better Time for Libraries

Alire: I am not sure I can come up with any really new challenges, but in the years approaching 2020 I do believe there will be an intensification of current challenges. Firstly, I think competition for funding will worsen. A second challenge is that we must keep libraries relevant to users but there will be a much greater demand for information technology to assist in the process, and the environment will be much more complex. The third challenge, and one I am particularly concerned about, is the generational gap between new MLS graduates and library staff who have been working for years. New library employees can get frustrated with the process orientation that we are accustomed to in our bureaucratic environment. I am familiar with the Millennials' frustration in the context of their unhappiness with the Association and its bureaucratic timeframes. We may be in danger of losing mutual respect across the generations. The newer generation works at a different speed, maximizing technology to do things faster, and multitasks easily; and this clashes with our traditionally slower environment. We expect to hire graduates with advanced technical skills but how do we accommodate for them in our organizations? That's why we have an e-participation Task Force in ALA, to establish means for virtual participation by members, but the change process is too slow because of our governing structure. It's difficult to ask the two sides to sit down in a task force and have mutual respect, and without that how can collaboration succeed? And what does this mean for collaborative activities across the library environment? The aspect I see in all of this is that we need to find some common ground to counter this generational divide before the NetGens give up and leave the profession. I'm trying to start a dialog with the more vocal NetGens right now to work for a solution.

CL: How might libraries partner to meet these challenges?

Alire: Keep doing what we have been successful at doing to counter self-interest. Remember that in any group one person can change the dynamics. If one person has changed the philosophy of collaboration it could cause a problem. I think that expanding the collaborative agenda to not just include acquiring materials by sharing more than direct financial resources but sharing human resources more creatively. We have to think more and more creatively and out of the box. How to relate to tech savvy users, and the tech savvy newer generation of library workers, is to establish a willingness to search for common ground. This is essential. I have been talking with the Young Turks as I call them, which is really a term of endearment by the way, and members of the older generation, to see what they are thinking. One of the older generation expressed frustration that the NetGens only want to talk in their terms. She pointed out that Obama won because he put together a coalition of all groups, races and ages, by being open to all their needs. The generations have to be open to the other's ideas in the library environment.

CL: As having perhaps the largest membership of any library organization in the world, and likely being one of the most vibrant, what in your mind are the highest priorities from among the multitude of ways the American Library Association supports and promotes collaborative librarianship?

Alire: Yes, ALA is the largest. For this question I will be more specific than for the other questions. Looking ahead to the Association's strategic plan, called ALAhead 2010, there are units in each division of ALA that are in a position to collaborate both internally with other offices in ALA but also with the membership. The Advocacy Office is one example, and another is the Intellectual Freedom Office. They collaborate with multi-type libraries seeking the same goals, such as fighting censorship. Another is ALSC, the Association for Library Services to Children, they do a lot of collaboration with the various ethnic caucuses in ALA. The book awards and pro-

Alire: Collaboration – No Better Time for Libraries

grams the caucuses do with other ALA groups, non-ALA groups like REFORMA, and with public libraries are another good example. Another good example are those divisions that have youth services goals like ALSC and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) and the American Association of School Libraries (AASL), which work to serve youth but also to work with teachers collaboratively. Within some of the ALA divisions there is collaboration across specialties. LAMA is a good example, they have academic, public, special, school librarians all interested in aspects of management. LITA is another example of this, where the interest is in technology. They are both in positions to work collaboratively with other ALA divisions and units and undoubtedly have collaborative programs. Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) is another example that works across all types of libraries. Those three are in positions to be able to collaborate because their members represent multi-type libraries and other divisions as well.

CL: In advancing collaborative librarianship, what new strategies and visions would you like to see take hold within ALA or within other library associations?

Alire: I'd like to find mechanisms to reward inter-divisional collaboration within ALA that eliminates the silos we have among the divisions. Some are willing to collaborate now and others aren't as willing, so some reward might break down the barriers. Also reaching across the table to other library associations is absolutely necessary for all the reasons we have talked about in answering the other questions. Let's build the table larger, include associations like SLA, IFLA and AALL. I think we do collaborate with them now but not to the extent we can, perhaps with joint meetings. I think there has to be really aggressive collaboration with non-library associations to explore mutual interests. An example would be with the officers of land-grant universities, called the National Association of State and Land-Grant Colleges (NASLGC). The NASLGC organization includes the policy makers, the

deans, CFOs, presidents, provosts of these universities and ACRL could reach out to them. There are probably a lot more examples. Times are going to get worse economically and we need new allies to think out of the box together. What worked in the last five years may not necessarily work in the coming five years.