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Restructuring Library Collaboration

Facing Challenges, Leveraging Opportunity

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Scale Is Existential

- Libraries have long sought scale beyond their own institution
- They created an array of consortia and other collaborative vehicles
- The collections and services needed by academia have changed steadily
- Libraries face a broader information landscape replete with competition
- For libraries today, scale is existential

Organizations should expect their collaborative vehicles to stay in sync with changes in both their own objectives and the broader context in which they operate.



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ISSUE BRIEF

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Restructuring Library Collaboration Strategy, Membership, Governance

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Academic libraries typically serve individual higher education institutions, yet their objectives require that they achieve greater negotiating power, more efficient distribution of collections, and stronger systems and services than even the largest academic library can provide itself. As a result, academic libraries have sought for more than a century to generate cross-institutional scale. In this paper, I examine efforts to generate that scale, including consortia and other membership organizations, which collectively I term “collaborative vehicles.” Yet collaboration is not good in itself, but rather only insofar as it supports libraries’ objectives as they develop and change over time. One of the great challenges facing academic library leaders is their understandable desire

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History

Resource Sharing

The dream of the universal collection, delivered as efficiently and seamlessly as systems enable

Resource Sharing

- Interlibrary lending networks
- Union catalogs to increase the efficiency of ILL
- Eventually, various kinds of library systems to bring these to the digital environment

CRL

- Shared offsite storage for a small group of institutions (“the Midwest Interlibrary Center”)
- Free rider problem grew
- Eventually expanded nationally
- Mission necessarily changed

Shared Print

- Managing down print collections in a digital environment
- Some shared facilities, but growing interest in stated commitments
- Journals, books, and data

Shared Systems

Reducing redundancy, enabling collaboration, ensuring access

Library of Congress

- The need for scale in collections description efforts
- LC began distributing catalog cards to enable local libraries to populate their own catalogs more efficiently

OCLC

- Systems infrastructure, peer to peer network, and business model
- Membership organization
- Role and value of metadata have shifted in a digital content environment
- “Networks” substantially reorganized; transform to ILS provider

ILS

- Many started at individual institutions, then were commercialized
- Cloud-based multi-tenant models can be collaboration enablers
- Commercial imperatives have led in the adoption of more advanced architectures and broader adoption

Shared Collections

Controlling spend, maximizing breadth, widening access

Print History

- A group of institutions buys only one copy of an item that can then be shared
- Numerous consortial initiatives
- RLG Conspectus

Shared Licensing

- Libraries wish to drive down price, achieve other objectives
- Providers wish to reduce the cost of sales
- Sometimes managed through core funding, more often on an opt-in basis

Shared Preservation

- HathiTrust preserves scanned print collections
- Community control enables important new services
- Somewhat similar models from other consortia

Organizational Models and Some Limitations

Product & Service Organizations

- Provide a technology-enabled product or service offering
- Can be organized on a profit-seeking or not-for-profit basis
- Some library collaborations offer products and services
- In some cases, they compete against others in the marketplace
- In a competitive environment, success requires some degree of agility

Trust Networks

- Trust is the most substantial intangible asset of these organizations
- Especially important for longest term commitments, ie preservation.
- Durability across members' leadership transitions can be a challenge
- Members often want their trust network to do more
- But not every membership community or governance structure is well suited to every purpose

Consortia

Groups of many libraries

- Often membership organizations, typically with library directors in governance roles, with an annual membership fee
- Alternatively, university systems offices, sometimes with elaborate advisory bodies, often with central state funding
- Many were founded during the print era, with a resulting regional structure
- Most consortia have licensing activity, often with additional other roles

Membership Organizations

Membership models tend to be durable due to a kind of peer pressure to be in the club.

Inclusive Governance

- Difficult to set an unambiguous strategic direction
- Challenging to follow that direction purposefully over a sustained period of time.

Membership Fee

- Unconnected from any single product or service
- Members can become jaded about the value of the price they are paying.
- Especially problematic if the work has drifted from its original objective or is no longer suited to a member's current priorities.

Changes and Challenges

Realign with the university

Contribute directly to ...

