

“Playing Well With Others”: New Opportunities for Library Consortia

by James Wisner

ABSTRACT: Libraries everywhere are facing a complex array of budget cuts, staff retirements, technological disruption, etc. Many libraries may feel that they do not possess the organizational strength they once enjoyed, and, as a result, an increasing number are seeking out ways to collaborate with fellow institutions in order to serve their stakeholders more effectively. The library consortium landscape, however, is rather confusing, and an almost endless series of acronyms reflect the array of options for consortial participation. This article attempts to describe the various kinds of library consortia that currently serve libraries, and offers suggestions on how and when to leverage the collective power of a library consortium in order to maximize the efforts of any single library.

INTRODUCTION

Not long ago an executive from a library vendor sat in my office, and as we discussed the current electronic resources landscape he quipped, with a note of exasperation, “Why do library consortia exist?”

The simple answer, of course, was “because libraries *want* them to exist.” However, as I have had the opportunity to consider his question more carefully I have realized that his question deserved a more refined response. It is certainly true that nearly every academic and theological library belongs to at least one library consortium—and sometimes several—so the question is actually one that deserves further reflection. Why *do* so many library consortia exist? An almost endless array of organizations, each with its own strange acronym, populates the library consortial landscape, and many of these consortia in turn fall under the “meta-acronym” ICOLC, which perhaps confusingly stands for the International Coalition of Library Consortia. As academic and theological libraries everywhere evolve, so too do the library consortia to which they belong. This essay will attempt to navigate the shifting terrain of the library consortial landscape, and identify the trends within this group of indecipherable acronyms.

CONSORTIA IN CONTEXT

For many libraries, their first experience with a library consortium was their participation in an OCLC network. These regional associations, many of which were founded in the early 1970s, provided both professional networking opportunities and a host of services that increased collaborative possibilities among both disparate and similar libraries.¹ As libraries automated their catalogs during the 1980s, several library consortia developed that allowed institutions to share the same catalog, a shift that allowed patrons to locate library materials more easily within a specific geographic region.

The rise of the Internet from the mid-1990s onward fueled a surge of interest in electronic resource licensing, and many consortia experienced rapid growth during this era, in part through expanding the opportunities for libraries to license electronic resources at a discount. Later in the first decade of the twenty-first century, however, OCLC

¹ B. Bailey-Hainer, “The OCLC Network of Regional Service Providers: The Last 10 Years,” *Journal Of Library Administration*, 49 no. 6 (2009): 621-629

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made the strategic decision to stop funding their networks and pull out of the content-selling business altogether.² Along with the drastic reduction in state funding for libraries, this decision may be considered one of the largest contributors to the consortial chaos that exists today.

In the aftermath of OCLC's decision, many non-OCLC-related consortia found themselves in the position to fill service gaps left by the dissolution of the OCLC regional networks, and this in turn prompted some of these consortia to reexamine the geographical boundaries of their membership base. In addition, several library consortia established partnerships that expanded their electronic licensing reach in ways previously not considered.³ In almost all areas of life, technology has rendered physical geography less important, and libraries are increasingly looking across traditional geographic boundaries at peer institutions for collaborative opportunities. A Franciscan seminary in California, for example, likely has more in common with a Franciscan seminary in New York than it does with a large academic research library located a mile away. As the second decade of the twenty-first century began, therefore, geographic proximity between institutions seemed to fade as the dominant organizational dynamic in most library consortia, and instead institutional similarity began taking its place.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF LIBRARY CONSORTIA

No two library consortia are the same. This diversity can be explained by the fact that library consortia have evolved over time to address the specific needs of their member libraries, which points to the unique and localized identities that most library consortia represent. That said, it's generally true that the two most common types of thriving library consortia are those consortia that either maintain and share a union catalog (what I will call "resource-sharing" consortia) or those that collectively license electronic resources (what I will call "buying club" consortia). There are some examples of consortia that do both well, such as the Orbis Cascade Alliance in the Northwest United States,⁴ but most consortia have evolved by demonstrating a core competency in one of these two areas.

