

A Case for Vibrant Library Consortia and for the Academic Libraries of Indiana (ALI): As Much and More

By Daniel J. Bowell

Librarians, mission and collaboration

A few months ago I was in a conversation about the fiscal and sustainability challenges facing higher education. Discussion turned to the duplication of efforts among institutions. I suggested that libraries had a record of success along these lines from smaller to larger cooperative efforts. No sooner had I spoken than a colleague was quick to suggest, "But you are librarians. You're about service, not wielding power or building domains." That does suggest something of our situation. We may be recognized as players in teaching, research, and administration, but we do not often sit at the big table where power and resources are brokered. Still, I find the record of accomplishment of libraries working together to be a source of professional pride and also a suggestion that there are other areas for institutional cooperation to be explored. I believe this speaks to a general disposition among librarians aiming toward a common mission, though variably expressed, that seeks to connect people with information for learning, personal enrichment, and meaningful leisure.

Libraries have a strong record of resource sharing. While such cooperation may arguably have roots before the era of typewriters and multi-part forms, libraries have effectively used computerization to develop effective sharing capacities. This clearly has been the case in Indiana for well over the past quarter century with multiple initiatives: INCOLSA (and its regional precursors) and PALNI (the Private Academic Network of Indiana), as well as numerous other state, regional, and local efforts. These in turn helped spawn ALI (the Academic Libraries of Indiana). Additionally, many Indiana libraries have been long-time participants in OCLC and other cooperative

regional and national endeavors. Indiana has been fortunate to have had library leaders, elected officials, and funding agencies who discerned the benefits of working together.

It would be too limited a view to see the benefits of consortia only in terms of fiscal and operational efficiencies, though these rightly are important engines that spur cooperation. Collective engagement provides a forum for mutual critique and honing of ideas and strategies that translate into sharper thinking and refined outcomes. Personally, I regard my participation with colleagues in consortia to be the most fruitful venue for professional education throughout my career. At heart, library cooperation is premised upon the mutual benefit that it brings to respective constituencies. But even more, librarians, at least on our better days, are committed to a larger vision of educating humanity for their development, benefit, and fulfillment.

More not less collaboration

From my perspective, the need for effective collaboration will continue, even heighten. The litany of challenges and opportunities is long. There are several factors that make continued and heightened library cooperation all the more pertinent. Foremost is the likelihood that many libraries will have to live within persistent fiscal constraints, even reductions. The prospect for increasing fiscal resources to academic libraries is not bright, at least in the near-term. As firmly as we know that the universe of information is not entirely digital, the all-too-common perception to the contrary abounds, and the current usage of library provided digital resources reinforces this idea. Consequently, librarians must strategize vigilantly about how to do as much or more

with the same resources and to do so with integrity and effectiveness. This requires that libraries not only seek internal efficiencies but also explore how select operations can be more efficient through the scale that cooperation affords. Increasingly, libraries will need to eliminate duplication wherever that is feasible – from physical resources to routinized operations. A key challenge is to identify those areas in which we can minimize redundancy through implementing operations on a larger scale that yield benefits fiscally and operationally. Recouped human and fiscal resources can in turn be reinvested toward enhancing library services to constituencies in locally defining ways. In short, we must do more together in order to concentrate on what serves local needs best. While premised upon a commitment to collaborate, this requires a heightened emphasis upon economies of scale within those areas of library operations that can and should increasingly become commonalities.

What are some areas for this kind of development within library consortia? It first requires identification of those areas which yield true economies of scale that can be scaled effectively. Already with a record of cooperative success, this will increasingly entail information content. Discovery tools pressure libraries to provide ever greater panoply of resources, especially of the digital sort. It is difficult to imagine this impulse abating but with constrained fiscal resources there are obviously limits to what any library can provide. Consequently, libraries must discover how to obtain broader access to content with finite or diminished purchasing power. Consortial efforts have been effective. We have a positive record of success in this regard within ALI. However, as we increasingly consider consortial purchase as our first recourse for most resources, we also need to explore how to provide other services and resources more efficiently through consortial efforts. One can imagine shared projects like technical processing, cooperative storage, print-on-demand, serials acquisition, and collective, original ownership of resources. Such efforts will not proceed without challenge.

