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Planning Amid a Multitude of Projects: A Consortial Perspective

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Amid a multitude of projects, no plan is devised.
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“Planning” is often treated as if it were a process synonymous with predicting the future. When viewed this way, planners can find themselves uncomfortably cast in the role of futurist or venture capitalist. Librarians engaged in planning activities may feel that they are expected to predict the future of information technology and publishing in order to plan for library services and collections. If this is your view of planning, then it may be tempting to observe the pace of change in these fields and (even more daunting) the hype concerning new technologies and conclude that planning is futile. We are all swamped by a multitude of projects and subject to a dizzying array of factors outside our control. How can we possibly predict what new technologies will emerge and which .com’s will have an impact on library services?

Rather than emphasizing prediction, perhaps a more useful approach is to view planning as a continual process aimed at:

- Evaluating services.
- Supporting successful services.
- Revising or discontinuing unsuccessful services.
- Launching new initiatives.
- Creating a flexible organization and culture.
- Encouraging experimentation.
- Reinforcing the values and purpose of the library within its larger context.

In other words, planning need not be so much the act of devising long range predictions as it is a continuous process of feedback and analysis, an ability to take action relatively quickly, and a willingness to evolve and try something new.

Library Consortia

Although these factors apply to library consortia equally well, such collective enterprises face an additional challenge as they attempt to weigh the divergent needs and cultures of their member libraries.

Consortia do not exist in a vacuum. Those that succeed are attuned to the needs of their member libraries—libraries that are, in turn, attuned to the broader context of the college, university, school, city, or company they serve. In other words, successful consortia exist to further the mission of their member institutions. While this relationship between the consortium and its membership may sound obvious, in practice planning services for a diverse group is no simple task.

Depending on the consortium, member libraries may serve a tremendous variety of constituencies. Statewide projects often serve every non-profit library in the state and thus include public libraries, universities and colleges, school libraries, and special libraries. Even among a fairly homogeneous academic consortium such as Orbis, one quickly discovers important differences that stem from institution size, public and private funding, two-year and four-year programs, location in a metro or rural area, location in Oregon or Washington, extent of graduate programs offered, curriculum supported, and differences in institutional culture and approach to management.

Consortia typically deal with disparate memberships in one of two ways: they become skilled at understanding their membership and building flexible services, or they become dictatorial and offer services on a one-size-fits-all basis. The consortia that most often thrive under autocracy are those with a government mandate and a large pool of central funds to disperse. Many libraries are willing to put up with an autocratic consortium if the economic benefit of membership is large. In contrast, when libraries commit institutional funds to participate in a consortium they are far more likely to expect their consortium to make wise use of funds, engage in businesslike practices, and behave in a responsive and flexible manner. This contrast illustrates a familiar expression: “There is a world of difference between paying and being paid.”

I will not dwell on the autocratic approach but rather address some of the factors that inform the planning process for consortial projects that are attuned to member needs and interests.

Communication

Consortia often survey their membership to determine the extent of common interest in a particular project or product. Although surveying may seem to be a fairly straightforward planning technique, there is perhaps nothing quite like working on a consortial project to reveal a variety of philosophies and priorities within a single member institution. It is not unusual to find differences between directors and staff, technical and public service personnel, or the “main library” and its various branches or semi-independent parts.

While this is to be expected, it is important for the consortium to structure the planning process in a way that will draw out the diversity of input present in its membership. Approaches to addressing the challenge of collecting member library opinion include:

- Offering summaries of committee work on a consortium Web site that is available to all staff at member libraries.
- Supporting open access to topical consortium email lists. Such lists should encourage broad subscription beyond committee membership.
- Educating committee members to see themselves as spokespersons for their institution. The consortium needs more than their input as an individual or representative of a piece of their institution. In some cases, this expectation requires cross-divisional discussion that may not normally occur within the member institution.
- Encouraging discussions that seek analysis and input from line and management staff but also make clear where final decisions will be made. It is important that the values and conclusions of each group are summarized and made widely available to the consortium membership.

Minimizing Requirements and Maximizing Choice

It is critical that consortia not overstate the universal requirements for membership. This can be a difficult balancing act since some services gain their efficacy from consistency. The consortium should only impose such sweeping requirements where the payoff is large and the cost of consistency minimal.

Orbis Borrowing, the Orbis Library Consortium's patron-initiated borrowing system, is an interesting example of a service that imposes a very stringent requirement but also allows for great autonomy among member libraries. For this consortium, participation in Orbis Borrowing is synonymous with membership: all Orbis member libraries must participate in Orbis Borrowing if they are to be an Orbis member. The Orbis Borrowing system is based on "INN-Reach" software developed by Innovative Interfaces Inc. (III). Unfortunately, given present technical limitations and the high cost of including catalogs based on non-III software, requiring participation in Orbis Borrowing is tantamount to requiring that every member library use III software for its local catalog. All things being equal, the requirement of consistency in local OPAC vendor is clearly undesirable because it sets a very high bar for participation in the consortium.

Although such a steep and universal requirement is generally undesirable, in this case it has worked well for the consortium because the INN-Reach system is unusually robust and successful. Somewhat paradoxically, although INN-Reach requires consistency in catalog software it also allows for a great deal of autonomy among the member libraries. Member libraries are able to participate in a powerful resource-sharing system while retaining nearly complete control over the coding of bibliographic records, public interface, financial functions, patron records, and other aspects of their local system.

In short, the choice to "opt in/opt out" is generally preferable but, when the benefit is large and the cost manageable, consortia should be prepared to impose some expectations on all members.

Flexibility

It is a bad plan that admits of no modification.