Resource-sharing consortia have evolved for an obvious reason: the libraries within these consortia have forged an agreement to make their print collections available to each other for faster item delivery. These consortia are typically clustered near each other geographically (for example, the Boston Library Consortium,⁵ or the Nashville Area Library Alliance⁶), but occasionally they are located in dispersed environments, such as the Link+ consortium,⁷ which is a resource-sharing consortium comprised of public and academic libraries throughout the rather vast landscapes of California and Nevada. The benefits of resource-sharing consortia are immense, and such partnerships allow each participant library the luxury of not having to meet the information material needs of its patrons singlehandedly. That more resource-sharing consortia do not exist is primarily a function of the variety of Integrated Library Systems (ILS) in the market. For many resource-sharing consortia to function successfully, most libraries within those consortia have to agree to operate the same ILS. As ILS systems mature, however, this is becoming less of a problem. For example, OCLC's Worldcat Navigator works with nearly all library systems. Still, for resource-sharing consortia to maximize their potential, there needs to exist a groundswell of support and enthusiasm for the consortium's mission throughout the respective library organizations.

² N. Oder, L. Blumenstein, J. Hadro, and R. Miller, "OCLC Divests E-Content, To Focus on WorldCat," *Library Journal*, 135 no. 7 (2010): 14.

³ For example, the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) partnered with Lyris, and the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) partnered with the Statewide California Electronic Library Consortium (SCELC).

⁴ <http://www.orbiscascade.org/>

⁵ <http://www.blc.org/>

⁶ <http://www.library.vanderbilt.edu/nala/>

⁷ <http://csul.iii.com/>

Newer to the consortium landscape are *buying club* consortia. As the range of available electronic resources has expanded almost exponentially, while at the same time the associated costs have risen dramatically, libraries almost everywhere are looking for an economies-of-scale approach to maximize the value of their licensing dollars. Buying club consortia, however, are not as limited by geographic location. Many of these consortia, such as Lyrasis,⁸ Westchester Academic Library Director's Association (WALDO),⁹ Statewide California Electronic Library Consortium (SCELC),¹⁰ and NELLCO,¹¹ all began with specific geographic regions but have since expanded beyond these original boundaries. The changes associated with the OCLC networks left many libraries with weakened local consortia, so libraries in many regions began aligning with consortia far outside their specific locations, with the goal of leveraging electronic licensing discounts. In some cases, institutions joined more than one of these consortia, and it is now not uncommon for academic libraries to belong to several consortia at once.

Other types of library consortia certainly exist; for example, many members of ICOLC are government-funded library consortia. These, usually funded at the state level, are often comprised of both academic and public libraries, and have ambitions far beyond resource sharing or collective buying (TexShare,¹² for example, in Texas). Still other academic consortia are funded by their states but allow private universities to participate (like the Virtual Library of Virginia, commonly known as VIVA¹³) while other academic library consortia represent university systems (for example, the California Digital Library,¹⁴ which represents all university libraries within the University of California system). On a much smaller scale, some "library consortia" are not even consortia in the usual sense. In California, for example, the libraries at both the Graduate Theological Union¹⁵ and the Claremont Colleges¹⁶ serve a consortium of academic members. In both of these cases, the libraries of both consortia of institutions belong to several library consortia themselves. The latticework of these relationships is quite complicated indeed.

THE VALUE PROPOSITION OF CONSORTIA

Just as no two library consortia are alike, so too the relationships between each individual library and the consortia to which it belongs vary widely. Some libraries possess internal capabilities that are sufficient to offset what they need from a consortium, in comparison to other member libraries. At every institution, therefore, it should not be assumed that every possible consortial benefit will be of equal appeal to each library. Large research libraries may not want to participate in a union catalog/resource-sharing arrangement, and highly specialized institutions may have such refined information resource needs that they will not benefit from the generic resource offerings licensed by buying clubs. The most successful library/consortium arrangements, therefore, are those that offer a "cafeteria" approach both in consortial offerings and in community expectations from member institutions.¹⁷

⁸ <http://www.lyrasis.org/>

⁹ <http://www.waldolib.org/>

¹⁰ <http://scllc.org/>

¹¹ <http://www.nellco.org/>

¹² <https://www.tsl.state.tx.us/texshare/index.html>

¹³ <http://www.vivalib.org/>

¹⁴ <http://www.cdlib.org/>

¹⁵ <http://library.gtu.edu/>

¹⁶ <http://libraries.claremont.edu/>

¹⁷ In my particular consortium, for example, no electronic resource offering is licensed by even 50 percent of our members, and the relatively new resource-sharing program we have launched has but eleven participants. Collectively, however, we know that not all the things SCELC does will meet the needs of all of our members, and we in the SCELC office are very comfortable telling members to utilize our services only when they make sense and to "go it alone" or collaborate with other consortia if another consortium better meets their needs.