- student success,
- research excellence,
- community development

In a time of pandemic,
disruption, and austerity.



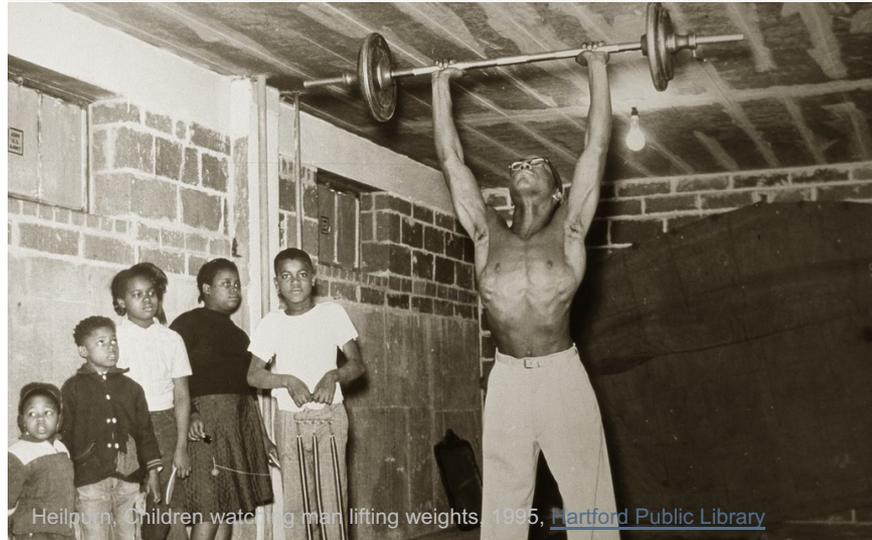
Group of offering bearers, ca. 1981–1975 B.C.,
[Metropolitan Museum of Art](#).

Competition & Transformation

Commercial competitors have built user-centric systems, i.e. for discovery and access

Academic libraries have vital roles in support of stewardship, long-form reading, and other “legacy” functions

And yet they must transform



Essential Transformations

Print

Electronic

Local

Shared

Licensed

Open

General

Distinctive

Collections

Users

Access

Workflows

Selector

Enabler

Provider

Partner

Organizational Transformation

Reducing the membership fee burden on academic libraries and other member categories is at least one of the drivers.

Mergers and Closures

- DPN sunsetted
- DuraSpace merging into Lyrisis
- NFAIS merged into NISO
- IDPF/W3C merged

And many more pivots

- DPLA
- AAP/PSP
- Many consortia

Concluding Observations

Finances

Value

- The value of any enterprise's work often tends to decline with time
- New service models are needed
- Libraries only benefit from cross-institutional scale by transforming their work, staffing, and structure.
- This degree of reliance is ultimately hard for individual libraries to accept
- Pressure to show value and differentiate against peers

Funding

- Scrutiny of library budgets even before the current crisis
- Membership crisis
- And yet collaborative undertakings require not only financial stability on an operating level but also need to be capitalized well enough to innovative
- Reserves and working capital are essential

Structure

Organizational Proliferation

- New organizations are created for new purposes
- The library profession has chosen to recognize and reward leaders for creating new organizations
- The recent wave of mergers and closures probably should continue

Agility vs. Inclusion

- Inclusively governed trust networks are being asked to deliver efficiently in a competitive environment.
- Not easy to do both.
- Membership models are ill-suited to product organizations and marketplace competition.
- The key question is whether to optimize for *strategic agility* or *inclusive governance*.

Governance

Recruiting and Selection

- Does the board have sufficient alignment on organizational purpose to hire accordingly?
- Is the board (typically library directors) prepared to delegate strategy and spending to a CEO?
- Or, is the board in reality simply seeking a strong project manager?
- What motivates a strong candidate to seek a role leading a collaboration?

The Board's Role

- Its principal role is to provide fiduciary oversight and management accountability
- Board governance should regularly assess organizational purpose and strategy.

Organizations should expect their collaborative vehicles to stay in sync with changes in both their own objectives and the broader context in which they operate.

Thank You

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