DEEP COOPERATION:
A REPORT ON SUCCESSFUL COOPERATIVE STRATEGIES

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June 4, 2002
Kansas City

The predisposition of librarians to cooperate with one another is part of the bedrock of our profession. Very few of us believe that our individual libraries can fully support the needs of our users alone. The rapid increase of information, escalating prices, enabling technology, and institutions like OCLC have fueled both our need and our ability to cooperate. But in most cases, the cooperation that we engage in is only skin deep. It is additive but not transformative. What I would like to share with you today are several examples of a deeper and more profound cooperation that I have had the pleasure of working with. By "deep cooperation," I mean an agreement between one or more institutionally independent libraries that affects each in a long-term and transformational way.

From 1993-1996, I was the College Librarian at Kenyon College, one of the high-quality but small private liberal arts colleges in Ohio. There were four other very similar small private liberal arts colleges within a two-hour drive of Kenyon. Each of us had similar sized budgets, collections, student bodies, faculty sizes, and programs of study. Kenyon used the DRA automated library system, while the others all had their own Innovative Interfaces systems.

At that time the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation was offering grants to colleges to encourage them to become involved in cooperative ventures with other colleges. Kenyon's President requested that campus administrators develop possible grant proposals for Mellon. The librarians at Denison, The College of Wooster, Kenyon, and Oberlin immediately began to develop a cooperative proposal. It quickly became apparent that the library proposal would hold the best chance of being funded by Mellon.

Our final proposal to Mellon was that the four libraries (Oberlin chose not to join) would merge our individual automated systems into one Innovative Interfaces system, hosted by Denison University. Frame-relay service would be used to support communications among us. Mellon awarded the consortium over $800,000 to make this vision a reality. The savings per institution were significant: merging our systems eliminated redundant hardware, decreased the number of systems staff, saved money in service contracts, and enabled us to join OhioLINK as a single institution instead of purchasing separate memberships. OhioLINK was the state-supported library network that provided many databases, a book and document delivery service, and a virtual catalog of all its members.
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Once we had agreed to this course, there was no turning back. Each library had a vested interest in making this cooperative agreement work, since the cost of ever reestablishing our independent automated systems would never be supported by our administrations. Our libraries were truly transformed at a very profound level, and it meant a personal commitment by the directors to work together and by our staffs to communicate on a much more intense level.

Let me illustrate "deep cooperation" by using acquisitions as an example. Prior to this agreement, each of the four participating libraries acquired about 6000 monograph titles per year. A comparative study of our acquisitions found about a 60% overlap in what the libraries purchased, since our academic programs were so similar. So we approached our faculty (who did most of the book selection) and asked them how they would feel if the four libraries would only purchase one or two copies of certain books, guaranteeing delivery among the institutions within two days. The faculty immediately saw this as an opportunity to increase the total number of unique titles available to them and readily agreed to the idea.

Since book orders from each library appeared in the merged catalog, it was easy for acquisitions staff to see if a book had been already ordered by another library. We modified our book order cards to give the faculty three choices: one, order this book to be held at my library; two, order this until there are X copies in the system; three, order another selection if this book is already on order at one of the other libraries. Over time, we found that a rather high percentage of faculty orders indicated that other books could be ordered if the book was in the system at another library.

So deep cooperation between our four libraries now took on a new complexion, since not only were our technological infrastructures being changed, but also the very nature of our collections were being transformed. As time progressed, our cooperative collection development policies would make us ever more co-dependent. But our collections could be far more rich and unique because of this dependence, and we could also shift segments of our collections between campuses depending on what courses were being taught each semester.

Additionally, because of the OhioLINK book delivery service and because our catalogs showed the merged holdings of all OhioLINK libraries, ordering materials from any library in the system was a keystroke away. Our interlibrary loan usage skyrocketed, from about 3,000 loans annually to about 3,000 loans per month. Clearly, we had a great success on our hands.

Though this case shows the value of "deep cooperation," I hasten to add that it was not always easy. Many times during the planning and development stages, our fears would come to the surface, and I remember a number of days when I spend hours exchanging emails with the other directors, discussing the "what ifs" of our venture.

In 1996 I left Kenyon for Vanderbilt. When I arrived, I found that Vanderbilt had no cooperative agreements with other libraries. Indeed, the culture of the campus was that

we were the flagship private institution in the state, and we needed no partnerships, indeed we saw them as deleterious. Vanderbilt had the only research library in Nashville and was surrounded by a number of small liberal arts colleges, three state universities with large enrollments, and a weak and neglected public library. After some years of being open to the public, increased pressure on our resources and staff resulted in a decision in 1979 to close the library to the public; access was only provided to students, faculty, staff, or alumni of Vanderbilt. I was under constant pressure from the community to reinstitute the policy of broader access, and the mayor of Nashville had recently criticized the institution for its lack of cooperation and involvement in the community. So the time was right for change. I checked our interlibrary loan statistics and found that, contrary to our expectations, Vanderbilt students and faculty had actually borrowed more material from surrounding libraries than they had from us. We had also recalled over 10,000 books annually from our borrowers because another borrower had requested them. The needed book might easily have been on the shelf of another Nashville-area library.

