

## Academic Library Consortia in the United States: An Introduction

by SHARON L. BOSTICK

Library consortia in the United States arose from a need for sharing when resources or funding for those resources were scarce. This is as true today as it was over 100 years ago when the first American consortia were formed. Consortia continue to be a growing and important part of the library profession. This article will give an overview of academic library consortia, with special emphasis on the history and modern developments in the United States and provide a general introduction to the concept of library cooperation.

### WHAT IS A LIBRARY CONSORTIUM?

A library consortium is a group of two or more libraries that have agreed to cooperate with each other in order to fulfill certain similar needs, usually resource sharing. Cooperation among libraries is not a new concept. It has existed in many forms, in many countries, for many years. Some cooperation was, and still is, informal while other types encompass complex processes to share collections or services. Traditionally, library cooperation meant sharing collections in some way, but it could also include sharing of services, or of processes such as joint cataloging of materials, or of staff and user training. In general, however, most libraries kept their autonomy and consortial involvement was a peripheral library service. Cooperative efforts usually had an economic motivation, and that incentive continues today. Recent developments in library funding, and the growth in importance of electronic materials have led to a change in thinking about how libraries cooperate, and the growth of formal cooperative entities: library consortia.

## HISTORY

The United States has a long tradition of library cooperation. Library consortia have existed there for over a century and have gone through several phases of development. The first phase was in the late nineteenth century, when the American Library Association formed the Cooperation Committee, which was later renamed to the Committee on Coordination.<sup>1</sup> The Library of Congress began a cooperative cataloging program in the early 1900's to distribute cataloging information and cards to participating libraries on a nation-wide basis. An early academic consortium was the Triangle Research Libraries Network. This was a group of three (now four) academic libraries in North Carolina. The presidents of the University of North Carolina and Duke University created the Committee on Intellectual Cooperation; the libraries became a key component to this group. North Carolina State University was soon added, then North Carolina Central University. The TRLN, as it is known, is still in existence today.<sup>2</sup> Other consortia followed. The earlier ones were developed mainly to share collections and occasionally to combine buying power. Many types of libraries, including academic, public, school, medical and other special libraries formed similar groups. In the United States the biggest impetus for the development of formal library consortia occurred after 1960 when automating library processes became a possibility. For many libraries, forming or joining consortia was the only way that they were able to afford expensive integrated library systems. By the late 1960's, consortia were being formed specifically to acquire library automation products for the members, thus setting the stage for the current consortia movement.

Many academic library consortia were created as part of larger academic cooperative groups, where the universities included libraries in a larger agreement between two or more institutions.<sup>3</sup> The Triangle Research Libraries is an early example of this practice. It is still a common way to form resource-sharing groups. Consortia such as the Big Twelve Plus<sup>4</sup>, and the Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC)<sup>5</sup> are modern examples that follow this model. Other library consortia require that the parent institution, not the library, be the official member, with all activity and governance generally delegated to the library. The Boston Library Consortium<sup>6</sup> is an example of this type of consortia. Increasingly, individual states are creating library consortia, some linking all academic, public and sometimes school libraries in the state. Many of these new consortia are being formed to create statewide digital libraries. Illinois Libraries Computer Systems Organization, or ILCSO<sup>7</sup> is one of the earlier examples of this type of group.

As with the consortia of the late 1960's, that cooperated to purchase integrated library systems, automation is still a strong reason for cooperation, but its definition has expanded to include a variety of electronic resources. Some of the earlier, automation-driven consortia have discovered that their

usefulness has passed and that the original automation need is no longer there. They disband, often because members are involved in other, more relevant consortia. Most consortia today are still involved in some way with group purchasing of electronic resources and the opportunities in this area continue to grow.

#### CONSORTIA TODAY

Today, consortia are very prevalent in the United States and through the world. In the United States, they come in many forms. Some are exclusively for a specific type of library while some include a mix of library types, such as academic and public libraries, and are called „multi-type consortia“. The Alberta Library<sup>8</sup> is an example of a consortium developed to encompass all types of libraries, including school and municipal, in the province.<sup>9</sup> Some are devoted exclusively to one project, while others do multiple tasks. The focus of individual consortia may also change over time.

