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Partnerships: A Critical Element for Libraries

Jessica Dorr, Martha Choe and Kara Hannigan

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For over a century, libraries have brought knowledge and information to communities through the written word. But recently, computers and the Internet have proven themselves to be essential tools for success in the information age. Access to technology and online resources help people earn academic degrees, find employment, start a business, find answers to medical questions, and connect to others across the world. However, not all people or communities have been able to share in the benefits of information technologies because of lack of opportunity, lack of skill, and lack of access.

In the 1990s, a digital divide began to emerge, putting those with access to technology on one side, and those without access on the other. Libraries throughout the world play a key role in

addressing this inequity and allowing all people—no matter their race, gender, age, income level, or geographic location—to take advantage of everything the digital world had to offer.

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is proud to support libraries through the Global Libraries program. Since 1997, the foundation has provided assistance in the building of infrastructure to provide no-cost public access computing, training for library staff and the public in technology usage and support, and help to sustain public access computing in libraries by generating community support. Through this work, we have observed the importance and the benefits of partnerships both in the United States and around the world.

Why Partnerships Are Crucial to a Library's Success

If one thing has become clear throughout our work with libraries worldwide, it is that effective partnerships are the key to successful public access computing programs. Partnerships provide libraries with resources and expertise that can expand the library's impact and reach in a community.

What is a partnership? It's a relationship between people or organizations that results in some type of success and benefits for all parties involved.

Setting up public access computing programs is often a complex endeavor, especially in rural, remote, often poverty-stricken areas. And sustaining them with necessary updates, replacement equipment, technical support, and ongoing training is even more of a challenge. Having all members of the community—from students to teachers to business people to local officials—rally behind the library and its computing programs is the best possible way to guarantee success.

Partnerships can be used to bring resources to a community. In 2001, Chile's Directorate of Libraries, Archives and Museums (DIBAM) launched an initiative to provide public access computers, Internet connectivity, and training in all of its 368 public libraries. By early 2003, the BiblioRedes: Abre tu Mundo (Open Your World) project was able to increase the percentage of libraries with Internet connections from 8 percent to 100 percent. Partnerships that serve to raise funds, facilitate community outreach, and promote the project have been a crucial part of Chile's success.

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's initial investment of \$9.2 million increased to \$20 million through the support of the Chilean national and local governments, as well as other organizations. Local municipalities were required to pay monthly Internet fees, perform any renovations and security upgrades to the buildings, replace the computers in the future, and offer training to library users. The national government funded a department of 50 people dedicated to providing centralized support to the national library network, including technology training, the development of a curriculum to help librarians teach patrons to use computers, the creation of publications, and the development of an advocacy strategy, which included promotion, data collection and sharing, media relations, technology training, and the search for ongoing funding.

BiblioRedes created an extensive communications campaign to publicize the project, not only to reach patrons who needed computer training and access, but to raise the profile of the project so as to ensure its sustainability. BiblioRedes received extensive coverage in all types of media, including print, TV, and radio. It even partnered with a radio station to create a call-in show to provide information about the project. Partnerships with organizations such as the National

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Service for Women and the National Institute for the Retired helped libraries reach out to specific target audiences such as women and senior citizens, people who might not seek out technology courses on their own.

Partnerships that brought in needed funding were created with a variety of businesses and institutions. For example, Banco Estado, the Chilean national bank, pays libraries to train its clients in online banking, government offices pay libraries to train their staff on the use of technology, and the Chilean Internal Revenue Service (SII) pays libraries to help patrons submit tax returns online. In addition, a job search portal pays a fee for every person who finds a job using library computers.

Partnerships can increase impact. The foundation's Canadian Partnership Program was launched in 1998 to help public libraries serving Canada's low-income communities provide free public access computing. The Whitehorse Public Library in the Yukon decided that it could not house a new computer lab in its small facility and chose instead to partner with the Kwanlin Dun House of Learning, which provided both space and staffing for the lab. Also in Canada, the Northwest Territories Public Library Services had trouble finding space for its six new virtual libraries. After originally placing the computers in public schools, these libraries were moved to local Community Learning Centers, since these centers had longer hours and were more accessible to the public. The territorial government recognized the benefits of the new computers and decided to commit \$300,000 (CAN) per year over the next four years to sustain the computer program.

