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Partnerships

Assessing when to start, when to hold, and when to fold

In the current academic and fiscal environment, libraries can no longer undertake major new projects, or even maintain existing infrastructure, without considering partnering with other institutions. This reality is recognized in future-oriented planning activities, such as ARL's 2014 Strategic Thinking and Design work, which predicts that, "within two decades, the research library will have transitioned its focus from its role as a knowledge service provider within a single university to become a collaborative partner within the broader ecosystem of higher education."¹

This is not a new idea. Libraries have long been taking collective action in multiple areas—from large-scale collectives, such as the digital preservation and access initiatives like HathiTrust, to smaller collaborations in a particular functional area, such as the technical services integration at the Kenyon College and Denison University Libraries.²

The African proverb cited by Martha Sites, a panelist for the 2011 CLIR Symposium on Deep Collaboration, expressed libraries' sentiment and conviction most fittingly: "If you want to go far, go together."³

But it does not always make sense to go together, even when the prospect appears attractive, at first. The cost of less-than-ideal partnerships, where the potential investment and costs are high and often hidden, may incur lasting damage for institutions involved.

How can libraries assess the cost factors fully? Could there be an early warning sys-

tem for decision-makers? How can libraries discern the inhibitors of success at the outset to improve the outcomes? How can collaborators communicate concerns with minimal risk of damaging relationships? These were the questions that a team of Cornell University Library (CUL) staff attempted to address.

Partnerships have a long and productive history at CUL.⁴ By 2012, the library had entered into a variety of partnerships, ranging from two people working together to discussions of merging unit operations with another university. We imagine a future where partnerships will be even further embedded in how we operate.

As part of a greater strategic planning effort, the library put together a team to analyze this trend and develop recommendations as to how to make partnerships more effective. For the purpose of this task, the partnership is defined broadly as collaboration between two or more parties,

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as a one-time project or long-term program, with the following characteristics:

- requires seed funding from one or more partners, or an external source, and/or dedicated staff time,
- provides mutual benefits to all partners,
- requires shared risks and responsibilities for all partners, and
- results in measurable outcomes.

Following a literature review, the team created two tools for assessing prospective and existing partnerships,⁵ drawing heavily on a document published by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister of UK.⁶ The Pre-partnership Check-up guides assessment of the value, costs, and risks of a potential partnership. The Existing Partnership Check-up can help determine whether an existing partnership is functioning as well as it could be and, if not, what the cause may be. The tools are intended for use by the person or group responsible for initiating or approving the partnership. Ideally, they are used in collaboration with the partner(s).

How to use the partnership tools?

The assessment tools are designed with flexibility in mind. They can be used as conversation starters or checklists, and can be filled out by partners together, or separately with a goal of comparing answers. They can be used in whole or in part, and discussions can be structured around one or several sections, by a person or a team, confidentially, or in a transparent way.⁷

When to use the partnership tools

The Pre-Partnership Check-up should be completed when there is a reasonable amount of information known, but prior to committing to a partnership. At this stage, the lead person or team will not have answers to all the questions in the tool. Having such gaps is normal and useful. These gaps can guide partners to further explore areas and define boundaries as the partnership becomes established, exposing

planning deficiencies or assumptions that need to be resolved. As most partnerships require some level of funding, this can also provide an analysis to evaluate the financial feasibility and expected results of a proposed partnership.

The Existing Partnership Check-up should be completed at least once a year and reviewed with the appropriate decision-makers. Additionally, the tool should be used as needed if issues arise, if extending or expanding the partnership is under consideration, or if the resources required for the project change significantly. By using the tool regularly, it becomes easier to see how the project has changed or when it is entering a phase at which it is appropriate to discuss a course correction or reasonable sunset strategy.

Establishing buy-in: Lessons learned

Two keys will unlock the full power of the tools. First, the recognition that a due diligence check is a vital step for partnerships at any stage, and, second, the users' candor when reviewing the results. These two keys are not as simple as they appear, and promoting and implementing the tools may prove challenging. Based upon our experience, we share some common obstacles below, along with relevant questions from the tools (referencing them by "Pre-Partnership" or "Existing Partnership," and question number), and suggest strategies for promoting buy-in.