The library had already purchased the SiteSearch software from OCLC. It allows a Z39.50 search of other catalogs, so I proposed to the administration that we host a virtual catalog for other academic libraries within a 50-mile radius of Nashville. The single requirement was that the library have, or be willing to purchase, software that was Z39.50-compatible. In addition to those academic institutions, we invited the public library, and via their system, the Nashville public schools, to join. The director of the public library was also relatively new to Nashville, and with her help, we formed the Nashville Area Library Alliance, which today includes nineteen area institutions, all of them academic or public libraries within 50 miles of Nashville.

NALA also contracted for book delivery service three days a week, and we now have thirteen NALA members participating in Project Athena, our virtual library catalog. Via Athena, Vanderbilt is a net lender to the other libraries, but only by a small margin. Because of the virtual catalog, it is easy to see which library has a book on its shelf, and unlike before, Vanderbilt is not seen as the only source of scholarly and research materials in Nashville.

In practice, we have found that Vanderbilt's Athena borrowing tends to be additional copies of recent imprints that we own, but which are checked out. In many cases, we thus borrow via Athena in lieu of recalls. Other libraries in Athena tend to borrow books from us that are more esoteric and not in high demand. As a result of this "deep cooperation," criticism about lack of access to our library by outsiders has all but disappeared. (We have also recently offered each NALA member library five complementary library access cards to be loaned to their faculty, students, and other users.)

Another cooperative effort was already in place. The University of Tennessee at Knoxville and the University of Kentucky had formed the Information Alliance to foster staff development and communications between their staff. When I arrived at Vanderbilt, I immediately asked if we might join with them as the third ARL library in the region.

They graciously permitted us to join. Almost immediately we began talking about developing additional cooperative programs among our libraries. UTK and UK both purchased SiteSearch and set up servers to point to the other two institutions and Vanderbilt did the same. We called the new virtual catalog IRIS and added a button to each of our homepages. We contracted for delivery service among our libraries and were off and running, creating a rich resource for our faculty and students. Vanderbilt has 2.3 million volumes, and when you add the holdings of NALA, we increase our accessible holdings to 5 million volumes. The holdings of the other Information Alliance libraries add 6 million to that total. Access to 11 million volumes (even though quite a few are duplicates) is quite a rich resource for our users for a relatively small investment.

The three Information Alliance Libraries are each members of the Association of Southeastern Research Libraries, a group of 42 of the largest research libraries in Solinet's territory. A number of members heard about the virtual catalog of the Information Alliance and asked to join. So we have changed IRIS to an expanded virtual catalog called KUDZU (we cover the South) which today has 16 member libraries plus the Center for Research Libraries, providing access to 23 million volumes and growing. KUDZU has just contracted with Lanter as our delivery provider, and we are off and running. While the cost of each of these agreements and service has been relatively low, they have cost a fair amount of staff time.

I should also mention that bibliographers from Kentucky, Tennessee and Vanderbilt have been meeting on a regular basis to see how we might develop a program of cooperative collection development. We have had moderate success overall, but I can point to success in one specific subject area. Our German bibliographers met and decided that none of us could afford to purchase all modern German authors, but if we each purchased one-third of the authors, then between us we could do a much better job of meeting research needs. The bibliographers developed a database of modern German authors to keep track of which authors each of us will purchase. Our music, English, and science bibliographers have also met, but equally successful results have not yet resulted. I am optimistic that progress in these areas is possible.

There are several other cooperative areas in development. Our serials librarians have worked on combining runs of broken and ceased serials in only one institution, but this has proved very labor intensive, and we have not made much progress. On another front, we held a meeting last fall of our special collections librarians, systems staff, and preservation staff. This group is in the early stages of thinking about how we might work together to develop expertise and equipment for digital preservation. Additionally, ASERL is talking about developing cooperative virtual reference, whereby we might all purchase the same software and possibly fund a central reference service based at one of our institutions that would offer night and weekend service to all of us.

Deep cooperation takes courage, time, and determination. Some of our successes to date may well be the result of our having picked the low-hanging fruit. New possibilities may not come as easily as our early efforts. But I am convinced that our efforts are well worth the payoff: increased resources for our students and faculty, broadened access for users

outside our home institution, and the valuable recognition the library has received for its spirit of cooperation.