Triumphs and Travails: The Challenges of Institutional Collaboration

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Abstract: This article describes a collaboration funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. The grant, awarded to a Lawrence, Kansas Jr. High School, partnered a university research library, a group of Jr. High School teachers, a local community museum and a city newspaper. The object of the grant was to produce a local-history web site, developed by teachers, and used as an educational tool by secondary school students. The author details the history of the partnership and explains how an understanding of institutional cultures and a clarification of roles brought the project to fruition.

Introduction

Anyone who has tasted the sweet success of a multi-institutional partnership knows that it is no exaggeration to name it a triumph. At the same time, those same people have no doubt experienced new levels of frustration and aggravation while working through the collaborative process. As institutions continue to pursue the ever-beckoning notion of collaboration, both challenges and opportunities must be embraced. As can be seen through a recently completed grant-funded partnership involving the University of Kansas, the advantages of multi-institutional collaborations are many, but are not without challenges.

Key Collaborations

Dr. Robert Martin, director of the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) calls collaboration "the emerging strategy of the 21st century "[1] and so it has become as collaborative digital projects emerge among libraries and allied organizations. Funding sponsors are on the lookout for these collaborations. They like the idea of merging the collections of different cultural agencies to create rich, complete educational tools that satisfy the research needs of all learners. A look at the collaborations page on the IMLS web site or the project pages at the National Endowment of the Humanities (NEH) or the National Science Foundation (NSF) suggests the potentially gratifying outcome of such partnerships.

Institutions also favor collaborations. Because they attract funding and may lead to future partnerships that promote collections and services, the list of potential benefits is extensive. As noted in the Digital Initiatives of the Research Library Group (RLG) in 1996, "Collaboration means sharing work and expenses, as well as benefits -- thereby getting the most of the money and effort each player expends." [2] Browse the online collections found at the University of California, Berkeley and the Colorado Digitization Program to see examples of the valuable resources created through collaborative efforts.

As the federal grant agency for libraries and museums, IMLS works to highlight the contributions made by institutions across the country. Martin speaks of the "blurring of boundaries"[3] between cultural institutions as they begin to share resources. IMLS funds several partnerships between

libraries and museums each year. But the merging of institutional boundaries doesn't stop with libraries and museums; it extends to archives, school districts, businesses and other organizations.

If collaborations are indeed in favor because they promise advantages to the partner institutions and hold such great potential for producing content-rich educational tools, why is it that many institutions new to the collaborative process are reporting their initial enthusiasm and anticipation dampened early in the game? Why do experienced collaborators sometimes greet a new collaborative effort with hesitation, if not trepidation?

This is answered in part by the term "collaboration" itself. A standard dictionary lists three definitions of the word. The first is "to work together," the second, "to willingly assist the enemy," and the third, "to cooperate with an agency with which one is not immediately connected."[4] by considering all three meanings, one begins to capture the flavor of the collaborative environment. It is unlikely to find any institutional collaborators who would consider describing partners as the "enemy," but the notion of "blurring the boundaries" of established institutional cultures begs the consideration of several important issues. Each institution has its own mission and its own community and responsibilities to that community – which contribute to the culture that forms around and within the community. To fulfill the institutional mission, procedures that ensure success must be set and followed. When cultural agencies attempt to align their missions, the individual agendas of each partner will, of course, come to the fore. In his workshop, Successful Collaborative Projects, Dr. Robert P. Lowman of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, emphasizes team building and the importance of working towards a common goal in order to achieve a successful collaboration.[5]

The Kansas Experience

The Spencer Research Library at the University of Kansas is closely involved in collaborative, grant-funded, digital resource sharing projects awarded by both IMLS and the NEH. To illustrate the challenges and opportunities of collaboration, this article examines details from the Schools

for a New Millennium grant, *Community Connections*, which the Spencer Library has been involved in since 2000. This grant was awarded to West Junior High School in Lawrence, KS by the NEH, the key mission of which was to provide electronic access to resources documenting the Lawrence area's rich history and not available within the walls of the public school. A local-history web site would be developed by and for students and teachers, and would draw from the collections of local archival, library and museum repositories of regional history. The grant provided funding for salaries, consultant fees, travel, supplies and other miscellaneous costs. The collaboration began with a group of teachers who shared the high expectations - and the inflexible schedule - of a typical public school system. Their imaginations soared as they discovered the rich materials available to learners through the electronic collections of institutions worldwide. Their dream of building a similar resource promoting local history took shape. The author of the grant, the West Junior High School librarian, would serve as the leader of the project, coordinating the work of the teachers with repository staff members in an attempt to bring together resources, content contribution and design.