Nunavut, Canada's newest territory, spans approximately two million square kilometers, about one fifth of Canada's total land mass. A continuous layer of permafrost covers the ground, so no two communities are connected by roads. Eighty-five percent of Nunavut's residents are Inuit, whose descendants were nomadic hunter-gatherers. Nunavut struggles with the high cost of goods and public services, high levels of unemployment, low education levels, low average incomes, and high incidents of alcoholism, suicide, and domestic violence. While bringing technology to this area was a monumental challenge, the need for public access computing equaled that challenge. Fortunately, Nunavut Public Library Services was able to convince the government to improve local wiring and connectivity to support a foundation grant. The government also provided free Internet access, and the Department of Education committed to providing training to librarians, as well as replacing and upgrading computers and software.

Partnerships can develop and promote local content. In the United States, Native American communities are working to develop public access computing resources for their communities and tribal libraries play a big role in this. Tribal leaders are concerned that technology and computers will further distance the children from their native roots and culture. To address this, tribal librarians at the Colorado River Tribes Public Library/Archive were able to show how technology can preserve tribal culture by partnering with the University of Arizona to record one of the few remaining speakers of Chemehuevi, an endangered Native American language. While the University provided expertise in language recording and digital editing, the tribe provided cultural expertise and ensured that the tribal leaders were comfortable with the process.

In Mexico, the Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes (CONACULTA) has implemented the Digital Access to Library Services (DALIS) initiative which is providing public access computers in nearly 1,800 public libraries. CONACULTA has also partnered with the Ministry of Education to provide access to a wide range of training materials for children, students, and

adults. The Ministry of Education provides funding for connectivity in exchange for libraries serving as a location for adult education training.

Notes on Partnership Creation

Any entity is a potential partner for a library: local and state government institutions and agencies, nonprofit organizations, foundations, businesses, schools, faith-based organizations, clubs. The most obvious way for a partner to help is to provide funding, but there are innumerable other ways for partners to get involved. They can provide in-kind support through goods and services, publicize the library's programs through their communication channels, and help raise the library's profile so that everyone understands the library's important place in the community. It is this community-wide support that will help sustain libraries' public access computing programs into the future.

It is important to note that there are some considerations to keep in mind when forming partnerships. Working with others will take more of your time and perhaps more resources. Before starting any partnerships, organizations must take the time to understand each entity's needs and desired outcomes and to determine if the partnership will result in success for all.

How to Form a Successful Partnership

Determine Target Audience

Libraries should know who their target audiences are before approaching potential partners. If the primary purpose of a particular partnership is reaching out to community members, it's a good idea to choose a partner that can help reach that audience. The first thing to do is to identify the target audiences' demographics, such as age, ethnicity, marital status, and income level. The next step is to identify the newspapers they read, the TV shows they watch, the radio stations they listen to, and the stores they frequent. Once libraries have a clear picture of the people they want to reach, it's a lot easier to identify partners that can help reach them.

Create a List of Potential Partners

As mentioned above, any entity can be a partner, so libraries should consider every possible organization and institution, including government agencies, local businesses, the local historical society, public and private schools, colleges and universities, foundations, faith-based organizations, and civic clubs. Researching potential partners is a good way to get a sense of how they can help the library, whether it be using their communication channels to reach their customers or members, donating goods or services, or providing funds, and how the library can help them. Finding out what other organizations they are currently working with allows libraries to get a sense of the entity's priorities and interests.

Identify the Benefits of the Partnership

One of the most important aspects of the partnership forming process is identifying the benefits of the partnership, both for the library and the partner. Is the partner likely to provide money, good or services? Will the partner assist in recruiting new volunteers? Perhaps the partner will publicize the library to its customers or members and raise the profile of the library throughout the community. Listing out the benefits of the partnerships will help the library prioritize its list of potential partners and define exactly what to ask of each.

Listing the benefits to the partner is the best way to suggest the idea of a potential partnership. Potential partners need to know that working with the library will heighten their visibility, differentiate them from their competition, create substantial goodwill, fulfill their community service needs, and even allow them to utilize the library for meetings, events, classes, or storage.

