

## LIFTING THE LID ON COOPERATIVE COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT

*Barbara Frame*

By now I think it has become an article of faith among us that cooperative collection development is something that we have to take very seriously. We want to meet the needs of our library users as completely, efficiently, and economically as possible. We see it as the only way, in a climate of static or shrinking budgets and rising costs, that we can meet the increasing needs of the people that we are in business to serve.

Today I want to talk about some of the things that happen when you stop talking about cooperation as some lovely ideal thing that you will do someday, and get down to the practicalities of how you are actually going to do it, the nuts and bolts - this means dealing with real libraries with all their funny little ways, their odd traditions, their different collections, and their particular and sometimes quite distinctive clientele.

It would be very nice if the librarians of the libraries concerned could just get together and, in our usual cooperative spirit, come up with a sensible and workable plan. And we could do that, too, if this wasn't the real world and we didn't have to consider a lot of the difficulties in it.

Some of these difficulties are other people: for example, the people who own our libraries and run the institutions that we work for. They don't always see things quite as we do. It can be hard to get them to understand that the objective is to improve services, not to save money, and in tough economic times I think this is a misconception that we are always going to have to fight, and that will never quite go away.

There are also questions of pride in the self-sufficiency that rightly or wrongly they assume has existed up to the present time. Also lack of trust - people may be very suspicious about any form of dependency on other institutions, and if you are talking about cooperating with libraries owned by churches of denominations other than your own, you may be surprised how many ancient prejudices come to the surface.

There is also a feeling abroad that cooperation is a wimpy thing to do - an admission of weakness. The idea is that to survive, you have got to be able to compete. I think that librarians are very service-oriented people and that that sort of thinking doesn't cut very much ice with us.

But in a climate where competition is held up as the ideal, where there's a lot of talk about performance, cooperation may be seen as backward-looking, messy, and inefficient. We know that it's none of these things, but we may have to work quite hard to convince our employing bodies of this.

We also need to think hard about the people who are using our libraries. We know that if we cooperate, they will benefit overall in terms of the greatly enlarged pool of resources available to them. We know that the opportunity to specialise in some areas means that our collecting in other areas will be reduced to very low levels. But some of our users may consider themselves terribly disadvantaged if the research materials that they want are not in the institution where they are based. And it's quite possible that in ten or twenty years the research emphases of an institution may change. So do we expect the library's collecting emphasis to change with it, or do we continue sending researchers across town in the expectation that research interests may change yet again? How can we expect to attract research students to our institution when the resources they need may not be in our own library? How do we tell the staff at our own institutions that they'll have to take their book recommendations to another library?

Also, do we really, deep-down, trust the other libraries? If cooperation is going to work, we have to be able to trust both the other librarians, and the institutions that they work for. We have to make efforts to understand their goals and objectives, which are not necessarily parallel to our own. We have to feel confident that they are going to stick to their part of the agreement - no-one wants to have to think of acquiring library materials retrospectively and at great cost, because someone else couldn't last the distance. We have to be able to build into the agreement contingency plans to cope with someone wanting to change the terms of the agreement, someone whose funding lets them down

even if they themselves have the best intentions. We need to have some idea of how the rest of us will proceed if one of the parties unilaterally changes direction. We need to be able to provide for good, regular communication between the libraries concerned; this may mean scheduled meetings between the librarians or specified members of the staff. We also have to be able to feel that we can trust the other libraries' subject expertise, and that we can trust their collecting to be every bit as unbiased as we are sure our own would be. There also needs to be agreement about readership level, whether we are collecting at the popular, the undergraduate, or the postgraduate level. We need to feel sure that a library that has taken responsibility for collecting in a given area is taking that responsibility seriously, is collecting in a way that's acceptable to everyone in matters of both quality and quantity, and is budgeting accordingly. It may be that we need mechanisms for making suggestions and recommendations to each other in a way that nobody perceives as threatening. We need to be clear about each other's collection development policies, if we all have them, about special lending policies, especially for rare or very expensive material, and about policies for things like weeding and disposal of library material.

We need to make special efforts to see that new staff members in every library are aware of our cooperative arrangements and how they operate, and we need to make sure that changes in staff are not going to alter things in ways that will make our cooperating partners nervous.

We have to think about how formal we want the agreement to be: probably we don't want to go all the way and have the library equivalent of a pre-nuptial agreement, drawn up by lawyers, but we'll want to have something in writing. This could be just at the level of memorandum of understanding drawn up after discussions, or we might want to have something quite lengthy and detailed.

And as well as all this, we have to structure our agreements in such a way as not to be too cumbersome and complicated to be workable!

When we are making decisions about automation, we have to be sure that our cooperative collecting goals are taken into account. Our goal should be nothing less than complete shared bibliographic access.

Whatever we do, it's going to have to be economically fair, administratively possible, and sensitive to the concerns of our institutions and our users. It will need to be firm enough for everyone to know where they are and to have confidence in, but also flexible enough to be able to move with changing times. I don't think that all of this is going to be wonderfully easy to achieve, but I think we have got to try, because it makes so much sense, and because we just can't afford not to any more.

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