The initial content contributor was the Watkins Community Museum, used regularly by the Lawrence educational community and housing a wealth of local-history materials, albeit with a small staff and low operating budget. The Spencer Research Library, a university-based archival, regional history and special collections facility, served as consultant for digitization practices, rare book handling and conservation. The Spencer Library later moved from consultation services to content contribution as collaborators realized that elements of the Spencer's collections would round out the content of the anticipated digital collection.

The final partner was the Lawrence Journal World, the daily, commercial newspaper for the city of Lawrence. The Journal World's key role was to host the Community Connections web site after first creating the database used to collect data for all selected materials. Journal World staff also provided consultation services on technical issues and copyright concerns for the collaborating commercial and non-commercial partners.

While all partners in this collaboration embraced the goal of providing electronic access to primary sources and enriching the classroom experience of young researchers, attaining this

goal, even taking the first steps, proved more challenging than anyone suspected. As suggested by L.M. Simmons, Jr. in his editorial article, *Collaboration Dreams*, "collaboration is what one hopes to achieve but must labor to reach."[6] All partners soon learned that identifying the cultural differences among institutions, understanding the value of consultants, and recognizing individual institutional agendas and expectations would combine to slow the project to a crawl. Initially, cultural differences were not even addressed, much less fully considered. Goals were shared, but individual agendas for reaching them, based on institutional assumptions and practices proved very different.

Copyright was the first issue to show itself as a potential boundary between member institutions.

- Until the grant project, copyright issues seemed to have seldom surfaced for the Watkins Museum. Accurate donor record-keeping was sporadic, at best, and the museum's mission of making local-history materials available to its constituents was, at times, suggestive of copyright implication. The small staff was focused more on outreach services and providing quick, easy access to the collections and less on documentation or long-term conservation and preservation.

- The staff of the Spencer Library was familiar with intellectual property issues and had policies and procedures in place to assure copyright compliance and avoid potential infringement implications. However, the Spencer's reputation for outreach and visibility in the Lawrence community fell far short of its potential.

- The school coordinator understood the potential copyright implications, but also had grant deadlines to consider, as well as a group of educators eager to develop curriculum material for use in the classroom in the upcoming semester.

The grant called for compiling 19th century photographs and other materials on the project web site. It was decided that a good faith effort would be made to trace ownership of selected items and that a copyright disclaimer stating this effort would be included on the site. Grant partners grappled over the need for this step, the logistics of it and who would provide legal counsel. In the end, the school district hired, with grant money and on a temporary/free-lance basis, a law student from the University of Kansas. This student was able to guide a grant-funded assistant,

working with the museum, through the process of identifying public domain items, making a good faith effort to provide background documentation and weeding out problematic materials.

The copyright issue, after a laborious effort, ended in a small triumph. The project web site made available copyright disclaimers from all contributing institutions; the school coordinator had the satisfaction of knowing that accurate ownership and crediting information was available for young researchers; and the community museum came away, for the first time, with a copyright disclaimer and a full set of donor records for selected project materials, as well as a *Deed of Gift* form for use with future donations.

The desire for, and heavy reliance on, online materials resulted in some cultural tension among member institutions. While school educators were eager to get materials digitized and create online surrogates of history collections, staff members at both the Watkins Museum and the Spencer Library were looking for new ways to bring students into their institutions to experience, first hand, the full range of resources housed there. The library and museum shared a concern that quality learning might not be fully reached in the move from extensive hands-on access to a more limited online access.

In actuality, digital resource sharing is working to everyone's benefit. As more and more material becomes available online, educators are using these resources in their classrooms and professors and students, alike, are gaining a new appreciation of the vast array of rich learning tools found in libraries and museums. To promote access to archival, rare and museum collections - to capture this new community of learners - a digital presence is critical. Libraries, museums and archives are able to promote their collections to researchers of all ages, and institutions with holdings well-represented online potentially increase the number of visitors coming in to see the actual materials discovered electronically.

