Collaboration for Hard Times

By Irene Gashurov and Curtis L. Kendrick on October 2, 2013

People have always known that they can often achieve more working with others than they can alone. Today collaboration is a vital feature of organizational life, but finding the right partner for a supportive relationship is still no simple matter. There are risks and costs, along with the tension between self-interest and resource sharing. Once the right partner is found, the team must figure out how to make the relationship work.

Users’ constantly increasing expectation of immediate access has added complexity to our work and our collaborations. Librarians are now advocates, consumers, educators, and publishers. We are linked not only with other libraries and library systems but also with publishers, foundations, and government. Simultaneously, limited resources are testing our ability to provide services that align with rapid innovation and changing user behavior. All of this is forcing academic libraries to become more entrepreneurial, to seek new ways to collaborate more deeply, effectively, and creatively than we have before—or risk obsolescence.

In recent years, serious discussion about how collaboration works in higher education has greatly intensified. Collaboration is being examined from both the economic perspective and in relation to issues ranging from rethinking managerial practices to redesigning office spaces to foster team work and take advantage of the kind of unstructured transactions on which the business world already relies. For example, the future library of Cornell University’s School of Hotel Administration, designed by the architectural firm Woods Bagot, draws on workplace efforts to create an environment to facilitate research, social interactions, and collaborative activities by eliminating obstructions to information and communication. As the Chronicle of Higher Education outlined in 2010’s “The Making of Corporate U,” this business culture is found nearly everywhere in higher education—in the rise of borderless virtual education, the use of cost analysis to determine which programs to offer, the growth of part-time adjunct faculty, and the outsize salaries of star faculty. Libraries are evolving in similar directions.

A brief look at some of the recent collaborative models from the world of business and their parallels in libraries helps us understand what works and what doesn’t and helps us to identify the elements of a good collaboration. Whether the field is business, education, or libraries, several common themes emerge:

1. Each collaborative project must be approached strategically, with an end goal in sight.
2. Organizations that foster a culture of collaboration can overcome many challenges, including cultural differences between the participating institutions.
3. Collaborations that foster deep commitment achieve the greatest impact.
DISCIPLINED COLLABORATION

Academic and research libraries have historically created effective partnerships with one another, such as the Library of Congress distributing catalog cards, the establishment of the Center for Research Libraries, and the birth and growth of OCLC. More recent collaborations include the Research Collections and Preservation Consortium, the Columbia-Cornell partnership 2CUL, and the Manhattan Research Library Initiative. Yet far too many library initiatives have withered owing to lack of communication, focus, or leadership. Collaboration comes with risk as well as reward, so, initially, demonstrating the value of potential benefits to administration may be hard. It is difficult to justify spending our own resources on initiatives that will in part benefit others, particularly when our funds are already constrained. How can we guard against free riders?

Part of the solution is knowing when and when not to collaborate. The opposite of hesitation to share responsibility for initiatives can be a tendency to overcollaborate—to involve too many parties in all the minutiae of a project’s implementation. This leads to low productivity, or overestimating the value of collaboration on a project. According to Morten Hansen, management professor at University of California (UC) at Berkeley, in Collaboration: How Leaders Avoid the Traps, Create Unity and Reap Big Results (Harvard Business, 2009), collaboration requires careful prior evaluation, with the end goal in mind. Hansen presents a compelling argument for what he calls “disciplined collaboration.” First, one must identify which projects should be approached collaboratively. If a project does not have the potential to result in increased efficiency, improved resources, or greater innovation, it is better to go it alone. A bad alliance is worse than no alliance, says Hansen, since it can distract from more important work.

IMPORTANCE OF COMMON CULTURE

While many business transactions are the product of collaboration—particularly in our knowledge-based economy, which depends on diverse teams with different expertise to complete projects—research shows that partnerships between companies succeed only about 40 percent of the time. In their pursuit of profit, such business partners often fail to find a match with their companies’ values, goals, and cultures. One of the largest deals in American business history, the AOL–Time Warner merger, might have had the best financial rationale on paper, but the combined company fell to one-seventh of its former $350 billion valuation a decade after the merger. Pundits still argue about what caused the combined company to collapse, but a major contributing factor was the failure to close the then-substantial divide between the cultures of print journalism and digital media. The companies continued to work as separate entities, and the divisive cultural differences led to a fatal lack of trust between them.