Consortia can take many forms and go under other names, such as coalition or network. Most states work with a network, for example, which acts as a liaison to OCLC and other bibliographic utilities, and provides group purchase discounts and staff training, among many other services. Some of these networks serve single states, such as the Michigan Library Consortium or OhioNet<sup>10</sup>, while others serve several states that are in close geographic proximity. Examples of this type are Amigos, in the Southwest, Nelinet in New England, and Solinet in the South.<sup>11</sup> At times, the role of the network and the role of other consortia become confused, in part because libraries tend to belong to multiple consortia. However, the various consortia and networks are increasingly working together, particularly in the areas of group purchasing and training.

#### MEMBERSHIP

Membership in a consortium is a serious commitment for a library. It may involve a significant payment in membership dues and other necessary fees, although not all are expensive to join. Some are free and some have very modest membership dues. In addition to basic financial commitments, libraries may be required to put a considerable amount of staff time towards consortia activities, such as committee work and increased interlibrary loan volume. The amount of staff time required varies by type of consortium and type of activity, but staff participation is essential to most successful consortia.

## GOVERNANCE

Consortia tend to be governed by a Board of Directors. Sometimes this board is a subset of another board, particularly if the consortium is part of a larger, non-library group. Often, however, the Board of Directors is the top level of consortium management. A Board of Directors generally consists of the directors of the member libraries. In this model a full Board of Directors can become quite unwieldy for decision making in larger consortia, so a smaller governing council is often used, elected by the full board and reporting back to them. Boards generally elect officers from among themselves, and these officers comprise the governing council.

Day-to-day management of the library consortia can be time-consuming and detailed. It is common practice to hire a coordinator, or executive director, to manage the routine activities and coordinate the daily work. This person is usually hired by the Board of Directors and is responsible to them. The executive director is in direct contact with all the member libraries and oversees the committee work and other activities performed by the member libraries' staff. This type of position is becoming a viable career option in the library community.

Larger consortia often have a staff reporting to the executive director. The staff may be as small as one part-time person. However, a consortia office staff can include a number of people, some with specialization in such areas as contract negotiation and member training programs.

The Board of Directors sets the agenda for the consortium. This requires that the members of the board, who are usually the directors of the member libraries, be able to see more than just their individual library's needs and look at what is for the greater good of the entire group. At times, this can cause conflict, especially when a proposed consortium goal does not meet a goal of the individual library. This is particularly true in multi-type consortia, where different types of libraries must find commonalities. It can also be found in consortia where the members include a mix of library governance, such as publicly funded and privately funded university libraries. Thus, it is considered good practice for a consortium board to develop a mission statement that articulates the group's philosophy, which many consortia place on their web pages, as well as a plan of action agreeable to all members. In general, this will include a statement as to the level of participation expected of members. For example, some require the participation of all members in licensing agreements, while others do not. This decision can greatly affect negotiations with vendors, some of whom want total participation to obtain consortia rates, so it is an important point to consider. Participation in one or more consortia sets a specific cultural tone for an individual library and may require a reassessment of its collections and services.

## FUNDING

Funding methods for American consortia are as varied as the types of consortia. Some are wholly funded by a source other than the membership, often a governmental body, and membership is free of charge. Most, however, use some sort of dues structure. Dues can vary from nominal to several hundred thousand dollars, depending on the services provided, the number of consortium staff, and the nature of the projects undertaken by the consortium. Increasingly, consortia are taking a more entrepreneurial approach and attempt to create sustainable funding models. Resource allocation and equitable spending are current funding issues, especially when licensing large, expensive databases to a number of libraries.

## CONSORTIA OF CONSORTIUM

The consortia movement took a major step with the development of the International Coalition of Library Consortia (ICOLC), where various library consortia banded together „to share information and to develop larger-scale agendas among themselves“.<sup>12</sup> ICOLC began informally, but quickly organized and in 1997 held the first of its meetings, coordinated by Tom Sanville of OhioLINK. The group now meets twice a year in North America, and once a year in Europe. Its purpose is „facilitating discussion among consortia on issues of common interest. At times during the year, ICOLC may conduct meetings dedicated to keeping participating consortia informed about new electronic information resources, pricing practices of electronic providers and vendors, and other issues of importance to directors and governing boards of consortia. During these sessions, the Coalition meets with members of the information provider community, offering a forum for them to discuss their offerings and to engage in dialog with consortial leaders about issues of mutual concern“.<sup>13</sup> The membership includes consortia from all over the world. A web page and an active listerv provide current information to members (membership is free, although meetings have a registration fee). A result of the ICOLC endeavor is better communication between consortia, a sharing of mutual concerns and a stronger voice in policy and pricing structures, as well as enhancing the relationship between consortia and vendors. ICOLC's public webpage, <<http://www.yale.edu/consortia>> is the best source of information on most individual consortia in North America and, increasingly, the world and is the most comprehensive source of links to consortia websites.