Other cultural issues confronting member institutions concerned the expectations of the participating institutions such as: the amount of material that may be requested, the expected turnaround times for processing associated with limited staff and other resources. These challenges created a barrier that was difficult to see beyond. For example:

- To the surprise of the teachers, many of the materials selected for the project were located in the Spencer Library rather than the Watkins museum. With a renewed vigor and a clear vision, the teachers made scores of requests from the Spencer collections, whose staff had not planned for this stream of requests.

- Staff and resources became an issue when the Spencer's role in the project moved from one of consultation services to major content contribution. Since the Library was not scheduled to receive funding when the grant was written, and because it had staff responsible for scanning and metadata creation, the Spencer had to use its own resources to convert its materials to electronic format.

In the end, the project expectation issues were resolved successfully – the institutional boundaries did indeed dissolve. Spencer staff provided an orientation session to ward off potential procedural misunderstandings. This session covered selection, evaluation and digitization processes for collaborating teachers. Teachers revisited their selection lists, reduced the number of items sought by considering curriculum needs over resource availability, and prioritized the requests based on what was then a fuller understanding of working with primary resources. Preservation and access considerations were also taken into account as were the many issues surrounding online publication. At the same time, by working closely with teachers, the Spencer staff was given a fresh look at collections long-held by the library. New ways were found to repurpose material electronically and, consequently, enhance learning among middle-school aged children. Staff then established an evaluation and digitization workflow. The orientation process resulted in a model that prepared the Library for future collaborations and the ability to see its collections through the eyes of the classroom educator. As the Illinois Digital Cultural Heritage Community discovered in its collaboration among libraries, museums and schools, "the project helped the partners see how various parties might relate to artifacts, documents, and their descriptions and interpretations in different ways, depending on their institutional perspective (school, museum or library) and the intended use of the information."[7]

Summary

In summary, when institutions collaborate, particularly those with very different cultures, the following point the way to success:

- Choose a goal that all institutions are committed to and feel strongly about achieving. In a collaboration, partners must be able to see beyond difficulties to achieve the end product and what it will accomplish.

- Attempt to identify the cultural differences between institutions from the outset. Get those differences out on the table and start looking for ways to cross boundaries rather than accentuate them.

- Understand that it may be necessary to bring in outside help as issues present themselves. Make sure that grant proposasl include room for yet to be defined assistance of this kind.

- Recognize that every institution has its own agenda based on the community it serves. This is inevitable; its what makes each of us good at what we do. Find the strengths of each partner. Those strengths are what makes them successful in their own community and are the gifts they bring to the collaborative effort.

With the *Community Connections* grant project, it took several months to come to terms with the individual agendas as well as the needs and concerns each institution brought to the table. In the end, a clarification of roles, an understanding of needs as well as strengths, funding for necessary consultants and project assistants, along with a very sincere and shared belief in, "doing it for the students," has brought the project to a triumphant conclusion.

Consider looking beyond your own institution's boundaries to the rich resources found in neighboring institutions. Collaborations can result in high quality products that fulfill the objectives of all players and produce content-rich digital collections for current and future learners.

Works Cited:

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3. Ibid.

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Table I

Keys to Successful Collaborating

♦ Define shared vision and goal
♦ Identify cultural differences between institutions
♦ Recognize every institution has its own agenda
♦ Identify strengths and weaknesses and clarify project roles of
  each partner
♦ Understand need for additional project assistants or consultants

Table II

Online Resources

♦ Institute of Museum and Library Services, http://www.imls.gov/
♦ National Endowment of the Humanities, http://www.neh.gov/
♦ National Science Foundation, http://www.nsf.gov/
♦ University of California, Berkeley, http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/
♦ Colorado Digitization Program, http://www.cdpheritage.org/
♦ Community Connections,
  http://history.lawrence.com/project/community/collections.html
♦ Spencer Research Library, http://spencer.lib.ku.edu/
♦ Watkins Community Museum, http://www.watkinsmuseum.org/
♦ Lawrence Journal World, http://www.ljworld.com/
♦ West Junior High School, http://schools.usd497.org/wjhs/