

# The Lone Ranger is dead

## Success today demands collaboration

by Betsy Wilson

**T**he library is the intellectual crossroads of the community—a house of stories preserving our memory and fostering communication and collaboration. Librarians can lead collaborations that will keep that community alive and vibrant.

This is the first installment of a series on community and collaboration that will run throughout my presidential year. Each month, different writers will share with you stories of successful collaborations that strengthen our communities. These articles will inspire you to move outward from your campuses into the interconnected worlds of higher education, K–12, extended communities, global partners, and those who employ your graduates.

### **Why is collaboration important?**

Many leaders have called for colleges and universities to become more sensitive to their public responsibility and relationships, and less self-indulgent. Educational collaborations and partnerships are burgeoning across the country. Why have our institutions put collaboration at the forefront? It's relatively simple. Our colleges and universities are changing because the world has changed.

### **Engaged colleges and universities**

Peter Magrath, president of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges said:

“We are a nation of great accomplishments and future potential, but we are also plagued with huge problems in our communities: alcohol and drug abuse, crime, inadequate schooling, families (or perhaps more appropriately, non-families) and the reality and growing threat of a lost, wasted generation of youth, which in turn has massive implications for the economic competitiveness of the United States.”<sup>1</sup>

In an era of widespread public distrust, leaders around the nation are turning to colleges and universities for help in solving societal problems. The same leaders are concerned about what they perceive as mismatches between college and university missions and the needs of communities. They also are asking for meaningful measures of accountability and involvement with local communities.

The college and university's comparative advantage in the information society is the breadth and depth of its knowledge base. Couple this knowledge base with higher education's ability to innovate and create new knowledge, and you have the potential for powerful economic, social, and cultural impact.

Many leaders have called for “engaged colleges and universities.” Such an institution systematically structures, rewards, and encourages partnerships and collaborations. An

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engaged institution, whether public or private, collaborates with communities, not only in its important traditional missions of educating students on campuses and producing relevant research, but also in focusing on community partnerships and collaborations.<sup>2</sup>

### **Death of the Lone Ranger**

At the same time that leaders are calling for institutional engagement, we have experienced the end of the Lone Ranger. The myth of the triumphant individual, the rugged individualist, is deeply ingrained in the American psyche. Whether it is the Lone Ranger, John Glenn, Muhammad Ali, Amelia Earhart, Martin Luther King Jr., or Paul Revere, we are a nation smitten with heroines and heroes. Leadership is too often seen as an inherently individual phenomenon. We are beginning to recognize that collaborative leadership combines the power that is inherent in the act of leading with the greater power that comes from shared visions and actions.

Collaboration and partnerships grow more important every day. Technological, ecological, social, economic, and political complexity is increasing at an accelerating rate. There are fewer and fewer arenas in which individual action suffices. Almost all valuable work is done in a community. Creativity and innovation rarely emerge from people working alone.

The most urgent problems require the contributions of many talented people and institutions. Collaboration is not simply desirable, it is inevitable. In all but the most rare of cases, *one* is too small a number to solve problems. As one wise person said, "None of us is as smart as all of us."

### **21st century communities**

The vision of the successful community has changed dramatically in the last decade. Any successful 21st century community must have access to the requisite information and tech-

nological resources and services. As information technology transforms both the smallest and largest communities, librarians are experiencing firsthand the patron demands resulting from profound educational and information needs.

The reality is that there is a wide digital divide but an even wider information literacy divide. What are the basic competencies that community members need? Who is going to teach them? Who knows what resources are really out there? How can technology be used to the fullest potential? How can they choose from among the vast array of resources available? How can they keep up?<sup>3</sup>

Why are collaborations becoming more and more important? It's simple and compelling. Society has changed. The Lone Ranger is dead. And the vision of a successful community for the 21st century demands that we collaborate beyond our individual campuses.

### **What is collaboration?**

Collaboration brings together the widest range of talents and resources to solve a problem, build a program, or create something entirely new. The greater the number who comes to the table, the higher the probability that we will be successful. Shared visions are fundamental to successful collaborations. Collaborations that work bring together those who share the same goals, although they may be coming from different segments of the community.

What do we need to be able to collaborate? Collaboration doesn't come naturally. Our administrative organizations, reward structures, and budget processes usually do not facilitate collaboration on our campuses.

Can we be taught to collaborate? Is there a set of skills that one must have? Collaboration requires negotiating skills, being able to see tradeoffs, and being comfortable sharing control (and we all like control). Collaborators learn how to cross boundaries. Collaborators have a high tolerance for ambiguity. Or as one of my colleagues says, "Give me ambiguity or give me something else."

Successful collaborators get beyond the subtle barriers created by their professional roles. The persona we present to the world can get in the way. Who we are can create a barrier to what we need to know or do. As my mother use to say to us kids, "Listen to

anybody who knows anything, because you need all the help you can get."

Many leaders give lip service to collaboration. Few actually understand what collaboration takes, what it means, and how it fundamentally changes organizations. Collaboration is substantively different than cooperation or coordination. It is different in vision and relationships, structure, authority and accountability, and resources and rewards. Paul Mattessich outlines the essential elements of successful collaborations:<sup>4</sup>

- *Vision and relationships.* Collaborations require the commitment of organizations and their leaders. Administrative commitment is paramount. Two organizations are not just mashed together, but rather a new common mission and goals are created. One or more projects are undertaken for longer-term results.