PUBLIUS SYRUS, MAXIM 469

Flexibility is perhaps the overriding watchword of planning for library consortia. Every member library is different so, in addition to offering new services on an "opt in/opt out" basis, it is often wise to approach planning with an intent to accommodate a variety of implementation timelines and institutional definitions of the fiscal year. Whenever possible, each participating library should have the freedom to customize its implementation of a new service. Most libraries will want to incorporate a new service in a manner that is consistent with present services rather than according to a consortium-imposed standard.

Building a Consortial Culture

Key to the success of any library consortium is the willingness of member libraries to represent their needs and convey their differences while simultaneously developing an understanding of the values, needs, and limitations of other member libraries. It is especially important that members of the consortium's governing body choose to adopt the "consortium perspective." In other words, members of the governing board will often need to weigh what is good for the consortium as a whole against what is best or ideal for their own institution.

Ideally, consortia should also be prepared to take a few risks, try something new, and be prepared to learn from failures as well as successes.

Businesslike Operation

Although a consortium can be an ideal venue for sharing information and coming to understand and appreciate the challenges faced by other member libraries, consortia need to behave in a calculated and businesslike fashion as well. In many cases the consortium must take a calculated approach to weighing the costs and benefits of new projects and services.

The calculation of cost is perhaps most often under-emphasized when new consortial projects are envisioned. By their nature, collaborative organizations can impose a significant overhead in terms of the time required to reach a decision or achieve buy-in from participants. Too often we see consortia engage in an activity with an enthusiastic sense of the benefits but with an incomplete understanding of total costs. Economists call such costs "externalities," costs that are external to the calculation of cost, benefit, and optimal organization. For example, if committee time and the central costs of invoicing and paying a vendor are excluded from the calculation, it may appear that group licensing of a particular electronic resource makes

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sense even when the benefit each library receives is small. Although consortia offer many intangible benefits, such groups need to account for all costs so that most projects will make sense from a business perspective as well.

Summary

I recently completed editing three special issues of *Information Technology and Libraries* dedicated to library consortia.¹ In addition to six articles from the United States, these three issues of *ITAL* include contributions from South Africa, Canada, Israel, Spain, Australia, Brazil, China, Italy, Micronesia, and the United Kingdom. Taken together these groups represent a dizzying array of organizing principles, membership models, governance structures, and funding models. Although most are geographically defined, the type of library they serve also defines many of them. Virtually all license electronic resources for their membership, but many offer a wide variety of other services including shared catalogs, union catalogs, patron-initiated borrowing systems, authentication systems, cooperative collection development, digitizing, instruction, preservation, courier systems, and shared human resources.

Consortia display such broad variety that it can be difficult to detect common themes and “best practices.” It is clear that the technology of the Web, the increasing importance of electronic resources, and advances in resource-sharing systems have created new opportunities for consortia. Beyond these technological and economic motivations, in consortia we see the librarian’s instinct for collaboration being brought to bear at a time of great uncertainty and rapid change.

Planning to meet the varied interests of member libraries in this uncertain environment can be quite challenging. The keys to meeting this challenge are flexibility, a spirit of experimentation, the adoption of sound business practices, and ultimately the commitment of member libraries and their willingness to adopt the consortial perspective. The best consortia build on shared values while furthering the unique strengths of each member library. ☐

¹ *ITAL*, Vol. 17, Number 1, March 1998; Vol. 18, Number 3, September 1999; and Vol. 19, Number 2, June 2000.

Visions of the Future

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The first environmental scan provided some insights into demographic, economic, and political trends within Oregon. Many of the findings were sobering. For example, despite a growing prosperity, Oregon has the highest percentage of hungry households in the nation. Like many states, Oregon is getting older. By 2010, the state will have the fourth oldest population in the nation. This Hispanic population grew 66 percent between 1990 and 1997, while the state’s overall population grew 13 percent. Small businesses rather than major industries and larger corporations dominate Oregon’s economic landscape. From 1992 to 1996, small businesses created 98.5 percent of the job growth in the state. Forty-five states have budget stabilization or “rainy day funds.” Oregon is one of five states that does not.¹

The assessment of Oregon libraries also provided a rich context for OLA’s planning purposes. Overall, there have been many improvements in library service since Vision 2000 was published. More Oregonians have access to local libraries, and many resource sharing programs have enhanced the availability of library collections throughout the state. Significant improvements have been made in the area of information technology. Ninety-five percent of public libraries in the state are connected to the Internet. Despite these positive trends, there are a number of issues that need to be addressed and services that could be improved. For example, Internet connectivity is widespread, but the quality of those connections is lacking. Forty-eight percent of public libraries have only dial-up access to the network over regular phone lines, usually through a single computer. In 1990, a property tax limitation proposal

passed in a general election, and education was hit hard by subsequent budget cuts. The schools were forced to make some hard decisions, and many K-12 libraries had to reduce services. In 1998, the number of certified school library media specialists numbered 588, about 20 percent fewer than in 1992. According to the author of the report on Oregon libraries, school media centers have slipped into obscurity. There is little recent information on their status, and several major statewide reports on K-12 education make no mention of libraries.²

Within the academic community, the report is also mixed. During the 1990’s, student and faculty access to research collections improved significantly through the development of two consortia: Portals (Portland area libraries) and Orbis (academic libraries in Oregon and Washington). Group purchases of electronic resources allowed many libraries to expand access to expensive databases. At the same time, the two largest research collections in the state, the University of Oregon and Oregon State University, collectively cut more than one million dollars in journal subscriptions.

A third report was prepared to provide the Vision 2010 planning committee with some general trends that are occurring within the profession and affect libraries nationwide, not just in Oregon. The major themes that emerged from this report include the development of electronic resources (including the e-book, multimedia, and large repositories of raw data); copyright, privacy, intellectual property concerns; recruitment and retention of talented staff; and changes in user expectations.