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Recently we have witnessed efforts by some for-profit vendors and publishers to restrain or negate consortium acquisition options. This will require that library consortia band together in a concerted effort to enact market influence. (A recent, encouraging but embryonic effort by a scientific journal publisher to permit “pay to play” transactions within their aggregation of titles and at a reasonable cost suggests the possibility that library voices in harmony might wield some effect upon revised marketing models.) The International Consortium on Library Consortia (ICOLC), a loose affiliation of consortia, speaks on behalf of consortia but may need closer alignment and a broader range of cooperation from consortia in order to speak with sufficient clarity and volume to those market sectors that wish to harness consortial efforts. Can libraries collectively influence pricing, marketing, and repackaging? Perhaps, with technologies that will better enable us to understand the extent of duplication and inequities. Only collectively will we have a voice strong enough to be heard above the din of excessive profits.

The commoditization of information resources

Information resources will, I believe, increasingly become commodities akin to utilities. Libraries and consortia will more frequently work with brokers for the best mix to address collective and local needs. Arguably large scale consortia will offer the most leverage -- and provide the most effective brokerage; but, we must band together. ALI on its own may not be large enough to negotiate most effectively but combined with Lyrasis and other consortia may have a chance for continuing and elevated success. There have been recent pressures upon library consortia to force consolidation at the publisher or distributor level. We will not succeed if we make lone-ranger a concession to obdurate marketers no matter how momentarily enticing the bait appears! It is even thinkable that information content, management, and control could all become commodities as “web-scale” and “cloud-based” alternatives mature and flourish. How do libraries and consortia extend

scalable service and still maintain governance? Our non-profit consortia and their initiatives may be what enable libraries to survive, even thrive.

Scale and emerging technologies

A corollary to enlarged scale is reduced local customization. There is little benefit and even danger in continuing to customize in the wrong places. This has been a persistent plague upon integrated library system development. Too many libraries (read librarians) have focused on the back room mantra ("how we do it here") and not enough on what the back room is trying to accomplish for users. This is not to say that the back room isn't important, but we need to align, even consolidate our back room experiences. Many things simply do not need to be done differently within different contexts. This is congruent with trends in the larger business of software development where the migration of on-premise software to "software-as-a-service" (or, SaaS) reverses a prior direction toward customization. The challenge is to identify the local customizations that make a difference. We must be clear that what truly matters lies with library users and their experiences and not in how the library back room works. From my perspective, this is where projects like OCLC Web-scale Management, OLE, Evergreen, and others hold considerable promise. The back room is, at least to some degree, one-size-fits-all. While this is surely an overstatement, I think it is an important direction for consideration. If it breaks down because of local library demands for customization, such efforts with promise for immense scalability will not succeed. This is not, however, to minimize the ultimate requirement for local library effectiveness. There must be ongoing revision about the demarcation of responsibilities between the local library and the consortium. By doing all that we can together, while understanding that the local library's interpretation and implementation must fit with and serve its specific constituencies and context, we will effectively accomplish mutual goals.

Notwithstanding the caveats about technologically possible but excessive or misplaced local customization, there are potentially vastly increased levels of cooperation and collaboration to be realized through emerging technologies. As amorphous and allusive to define as "cloud computing" is, it suggests unprecedented opportunities for sharing not only information resources and metadata but management and discovery of archived content, collaborative interpretation, instructional resources, and cooperative management of operations and processes. In addition, developing technologies could make possible new models for shared or collective ownership of both new and retrospective resources. A decentralized, deduplicated collective repository of traditional formats is conceivable with shared technologies for management (i.e., a "last copy (ies)" distributed collection). Technologies currently, and will increasingly, permit consortia to share intellectual efforts that inform instruction, mediate information for users, and provide timely, even instantaneous, professional awareness.