- *Structure, responsibilities, and communication.* In collaborations, a new structure and/or clearly defined and interrelated roles constitute a formal division of labor. More comprehensive planning includes joint strategies and measuring success in terms of impact on needs of those served. Many levels of communication are created in collaborations—many, many informal methods are used.

- *Authority and accountability.* Authority is determined by the collaborators to balance ownership. Leadership is dispersed, and control is shared and mutual. All in successful collaborations share equal risk.

- *Resources and rewards.* Resources are pooled or jointly secured for a longer-term effort that is managed by the collaborative structure. Organizations share in the products and in credit. It goes without saying that more is accomplished jointly than could have been individually.

There are many examples of successful collaborations, including the Bauhaus school, the Manhattan project, the Guarneri Quartet, the human genome project, the Disney studio, Xerox PARC, and the Harlem Renaissance. But even in the most productive collaborations there are challenges.

Let me share with you the experiences of the TriUniversity Group (TUG) librarians.<sup>5</sup> TUG is comprised of the University of Guelph, University of Waterloo, and Wilfrid Laurier University. These three Canadian in-

stitutions have entered into a comprehensive collaboration to enable the coordination of their services and resources in such a manner that the three libraries were perceived and experienced by their users as a single library. How's that for a problem that requires collaboration?

What the TUG librarians found was that collaboration even among willing partners is complex and requires a continuous organizational development. They found that effective collaboration is not accidental. The first step is to realize that the real task is cultural transformation: a conscious and open examination of values, personal systems, and attitudes. Collaboration introduces organizational changes that penetrate an institution's structure. Institutional leaders and managers need to anticipate and prepare for the effects of change.

The most important factor in successful collaborations is human relationships. The biggest investment will not be in hardware or in software, but in people. The change of perspective from "me" to "us," from "I" to "we," from "them" to "us" is profoundly difficult. There are many opportunities to revert to the old ways. Sustaining the culture of the collaboration requires attention, protection, and vigilant maintenance.

One of the most predictable (and often problematic outcome for managers) is that in collaborations, everybody gets changed and can't go home again. Once you have been part of a successful collaboration, you become "homeless."

When problems arise and progress is difficult, people inevitably ask, "Why bother?" Collaboration becomes "too much trouble." As leaders, we must constantly reinforce the value of collaboration.

### **How can librarians build successful collaborations?**

Librarians have a very important role to play in educational collaborations. We are the original collaborators in higher education. We come from a culture of cooperation, a culture that values "the circle of gifts."

This culture is seen in our long-standing resource sharing programs; in our professional organizations; in our burgeoning consortiums; and in our collaborative building of "OCLC WorldCat," the world's largest and

most used database. We know and live collaboration.

Individually we have some attributes that are critical to successful collaborations. Librarians are able to organize groups, organize information flows, communicate, and move groups forward.

In the UWired collaboration at the University of Washington, librarians were somewhat surprised by how unique these skills and attributes were, and how critical they were for successful partnerships.

### Is collaboration worth it?

Yes, unconditionally—or in the parlance of Scandinavian Seattle, “ya sure, ya betcha.”

Collaboration can enrich the student experience by creating learning communities. Collaboration can enlarge research and learning opportunities for both faculty and students. Collaboration can embrace the needs of diverse communities and create a broader sense of identification with the academy. Collaboration can demonstrate the value of learning and build a culture of lifelong learning that transcends the campus. Collaboration can allow us to solve the really big problems.

Many who have engaged in successful collaborations will tell you that collaboration is its own reward. Collaborations can be simultaneously taxing and exhilarating. We all have a basic urge to explore and discover, to nurture new relationships, and to transform them into something new and wonderful.

The payoff of collaborative relationships is not money or glory. Again and again, members of successful collaborations say they would have done the work for nothing. The reward is the creative process itself. People long to do work worth doing. Given some-

thing we believe in, a problem that the whole community needs solved, and a chance to do it well, we will work tirelessly for no more reward than the one we give ourselves.<sup>6</sup>

Stay tuned to this column for stories of successful collaborations that have enriched communities across the nation.

### Notes

1. “The Engaged University,” *Penn State Outreach* 1, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 1998) is available at [www.cde.psu.edu/News/magazine/Vol\\_1.1/engaged.html](http://www.cde.psu.edu/News/magazine/Vol_1.1/engaged.html).


2. For a fuller description of institutional engagement, see the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities’ *Returning to Our Roots: The Engaged Institution* (1999), available at <http://www.nasulg.org/publications/Kellogg/engage.pdf>.

3. Building on the ACRL Institute for Information Literacy Community Partnerships project lead by Julie Todaro, Nancy Kranich’s ALA Presidential Information Literacy Initiative seeks to use a collaborative approach to building strong information communities. For more information, see [www.ala.org/kranich/literacy.html](http://www.ala.org/kranich/literacy.html).

4. Paul Mattesich, *Collaboration—What Makes it Work: A Review of Research Literature on Factors Influencing Successful Collaboration* (St. Paul: Amherst H. Wilder Foundation, 1992).


5. For a full description of the TUG collaboration see Murray Shepard, Virginia Gillham, and Michael Ridley, “The Truth is in the Details: Lessons in Inter-university Library Collaboration,” *Library Management* (1999): 332–37.

6. This paragraph is paraphrased from an examination of what motivates and sustains creative collaborations by Warren G. Bennis and Patricia Ward Biederman in *Organizing Genius: the Secrets of Creative Collaboration* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1997). ■

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