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External partnerships

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Introduction

While partnerships between academic libraries and other organizations are not new phenomena, over the last two or three decades their importance has taken on new dimensions in many academic libraries. Perhaps the emergence in the United States of the OCLC cooperative systems, with their dependence on network service providers, and the need for collaborative development of integrated systems between libraries and vendors gave the biggest impetus to the emergence of the partnership culture here. It is important, however, to recognize that libraries have a very long and productive history of collaboration within their own culture, and it is this history that enables them to be so successful now with partnerships of various kinds.

In this presentation I will focus on external relationships, those relationships that develop between academic libraries and organizations and entities beyond the boundaries of the campus. I will be defining partnerships as those relationships, usually formal in nature, entered into by two more or less equal parties who have a mutual interest in accomplishing something and a mutual agreement to bear the costs of its accomplishment, although their reasons for doing so may be quite different.

I will talk about the reasons why academic libraries enter into these partnerships; typical partners in these relationships; what some of the management issues are that arise from partnering; and finally some of the ways of addressing these issues.

Why do we form them and who are these partners?

Perhaps the most common reason for an academic library to enter a partnership is the extension of services or resources that it can offer its primary user populations. Interlibrary lending agreements formed early on, and as the interlibrary loan apparatus became easier to use, became a standard tool to enable a library to offer access to more information resources to its users. Cooperative acquisitions programs had more trouble doing this effectively when we were tied to the print environment since a physical item could not be located in two places at once, and if you had it, I didn't!

Cooperative cataloging programs are partnerships as well with the agreement that if I catalog something, you don't have to, and vice versa, so partnerships were a way of extending our basic staff resources as well.

Partnerships between geographically close libraries permit interlibrary use, extending even physical spaces and promoting even more access for users. This has become more important recently with the explosion of distance education and distributed learning opportunities. In fact this has led to partnerships far beyond the geographical areas we used to consider important as our students and even our faculty become more widely distributed, nationally and internationally. My own campus is now offering full degree programs both on the web and at various community college campuses around the state, and even in Mexico and other parts of the world and while we can provide many information resources through the network to these students, formal agreements with other libraries ensure both access to the technology that will enable them to use these resources, as well as to print based collections and study space.

A number of commercial distance education providers are now seeking accreditation in the United States, and accrediting agencies are expecting them to have formal relationships that will provide service and access to their distributed students. For some public academic libraries this is a financial opportunity in that they are already under some obligation to serve these citizens of their state, and the commercial distance education providers are willing to pay fairly high annual fees in order to have the formal agreements in place that the accreditors are expecting.

In many regions of the United States public higher education is being expected to take a more active role in solving the whole educational problem than before, and what began as kindergarten to eighth grade issues expanded rapidly to kindergarten to twelfth and kindergarten to sixteen and beyond issues. As part of a continuum in what has become a life long learning culture, academic libraries have begun to partner with k-12 schools to provide a more robust and effective information environment for boundary-less education.

The movement to partner with school systems has been spurred on by grant programs and state funding programs that bring financial resources to academic libraries to compensate for their participation, and these resources frequently underwrite technology or staff that supplement and strengthen the academic libraries infrastructure and capacity. An example of this from my own library has been a grant to produce curriculum materials for the teaching of Texas history in secondary schools throughout our very large state, a project which was underwritten entirely by a Texas foundation, and which has brought with it the funding to add important digital equipment that will be used for many other than its original purposes. In fact it is also enabling the digital distribution of an antique map collection nationally and internationally as a fall out from the project, a long-term goal for the library.

Universities are under considerable pressure to show relevance to their specific communities. Academic libraries, working with their counterpart public libraries, are able to offer expanded access to the community to high quality information resources beyond the capacity of the public library, and may in turn be able to provide access to their own primary users to more popular materials than they would

ordinarily collect. In turn, libraries become participants within the university itself in adding value to the community's cultural and educational life.

Partnerships with the private sector have led to the development of numerous commercial products and services. Few integrated library systems exist that did not commence with an alpha test site and several beta test sites. Libraries gained from their ability to influence the direction of products and services and by financial incentives. Vendors gained by being able to bring more mature products to the marketplace that had already proven themselves in live situations. Entrepreneurial librarians have brought services to the marketplace through agreements with vendors, gaining significant financial resources for their libraries (or themselves!)