PARTNERS FOR INNOVATION

Cultural differences do not always doom a relationship. Heterogeneous organizations can coexist if they support an environment of collaboration. An example is so-called innovation clusters, which connect academe, industry, and government. One such, the proposed Roosevelt Island campus of Cornell University, will integrate industry into the academic campus by creating an environment where members can learn from one another and assimilate one another’s strengths. Developed in partnership with Technion–Israel Institute in Haifa, the new Cornell NYC Tech is expected to bring together
scientists, government organizations, and the start-up community to speed the commercialization of technology innovation from the ground up. Other examples of academic-entrepreneurial partnerships include the Myelin Research Foundation, which brings together academic scientists, commercial biopharma, and government regulators to accelerate the development of new multiple sclerosis drugs, and OCTANe, a successful partnership between UC and industry that convenes academics, entrepreneurs, and investors to advance innovation-based economic growth in Southern California.

These partnerships succeed because they take into account cultural differences before forming an alliance, focus on long-term goals, and measure achievement by shared standards, as Anne R. Kenney, Carl A. Kroch University Librarian at Cornell University, laid out in her description of 2CUL’s formula for partnership success. The challenge for them is finding funders to finance an enterprise that does not itself have consumers but instead acts as the glue for diverse constituents, explains Dan Bornstein in his *New York Times* piece, “*Fostering a Team Approach to Drug Cures.*”

As with innovation clusters, networked library organizations depend on able leadership and a common mission to unite diverse groups. For example, the New York State Higher Education Initiative (NYSHEI) is a library group dedicated to advocacy for academic libraries. NYSHEI membership includes 147 libraries. They represent a broad coalition of public and private colleges, universities, medical institutions, and research centers. They work through unified action to educate policymakers on the value of libraries, enlisting the support of their respective organizations to influence government decision-makers. This collaboration affords opportunities for “spontaneous coordination,” through which all subsets of members contribute to the organization by leading related collaborative endeavors.

NYSHEI director Jason Kramer says that like advocacy, collaboration is a long-term proposition, at the heart of which is relationship building. Recently, NYSHEI secured the support of more than 20 library groups, a subset of its total membership, to lead a related collaborative endeavor, advocating on behalf of NYSHEI’s membership to the New York State Regents Advisory Council on Libraries, asking the Council to recognize the importance of academic and research libraries and act upon this recognition. “We all represent different groups and missions,” says Kramer, “but since each of us is committed to the practice of collaboration, we are able to act with one voice on matters of common interest.”

**LEADERSHIP FOR TRANSFORMATION**

Leadership must be able to steer a partnership to innovate. This sometimes means pursuing risky opportunities. When the City University of New York’s (CUNY) School of Professional Studies (SPS) launched its new online BA in communication and culture, it chose to outsource library services to the library of another CUNY school rather than to build a brick-and-mortar library of its own. SPS contracted Baruch College’s Newman Library to provide the same range of services that it offers to its college community, including virtual and physical access to the library and its resources and instruction. The partners examined the financial implications of this collaboration, including higher subscription costs for the greater number of students served, as well as authentication and identification issues, and appointed a librarian from Newman Library to act as liaison for SPS.

The experimental model was so successful that SPS has since expanded its online offerings to six undergraduate degree programs, two master’s programs, and two online certificate programs—all with library services handled by Newman Library. Arthur Downing, chief librarian at Baruch, sees the cost of SPS as an investment in the development of new services that will also benefit Baruch. When the online BA program was launched in 2006, for example, the library had to license and deliver full-length movies, with which it had no previous experience. Finding a solution for the online BA program meant the library was ready to offer streaming films on reserve when Baruch introduced a film studies minor.
COMMITMENT TO CHANGE

Once libraries decide to collaborate, they must wholeheartedly commit to the partnership. “Real change requires real change,” says David Lewis, dean of the University Library at Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis, in “A Strategy for Academic Libraries in the First Quarter of the 21st Century” (College & Research Libraries). “Incremental adjustments at the margins will not suffice, alterations in fundamental practice will be needed.”

Jim Neal, vice president for information services and university librarian at Columbia University, articulated a similar foundation-changing approach, suggesting that libraries need “radical collaboration” that goes far beyond what they have attempted so far. “We must go to a point when we have collaborated so tightly there is no going back and the only rational way forward is to continue to work together.” In some less successful collaborations, the central problem has been that the stakes were so small that it was possible for one or more of the collaborators to just walk away at the first sign of a problem.

RECAP: A STUDY IN EFFECTIVE COLLABORATION

The ReCAP project exemplifies fully committed library collaboration. The New York Public Library (NYPL), Princeton University, and Columbia University joined forces to develop the Research Collections and Preservation Consortium (ReCAP) off-campus shelving facility. With more than ten million items stored at Princeton’s Plainsboro, NJ, campus, ReCAP has grown to become the largest high-density shelving facility in the nation. By transferring parts of the members’ collections to off-site storage, ReCAP allowed the partners to accommodate new acquisitions, provide more study space, and better preserve historical collections at their home institutions.