Generally speaking, it makes sense for a library to work with a consortium if by doing so it will receive a specific benefit from participation. That value proposition is different for every institution. Those of us who work for library consortia must strive to provide value to our members, and we should fight the temptation to protect the consortium as an independent organization against or separate from the interests of our member libraries. Taken to an extreme, if our members ever determine that a consortium no longer serves a unique purpose and thus should cease operations, we should remain open to that possibility. Library consortia are not different in this regard from other human institutions, and as each consortium evolves and matures it must fight the tendency to be inwardly focused and opposed to re-invention if its members ever wish it to move into different and new areas. Recent ambiguity and disruption in the library consortial landscape may be partially blamed on library consortia not always adjusting to meet the needs of their members in a timely fashion.

FINDING (OR HELPING CREATE) THE CONSORTIUM YOUR LIBRARY NEEDS

The question for every library, therefore, is whether or not an existing library consortium—whether their individual needs be the maximization of their electronic resource dollars or the augmentation of their existing library collection—can meet the needs of their institution. If “the right consortium” exists already, it is probably better not to reinvent any existing wheels, and I would encourage any library—wherever it may be and in whatever sector—to seek out the library consortia that can best meet its needs in the most economically desirable fashion.

In many cases, however, the consortium that could best meet a library’s needs does not yet exist. Though the library consortium landscape is littered with confusing acronyms, I believe that far more library consortia could be developed to serve unique library populations. For example, there are many similar institutions that are not currently leveraging their collective buying power, and there are many geographically proximate institutions that need not duplicate each other’s collections. Undoubtedly, even more creative collaborative possibilities exist. I have often wondered if a collection of small institutions could collaborate to share many technical services functions. Many institutions, for example, have original cataloging needs, but those needs and their personnel budgets are not large enough to merit a full-time employee with that responsibility. Other libraries may require routine systems or web development work, but not at a level that warrants a full-time staff appointment.

What, then, is needed for a library consortium to thrive? At the risk of oversimplification, I think the three most important variables needed for a strong library consortium are

1. A reliable revenue stream that can fund operations
2. A strong personality to lead the consortium
3. Good timing

Of these requirements, perhaps a reliable revenue stream is the most important. Many library initiatives can be launched on the backs of volunteers from member libraries, but in my experience very few collaborative efforts succeed unless there is someone suitably qualified, being compensated appropriately to ensure that the collaboration succeeds. In order to fund an employee’s salary and benefits the consortium needs to determine how to share the costs among its members. There is no uniform best practice along these lines; some library consortia charge enough in dues to ensure an adequate staff, while others charge a small fee or surcharge for each licensed electronic resource. What all successful library consortia have in common, however, is a rational formula to pay for the activi-

ties they conduct. Asking institutions to pay for consortial services is also a good way of judging the value proposition of a particular service, for many ideas sound more compelling in their abstract form than they actually turn out to be. Paying directly for an *activity*, on the other hand, requires participating institutions to assess accurately whether or not a particular benefit offered by a library consortium is valuable *to them*.

Strong leadership is also needed for a successful library consortium to grow. Libraries, like all organizations, tend to concentrate on their internal needs above other concerns; it often takes a “cheerleader personality,” an identifiable advocate, to encourage institutions to focus energies outside their own campus communities. A leader who effectively knows the individuals in a given library community can best serve as a catalyst for the ongoing process of growing a successful library consortium. Essentially, the builders of a successful library consortium need to know how to network with people. Many collaborative endeavors fail because well-meaning but miscast people have been placed in leadership roles.

Finally, a successful library consortium needs to be timely. There is a time and a season for almost any worthwhile project, and a library consortium that is created or located during an era in which its core competencies are not needed or wanted is a consortium unlikely to thrive. Many library consortia that were successful in years past may eventually need to be “re-booted” or indeed dissolved in order to serve today’s library needs, and other potential library collaborative activities ought not be launched if their prospects for success are not apparent. A library consortium that exists mostly for the sake of existing can’t expect to endure indefinitely. A successful library consortium will be one that can *do something valuable and unique, and in a timely fashion*. Such a consortium will have little difficulty demonstrating its value.

CONCLUSION

Libraries today require skill sets that are often not taught (or taught often enough) in library schools, and libraries increasingly need to rely on expertise that exists far beyond their own walls or campuses. As this century progresses, time will not slow down to allow librarians to catch up with the needs of their user communities. The old proverb “if you want to go fast, go alone, but if you want to go far, go together” has never been truer for libraries. Technological convergence is allowing the library community to conduct its services in unique ways never before possible. Every library, no matter its particular context, will do well to consider what it could do better with fellow libraries, and, by looking for collaborative opportunities, go further together.