Timing: "We do not have enough information to answer all the questions."

The unanswered questions are precisely what the tools are designed to reveal. It is acceptable not to have answers, and the awareness of outstanding questions will help prompt exploration of the issues, and determine what must be answered when.

For example, when must a partnership have the necessary political and financial support from the appropriate level of management? What is this level, and what is needed for the library to approve

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or decline a partnership? When questions regarding an existing partnership lack clear answers, the tool can tease out whether this is expected or an early sign of trouble. Acknowledgement and exploration of these situations will help to identify possible problems and their solutions. It can also shine a light on unspoken assumptions concerning responsibilities for aspects of a project.

Partnerships can have long-term effects on important relationships and are expensive investments. Their success rests on several foundational pillars, e.g., clarity of goals, intended outcomes, the support of decision-makers, and resource commitments. Whether the stakes are high or low, asking pointed questions may be uncomfortable. The tools can mediate a situation like this. Start somewhere and pick a question, for example, What is the partner willing to contribute (Pre-Partnership IV.c.)? or Do you feel the timeline is realistic (Existing Partnership I.h.)? These can begin necessary conversations.

Workload: "There is too much going on. I don't want to add a partnership check-up to the project to-dos."

Concerns about changes to or increases in workload are legitimate issues for participants. Unilateral or multilateral partnerships disrupt work routines, create additional complexity, or otherwise may appear outright threatening to staff. This is when partnership leaders can especially benefit from reflecting on how best to plan the partnership so the needs of all involved are met.⁸

Particularly pertinent questions include: What's the purpose and duration of the partnership? Who makes decisions (Pre-Partnership I.b., c., d.)? How will

priorities be balanced (Pre-Partnership III.f., Existing Partnership I.e.,f.) and lines of accountability assigned (Existing Partnership I.e.)?

These are often the sticky areas in an existing relationship. To understand underlying motivations, one can deploy the assessment tools in different settings most suitable to the institutional culture, e.g., using the tools to drive team or town hall meetings, focus groups, or individuals or using it as a survey instrument.

Perception: "This assessment is too rigid for a fluid partnership."

A fluid partnership will only gain from a better understanding of goals and players. We are familiar with the saying in *Alice in Wonderland* that "If you don't know where you are going, any road will get you there." But in reality, too many of us engage a partnership without sufficient information. Or, we find ourselves in partnership proposals too hard to refuse because we know it is the right thing to do politically, even though the gains are undefined.

If the tool feels too structured, partnership leaders can break it down to suitable chunks without losing the ability to gather information systematically. Foundational questions are still (or perhaps especially) important to consider in a fluid or less well-defined partnership: Why does a library wish to engage a particular partner and why now (Pre-Partnership II.b and e.)? What are the risks and are the partners equally willing to take them (Pre-Partnership III.e.)? If a fluid partnership is a sign of success, what are contributing factors (Existing Partnership all sections)? Have we recognized those who contributed and celebrated success (Existing Partnership IV.h., II.d.)?

Sustaining a viable partnership is much less time- and resource-consuming than rescuing an ill-fitting one. An informal partnership may grow to the point that it needs to be formalized, and partnership leaders can benefit from applying the

Existing Partnership tool to prepare for what's coming. Conversely, the existing partnership leaders can review their results from the Pre-Partnership tool to assess the actual trajectory of the partnership in order to correct course or adjust plans and expectations.

Conclusion

In an era of academic library retrenchment, partnership is no longer a luxury but a necessity. In Jim Neal's words, "The future health of the research library will be increasingly defined by new and energetic relationships and combinations, and the radicalization of working relationships among research libraries, between libraries and the communities they serve, and in new entrepreneurial partnerships."⁹

Embedding thoughtful assessment across a partnership's entire life span is a gradual and ongoing process. Tools such as these provide a more objective assessment of potential and current projects to library senior administrators and other decision-makers, whose promotion and endorsement of the process is necessary for widespread adoption. Where these tools have been adopted within CUL, they have proved beneficial to those engaged in the management of the projects and partnerships. In the long run, institutions that successfully conduct due diligence checks before and during partnerships will ultimately gain the most from those endeavors.

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Notes

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