Morphing consortia for effectiveness and benefit

As many consortia, including ALI, have discovered, a consortium can only go so far on volunteer staffing. This awareness gave impetus to ALI's decision in 2007 to seek a vendor to provide exploration, negotiation, licensing, and invoicing for electronic information resources. PALNI has witnessed significant organizational and operational progress with its recent advent of full-time consortium employees. As with most cooperative endeavors, there is challenge in balancing the appropriate scale for economies with a satisfactory member representation. Part of this concern has been for a sufficient voice and consequent direct representative allocation for each member institution. With increasing inter-consortial programs, a more indirect administrative approach may be required along with more decision-making assigned to a representative executive or managing body.

A potential danger may be a sense of distance or even alienation that member libraries feel without direct representation. Such a perception may diminish the sense of shared ownership and organizational commitment. To counter this concern will require that representatives achieve effective communication, understanding, and solidarity with their constituents.

Emerging technologies will also make possible expanded inter-consortial relationships. New means for aggregating, managing, and sharing information and systems will challenge prior boundaries of geography, governance, and specialization. Although there will be an extended need, even if the duration is uncertain, to share print/physical objects, we must extend our thinking about collaboration beyond traditional geographic boundaries which understandably were defined by consideration for the transport of physical artifacts.

Other commensurate challenges may redefine ownership, organizational structures, and representation in augmented consortial relationships. I am cautiously optimistic that librarians can overcome these challenges because of our common focus upon purpose and persons. It will require commitment, diligence, and change. And, it will require a perspective that appreciates the nexus of commitments and interdependencies that are requisite for successful collaborative endeavors.

ALI and the future

ALI has realized success in cooperative acquisition of information resources, expanded resource sharing initiatives, and broader investment in collaborative information instruction across multiple types of libraries. Just as with one's personal professional development, if an organization remains static it will atrophy, cloud its vision, and stifle the energies of its members. ALI must envision its future amid a dynamic landscape of information and libraries. Will it remain an organization that provides "buying club"

benefits and impetus for modest, incremental developments? Or, does it need to pursue a larger role as a cogent guide for academic libraries (and beyond) onto the uncharted waters of sea-change in information creation, collection, and dissemination? Can ALI become an agent for promoting, coordinating, and consolidating change across Indiana academic libraries? I think so; not alone but in partnership, as it identifies mutual opportunities and expanded prospects with other entities and consortia within Indiana and the region.

A consortium affords considerable benefits with its collective environmental awareness of complexities, challenges, and opportunities. And, these are reinforced by a commitment to mutual progress and prospering, especially of the sort to which librarians are inclined. ALI demonstrates such benefits currently with more informed resource acquisition, licensing, and resource sharing. In order to continue and expand its viability and for its members to perceive organizational value and vitality, ALI must undertake new or augmented activities that demonstrate forward movement and align with the missions of its members and the profession. This requires a commitment to change purposefully, a will to venture and to risk (cushioned by calculated risk and the shared investment of a consortia initiative). As ALI refines its vision to see the continuing role of academic libraries and librarians with expanded emphasis upon users, resource interpretation, and service coupled with a shift of traditional services and operations to enlarged cooperative, collective scale, we will move forward together.

With over three decades of experience with library consortia, I remain optimistic about their value and contributions. I am optimistic about ALI. Professionally, we are bigger than the threats of competition and context that may try to divide us. We strive to see a fuller picture, a more informed world with more luminous human beings. I'm glad that we are different -- "but you are librarians." We can and do work toward these positive ends individually and in consort.

Bio

Since 2000, Daniel (Dan) J. Howell has been the University Librarian at Taylor University, Upland, Indiana, and currently serves as the President of Academic Libraries of Indiana. Over the course of 35 years in academic librarianship, he has actively participated in no fewer than seven library consortia in four states. He believes heartily that there is much to be gained from libraries working together both in benefits to constituencies and also in professional and personal reward for librarians.