At the outset of the ReCAP project, each partner realized it was entering into a relationship that would need to be sustained for generations. Planning efforts involved gaining the approval of many layers of organization within the library, all the way through the most senior management for each, as well as joint and independent consultations with legal counsel, facilities planners, and architects. Institutional support from each partner helped integrate the project across all administrative levels and ensured payment of the consortium’s operating expenses.

While each ReCAP partner had varying organizational styles, their strengths were complementary. Princeton had good relations with its town community and the land, which enabled Columbia and NYPL to address their more critical and immediate space needs (albeit at the cost of some controversy owing to ongoing criticism from those who dislike seeing part of NYPL’s research collection move off-site). NYPL brought expertise in operations, especially physical delivery of materials. Columbia provided staff experienced in building and operating high-density shelving facilities and an organizational culture that embraces interinstitutional collaboration. Management was outsourced to Princeton, including hiring the ReCAP facility’s employees, while a shared governance structure controlled the policy and budget. This shared management structure—an autonomous governing body of senior leadership that guides the project and distributes authority—was an important factor in ReCAP’s ability to improve continuously the way it works, as outlined in the Center for Research Libraries’ Best Practices in Cooperative Collection Development.
The project became operationally successful quickly. It now handles up to 1,000 requests daily from the three institutions that store materials there. Also, plans are in the works to create additional storage to accommodate an additional ten million to 13 million volumes, as the Chronicle of Higher Education reported this March.

The scale and success of the ReCAP collaboration highlights the crucial factors that make it work. Among them, tremendous advances in technology have brought down the costs of managing large enterprises. This has allowed organizations to become huge.

As relationships became more firmly established, two of the ReCAP partners—NYPL and Columbia—joined with New York University (NYU) to found the Manhattan Research Library Initiative (MARLI). MARLI allows for direct on-site borrowing by scholars at Columbia and NYU as well as at NYPL, marking the first time that the research collections from NYPL have been allowed to circulate. Moreover, scholars not affiliated with either of the universities may, after approval by NYPL, borrow materials directly on-site at any of the three partner libraries. As Jennifer Rowley outlined in Librarianship in Times of Crisis (Emerald, 2011), the evolution of ReCAP into MARLI demonstrates the value of trust, particularly when a partnership is involved in creating new services where there is greater risk.

SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATIONS ADD VALUE

While the challenges to libraries and higher education remain daunting, working together collaboratively, we face “a moment of opportunity that, if seized and capitalized upon, can place the library at the center of the academic and scholarly mission of the university,” as Daphnée Rentfrow said in No Brief Candle: Reconceiving Research Libraries for the 21st Century (CLIR, 2008). A strong history and culture of collaboration and heeding the lessons that previous collaborations teach us will put libraries in an optimal position to make the most of this moment.

If we don’t join in creating the future, we may find that the future does not include us. We can make ourselves an integral part of the future by working together. Collaboration, as much as competition, is here to stay. By scrutinizing each project’s potential to add to the bottom line and paying attention to human factors like trust, commitment, and a culture of collaboration, we can increase our chances of leading our partnerships to innovation, forging new value rather than just perpetuating the status quo.

Irene Gashurov is communications writer for the Office of Library Services, City University of New York (CUNY). She holds advanced degrees in library science and linguistics from Columbia University. She has worked as editorial director for Columbia University Medical Center and the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation, as a reporter at Fortune, copy editor at Time, and as research librarian at the Time Inc. Library. Curtis L. Kendrick is University Dean for Libraries and Information Resources, CUNY. He works in concert with the Council of Chief Librarians and other university administrators to enhance library system funding, resources, programs, and services. He has also held library management positions at Columbia, Harvard, and Stony Brook Universities, and Oberlin College. A graduate of Brown University, Kendrick earned his MLS from Simmons College and his MBA from Emory University. This article builds on a shorter presentation by Kendrick to the State University of New York Librarians’ Association.

This article was published in Library Journal’s October 1, 2013 issue. Subscribe today and save up to 35% off the regular subscription rate.


Comments

baruch student says:
November 7, 2013 at 6:23 am

This is one of the worst libraries among colleges in New York City. It has not been repaired since Hurricane Sandy. It misappropriate funds every semester. The wifi system has not
worked for two systems. The chief librarian is unresponsive. The overcharge for use of facilities that constantly fail. The library is an insult to public colleges and the backward in all its technology. It should be avoided, and the college should be avoided, too.