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Back to the Future of Cooperative Collection Development (an Editorial)

Glenda A. Thornton

Cleveland State University, g.thornton@csuohio.edu

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An Editorial

Back to the Future of Cooperative Collection Development

I do not know when librarians first began to look for ways to cooperatively develop their collections, but I do know, from personal experience, that this important effort has been going on for at least the past thirty years. Well, that is, at least *talk* about this important activity has been going on. Until the fairly recent emergence of online resources, successful cooperative collection activities were not numerous. This was initially due to fact that it was simply difficult to physically share materials collected in a cooperative manner over any significant distance, not to mention complicating factors such as ownership, collection statistics, and, of course, political and psychological barriers.

Given just these few problems, it is actually remarkable that any significant advances were made prior to the advent of the Internet and the ability of groups of libraries to collectively purchase materials that could be shared in a timely manner, (i.e., accessed instantaneously by all partners via the Internet). Even given the total removal, in the digital world, of the physical barrier of where a resource resides, the question remains as to whether or not an individual library can claim “ownership” of consortially purchased materials. Fortunately, the need to answer this particular question in order to demonstrate the quantity of materials actually owned by any one library is beginning to lose some, but not all, of its importance.

As demonstrated by the variety of collaborative collection development projects described in volume 28 of *Collection Management* (2003), a sudden burst of truly successful cooperative activities has been enabled by the ability of partners to easily share digital resources. This ability breathed new life into already existing consortia and gave new incentives for the creation of additional consortia. Even though all of the difficulties of sharing electronic journals,

indexes, and articles via consortium deals have not yet been fully resolved, it is clear that this is a successful model for libraries and, it seems, for at least some of the suppliers. Coming rather quickly upon the heels of electronic serials have been electronic books. These materials have proven a bit more difficult to share, not because of the technology, but, in part, due to the supplier's need to earn a profit, be that supplier the publisher or a middleman. Models to achieve adequate profits for the supplier have not been as easy to develop due, in part, to the unpredictable nature of the use of monographic materials, especially when use is a factor in the pricing structure.

In addition to electronic journals, indexes, articles, and books, we are beginning to see additional digital resources that can also be purchased or licensed by library consortia. Some of these include motion pictures, still images, music, and other types of digitized information such as media scripts, oral histories, and no doubt, many other types of information packets as well.

Yet, as John Haar states in his *Collection Management* report on the state of cooperative collection development, "thanks to the proliferation of shared electronic purchasing, collaboration is flourishing. But if we assess only the traditional forms of cooperative collection development, principally joint print selection and storage, the picture is considerably less sanguine. In fact, there is little to convince us that much has changed.... Cooperative collection development characterized by formal, distributed assignment of areas of concentration is still rare, and, for the most part, narrowly focused on area studies" (2003, p. 190). While Haar goes on to suggest that additional progress is possible, I can't help but look over my own experiences of the past thirty years and agree with Edward Evans statement that, "perhaps the biggest barrier to cooperative collection building is people" (*Developing Library and Information Center Collections*, 3rd ed., 1995, p. 445).

If this is the case, and I believe that it is, then perhaps librarians need to look for new ways to initiate cooperative collection development projects. With this in mind, I would like to suggest some possibilities. Perhaps a new wave of collaborative collection development projects might be developed based upon relationships first, and I don't mean just between librarians at partnering institutions. Consider the possibility of gathering together faculty members with similar scholarly interests from different institutions to allow them to discuss how collections might be developed, cooperatively. Thirty years ago acquisition budgets, at least at the major research libraries, were quite flush. Today, however, that is no longer the case for most academic libraries. I suspect that faculty members at most academic institutions have long come to realize that their libraries can't have everything that they need. I base this comment upon my own experience at Cleveland State University, an OhioLINK member, where faculty members almost always recognize that many of the books they need are coming to them from other OhioLINK libraries. A common refrain that I hear, especially during budget crisis is, "whatever you do, don't cut OhioLINK!"

So, what if faculty members from the history departments of neighboring institutions were invited to discuss what it would take for two or more libraries to develop comprehensive history collections in specified areas? What about political science, psychology, anthropology, etc.? An arranged visit, food, and an opportunity to actively participate might lead to new possibilities for a variety of cooperative activities, such as shared traveling exhibits or book talks. Would it take, for example, reserved parking spaces on collaborating campuses, free access to a library copy machine at a partnering institution, a tour of the library, a dedicated faculty carrel or study room, and/or an assigned collection development librarian who communicates with the faculties at ALL partnering institutions? Would it take full library privileges for faculty

members at the participating libraries? Mileage for travel when other methods for delivering materials were too slow for a particular use? Could such opportunities lead to other collaborations between academic departments, perhaps distance learning activities through videoconferencing. Might not the library be seen as a campus leader in facilitating opportunities for academic cooperation?

Rather than continue to explore ways to divide up collecting responsibilities for physical materials—an approach that has had minimal success for over thirty years, let's try to look at this as if we were inventing our libraries today. If the *2003 OCLC Environmental Scan: Pattern Recognition* is correct, it may be some time before funding for the “public good” is plentiful again, if ever. Were we building our libraries today, would we even for a moment consider trying to acquire all possible human knowledge? Would our mission statements read, “to select, acquire, organize, and provide access to information” or as Ross Atkinson has suggested in his *Collection Management* article, would they read, “to provide effective access to locally needed information” (2003, p. 9)? How might we define “effective access” if we were starting out today?

Many of us are learning that our university and college administrators are finding it harder and harder to increase library acquisitions budgets so that we can pay for quality material. Additionally, they are regularly reading popular reports about how Google searches of the Internet seem to be good enough for many students. They see that traffic to the library has diminished in some cases, and they read reports that no one is reading as much as they once did (“Literary reading is declining faster than before, arts endowment’s new report says,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Friday, July 09, 2004). What is a cash-strapped university administrator to do? A better question yet is how will librarians respond? I don’t think that we can just continue

to approach our problems from the same perspectives as we have done in the past. As Atkinson concluded in his *Collection Management* article, “Cooperation is, somewhat paradoxically, one of the few competitive advantages libraries have. Such cooperation does indeed entail significant risks for those libraries bold enough to engage in it—but those risks are in fact negligible, in comparison with the dangers libraries will surely encounter by continuing to insist that they should each face the future alone” (2003, p. 19).

In conclusion, I encourage librarians everywhere to look at the mission of our libraries with new eyes. How would we achieve our goals today if we didn’t have thousands of years of history behind us? How can we overcome the psychological barriers that are preventing us from finding new approaches to providing our users with access to information? Can we find ways to collaborate more with our faculty colleagues and thus become ever more central to our institution’s core missions?

Glenda Thornton, Ph.D.

Director, Cleveland State University Library