One of the most important partnerships today is in the realm of the rapid growth of consortia. While important for many years, today the power of the dollar, pound, or franc has made partnerships in purchasing and licensing electronic resources a critical strategic initiative. Almost all academic libraries today belong to one or sometimes many consortia specifically for the purpose of licensing electronic products at advantageous costs, and many vendors have negotiated creative agreements, which have brought significant funds into their coffers.

During the 1990s the academic library profession began to form partnership relationships with other information professions. One of the more successful relationships has been the Coalition for Networked Information, an alliance of academic librarians with academic information technology professionals. The Coalition, known familiarly as CNI, has sparked a number of collaborative ventures and brought these two interrelated professions much closer together.

The long history of libraries in partnering with each other has given libraries an advantage in working together in today's competitive arena.

What are some of the management issues?

Perhaps the most significant impact of partnering is the loss of control. A partnership involves the coming together of two agencies with somewhat different missions and priorities, and in order to work together, it is essential that there be given and take. This means that the project or activity involved will be the work and the result of decisions by both parties, and at times academic libraries will need to "let go." If the partnership is formal, it may well be managed by an independent board made up of representatives of the partners. This board will make decisions that will not always be in the best interest of each partner, but which forward the initiatives of the partnership overall.

A good example of the loss of control is in consortial licensing. The consortium may negotiate a license that includes products that an individual library might not think the most appropriate for its community, but which when considered as part of the overall license agreement is cost effective for the library. Taking the good with the bad, the wheat with the chaff is sometimes necessary in the partnership culture.

Some partnerships meet with resistance from staff or from the user community as not being in the best interest of the library. Political pressures or just developing collaborative relationships with new partners who can be important assets in the future may not be popular with staff if they see the cost as outweighing the benefits, but sometimes the long-term potential benefits do indeed outweigh current costs.

Partnerships frequently entail the commitment of venture capital resources, resources that are scarce for many libraries today, and so partnerships often bring with them risks. What if the partnership doesn't prove to be fruitful?

Another aspect of partnerships that presents management issues is the fact that two or more organizations, with different motivations, cultures, histories, and goals may have difficulty coming to agreement about activities. For libraries that are part of multiple partnerships, even the partnerships themselves can come into conflict. For instance licensing agreements may cause libraries to have the same products in more than one arrangement, and while this duplication may still be cost effective overall, it can lead to some difficult negotiations.

Finally, entering a formal agreement to partner and to commit financial and other resources reduces overall management flexibility. If in fact one has committed to a multi-year partnership of some kind, then the resources committed are not available should priorities change or reallocation of resources become desirable.

How can we deal with these issues?

The risks involved with partnerships are inevitable, and they mean that when a library is contemplating entering a partnership it is important for it to consider carefully all of the aspects of the partnership. What are the risks? What are the costs – all the costs? What are the potential benefits? Do the potential benefits outweigh the foreseeable costs? If not, it would be wise to reconsider the partnership.

If staff are going to be involved in the success of the partnership, it is important to have their buy-in at the beginning, so involving them in the development of the partnership agreement is important. Likewise involving the governing officers of the library and even users may be important.

Essential to success is a formal, written agreement – a legal contract – that spells out the commitment of the partners and the operating ground rules. How will decisions be made and by whom? What are the time limitations?

Is the partnership a fair one? This doesn't mean that each partner will get something of equal value, or at least of equal market value, but it does mean that the value to each partner of what it may gain is equal. If the only way to achieve something is by giving up something of perhaps a greater market value, it may still address a library's priorities to make up the difference.

Earlier I alluded to the loss of control that is a management issue. One of the clearest ways in which management may lose control is in the negotiation of consortial licenses. The agreements reached by a consortium board or management body may be untenable or impractical for a single participant. For instance, it is absolutely essential that all of my library's licenses permit off campus access through IP address control. By ceding control to a third party, I have less control over the exact license agreement that I do if my library is negotiating the license itself. If I am not prepared to accept the terms and conditions negotiated, I will find partnership unsatisfactory.

Conclusion

Partnerships present libraries with new tools to bring the most effective services to their users and the most affordable costs. They are a reality and will continue to be more than ever before. Libraries, because of their long history of collaboration and cooperation, are probably better suited to partnering relationship than any of their peer groups, and they should use that experience to their advantage. Caution in entering agreements is obviously important and it is more important than ever to read the fine print in every agreement, but partnerships certainly offer libraries exciting opportunities to expand the menu of services and resources to users and to maximize the impact of their financial resources.