Libraries should encourage staff members, board members and even patrons to brainstorm about what the library could offer a potential partner. One unique idea is to ask businesses to “Adopt a Computer.” The business can fund the necessary upgrades for the computer, and the library can, in turn, display the business’ logo on the computer’s desktop. Another idea is to ask a local college to provide student volunteers to help patrons use computers. The library can reciprocate by providing space for distance learning classes offered by the college.

Approach Potential Partner

Before approaching potential partners, libraries should prepare an information sheet that provides an overview of the library, information about its public access computing program, and how partners can get involved. The next step is identifying the appropriate person to contact. Libraries should ask staff members, volunteers, and others who are close to the library if they know anyone at the organization. If a personal contact cannot be identified, libraries should call the organization and ask for the name of the appropriate contact.

Libraries should then prepare a convincing request that will convince the potential partner that forming a partnership with the library is a win-win proposition. Libraries’ requests should be enthusiastic, concise, and convincing. They should clearly state what the library wants from the partner. It’s a good idea to prepare a back-up request, something small in case the potential partner balks at the larger request.

Finally, the plan for a partnership should include time for the library and the partner to determine together how the project will be evaluated and what are the measurements of success.

Ideally, libraries will meet potential partners face to face, which is the best way to communicate key message points and get people excited about working with the library. While library representatives should be well prepared to make their request, they should be conscious of listening to the needs and ideas of the potential partner. After the meeting, it is imperative to follow up, first with a thank you note and later with a phone call.

Accept Response Graciously

If a potential partner says “No,” it is important not to take it personally. Library representatives should remain gracious, thanking the contact for their time. It is a good idea to remain in contact, inviting the organization to library events and activities. There is always the possibility that a partnership could be formed some time in the future.

Communicate with Partner

If a potential partner says “Yes,” the first thing to do is create a letter of agreement that outlines the responsibilities of each partner. This is a good document to have in case the contact at the organization changes.

Libraries should appoint a single contact to be in charge of managing the partnership and attending to the needs of the partner. Staying in regular contact with the partner is important to

establishing clear lines of communication. Partners should be asked to provide feedback on projects, offering suggestions on how to do things different and what they found most helpful. They should also be sent library newsletters, fliers, and information about upcoming events.

Recognize Partner

It is important to continually thank partners for their involvement. One nice touch is to send thank you notes from library patrons as well as library staff. Partners should be recognized publicly whenever possible, whether it be in the media, in newsletters and fliers, or posted somewhere within the library itself. Partners also appreciate being included in library functions and activities, as well as in the decision-making process when appropriate.

Evaluate and Share Results

Evaluation is an essential part of any partnership. In strong partnerships, all participants work together early in the process to determine indicators of success. This allows participants to clearly identify what worked and what didn't, and make modifications to improve the project in the future. All results should be shared with the partner. Positive results can energize partners and result in stronger expanded partnership in the future.

Lessons Learned

The foundation has first-hand knowledge of the importance of forming partnerships. We have seen that libraries that successfully increase access to computers and the Internet, have gained support from local leadership, government institutions, and other organizations to design and create a program that meets the community's need.

We have also found that libraries must gain the support of their communities in order to sustain public access computing programs. Even in the most difficult of situations, when telephone lines are unavailable, when library facilities are cramped, and when poverty and illiteracy are rampant, community support can make the difference between success and failure. As Neil Burgess of the Department of Education in Nunavut put it, "When it's community-driven, it's generally going to be sustainable."

Libraries need to remember that promotion is a huge part of attracting partners and ensuring support into the future. Letting people know that the program works and that it has helped community residents in countless ways will help get more people on board and excited about getting involved. And once government institutions see that the library is helping residents acquire marketable skills, find gainful employment, start productive businesses, and earn advanced degrees, they will be all the more likely to make substantial investments in public access computing programs.

About the Foundation

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation works to promote greater equity in four areas: global health, education, public libraries, and support for at-risk families in Washington state and Oregon. The Seattle-based foundation joins local, national, and international partners to ensure that advances in these areas reach those who need them most. The foundation is led by Bill Gates's father, William H. Gates Sr., and Patty Stonesifer.