Consortia have begun working together not only in ICOLC, but informally as well. The major result has been the informal emergence of „superconsortium“, where several consortia band together to purchase expensive electronic products. One consortium takes on the role of administering the pro-

duct, which often includes reselling it to individual consortia that have agreed to participate. This model allows for a great degree of customization for the needs of an individual consortium.<sup>14</sup> The superconsortia concept is new and still evolving.

#### CURRENT ISSUES

Consortia are facing new and different challenges. In addition to the traditional goals for resource-sharing and group purchases, they are looking at other projects. Marketing libraries has been a frequent discussion topic at ICOLC meetings. Consortia can be a great benefit to member libraries in publicizing their collections and services, as well as the consortium's work. Consortia are increasingly involved in political action. For example, in the United States a major concern is the Uniform Computer Information Transactions Act, known as UCITA, which will have a profound effect on software licensing. Many American library groups oppose UCITA, and consortia are working together to both understand its implications and provide a united response to it.

Virtual catalogs, both within a consortium and among consortia, are another popular activity, particularly in those consortia where the members do not use the same integrated library system. Virtual catalogs of this sort, and the delivery options that go along with them, are emerging technologies and will soon become more commonplace. Delivery of materials, with or without a virtual catalog, is an important problem that does not have one specific solution. Web portals are becoming an increasingly important component of a consortium's work. Other topics of interest to academic library consortia include virtual reference services, developing digital libraries, hosting distance education classes and programs, and disaster preparedness.

Libraries in the United States continue to join together to share resources, to combine their buying power for better prices, to achieve stronger influence over the quality of the product, and to help determine publisher and vendor policies and to address an ever-changing array of needs and services. Through collaborative efforts, libraries can try new ideas and take risks that they could not do on their own.

The consortia movement has endured for many years and has retained the original philosophy of sharing resources and strength in numbers, while constantly determining new directions for library cooperation. The consortia movement is growing and expanding. It is stronger than ever before.

## *Academic Library Consortia in the United States: An Introduction*

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- 4 More information on the Big Twelve Plus Library Consortium can be found on their web page, <<http://www.big12plus.org>>.
- 5 More information on the Committee on Institution Cooperation can be found on their web page, <<http://www.cic.uiuc.edu>>.
- 6 More information on the Boston Library Consortium can be found on their web page, <<http://www.blc.org>>.
- 7 More information on the Illinois Libraries Computer Systems Organization can be found on their web page, <<http://ilcso.aiss.uius.edu>>.
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- 9 Margaret Hawthorne and Dean Frey: „Getting to the Summit: How Do You Get There from Here? A Climbers Guide to Consortium Formation“, *Serials Librarian*, 36 (1999) 3/4, p. 415-420.
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- 11 More information on Amigos can be found at <<http://www.amigos.org>>, on Nelineat at <<http://www.nelineat.net>>, and on Solinet at <<http://www.solinet.net>>.

- 12 Barbara McFadden Allen and Arnold Hirshon: „Hanging Together to Avoid Hanging Separately: Opportunities for Academic Libraries and Consortia“, *Information Technology and Libraries*, 17 (1998), 1, p. 36-44.
- 13 This statement can be found in the introduction to the ICOLC public webpage, <<http://www.yale.edu/consortia>>.
- 14 From a presentation at the International Coalition of Library Consortia (ICOLC) meeting, April 14, 2000, Orlando, Florida. „The Regional Network Alliance and National Aggregations: Today and the Future.“ Presented by Angee, Baker, SOLINET, Arnold Hirshon, NELINET, Mary-Alice Lynch, NYLink and Robert Watkins, Amigos. A longer description of superconsortia can be found in Bostick, 2000 and 2001 (see No. 2).

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