

WHITHER LIBRARY CONSORTIA?

by

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Interlibrary cooperation and consortia are often considered as one and the same. While the terminologies are synonymous, they are not identical. The former is practised by librarians voluntarily for decades without supervision and planning. Each library unit tries to accommodate the needs and requirements of the other on an ad hoc basis. Since the founding of the American Library Association in 1876, the necessity and extent of cooperation among libraries are identified and its procedures, formalized. However, interlibrary cooperation is, and has always been, a voluntary effort on the part of librarians; no one from the administrative hierarchy has looked over any one's shoulder on such matters. Librarians perform these functions routinely more as a professional courtesy than mandatory obligation. There is little or no reward system built in it to warrant a careful analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of a library's collection with a view toward regional or state-wide self-sufficiency.

With the budgetary crunch in recent years, coupled by such factors as unprecedented inflation in book prices, processing costs, and proliferation in the library literature, especially in the scientific disciplines, librarians and librarian-administrators began to realize that it takes more than the ad hoc effort of individual librarians to provide a viable mechanism for resource-sharing. Through institutional sponsorship, groups of campus libraries, be it public-public, private-private, or public-private, established programs of mutual assistance in accessing library collections. An advisory committee composed of the campus library Directors was usually formed in each group to set guidelines for coordination as well as cooperation. They constituted, to the best, groups of academic libraries working together to make their collections accessible to one another. This first phase of library consortia weak as it may appear is an elevation from individual effort to institutional endeavor; prompted chiefly by necessity than design.

The second phase in the development of library consortia such as the Five Associated University Libraries (Cornell-Rochester-Syracuse-SUNY Buffalo-SUNY Binghamton) and the Harvard-Yale-Columbia-NYPL Group are structured more formally than its predecessors; it being chartered bodies with a governing Board. While no federal funding is involved at present, the criteria in and emphasis on collective strength vis-a-vis individual strength are being studied in detail. Part of the institutional funding earmarked for the individual campus library is now being channeled to create a pool of resources accessible to, yet not duplicated by member units. Priorities in collection development consistent with academic programs at the individual campus level are being identified, and the newer yet better technological innovations in processing library materials, such as the on-line shared cataloging system of OCLC, are being introduced to and shared by member libraries. This more [formalized type of [interlibrary cooperation is further in multi-institutional approach toward resource a step sharing and costcutting. It is unique in that institutional libraries of the public segment become merged with those in the private sector in total library resources. The strength of one library contributes to the over-all strength of the consortium; each playing an independent yet complementary role in collection building. Not only are they by-products of necessity, but also creations by design.

A third phase, envisioned by some but opposed by many, is now receiving some attention in America. Using computer-based information system as an accepted operational mode by libraries, a national center in informational services could become a reality— a prototype to the MEDLINE network. A few theorists hypothesize that librarians working in a large library lose their ability to participate in the educational, research, and informational activities of users as do their counterparts in small libraries. Kilgour categorizes the small library concept where the librarians know the collections in detail and their users as individuals as attractively human situation which is no longer possible in our present technological society.¹ The ALA Conference on Interlibrary Communications and Information Network, on the other hand, is opposed to "a monolithic structure but instead, a series of networks organized to meet local information needs."² Furthermore,

the implementation of a national information center in the U.S. in lieu of regional centers is inhibited by several factors: 1. the necessity of huge infusion of public funds to maintain such a center, which may mean federal control at the end; 2. the size of the country is much too large to make centralization of information services feasible, or even possible. The recent breaking down of MEDLINE from a planned national center to eleven regional centers is a good case in point. A national center with substantial governmental funding, if and when implemented, will become a creation not by necessity, but by design.

Whatever the merits or demerits of consortia in interlibrary cooperation, the guidelines laid down by Logsdon and Nelson should be considered. Their list included: "1) cooperation is not good in itself, it is a voluntary act which must be pursued creatively and geared to local situations; 2) objective appraisal of the results of cooperation is as critical as advance planning and sound implementation; 3) cooperation must take into account the legitimate ambitions as well as the present status of the individual cooperating institution; 4) a precondition to an effective system of interlocking libraries is the creation of an adequate governmental structure to develop and sustain it."³ Another point to be stressed in cooperative ventures of whatever form is the "proportionality condition" advanced by Sinclair. He wrote that each participant wishes to gain advantage in proportion to the value of its inputs. If a participant is less well off than before, the cooperative fails.⁴ Extrapolating on this line of reasoning, consortia exist for the benefit of all participants; all gainers, no losers. If A gains at the expense of B, the plus factor of A is cancelled by the minus factor of B. The consortia, if not a total failure, cannot be considered a success. Pragmatically speaking however, this is an impossible situation even with the best of intentions. A cooperative consisting of both the poor and the rich libraries is bound to be tilted toward the rich ones in services and collections. The rich libraries, burdened by heavy demands from the poorer units for services, will either seek fiscal remuneration for the additional workload— a drain on the limited pool of resources to be contributed by all participating units, or gain control of the entity thus further strengthening their bargaining position. The poorer units, on the other hand, are equally unhappy in being used as "pawns" in the

deliberative process. They can never be partners in a major league and feel much more at home in a minor league where their posture as coequals can be maintained. It is therefore not surprising to find consortia to be formed by the direct interaction of libraries of similar type, with similar needs, and of similar strength. State and federal programs of library cooperation have been only frosting on a cake, not the cake itself; compatibility is still the essence of cooperation. While it is conceivable that interregional networking may gain momentum in the future, local libraries and regional networks will continue to grow.⁵ In the consortium make-up, however, libraries free from intra-structural competition are usually preferred. The examples given in phase II of consortia development are pertinent enough to illustrate that these rules prevail.

In Taiwan as in elsewhere, the time is ripe for increased levels of activity in interlibrary cooperation, including the formation of consortia. As students in library science, we need to examine the typological distinctions carefully before we decide which type of consortium make-up is best suited for us. Our total informational system must be large, yet its components small; our procedures standardized, yet flexible; our goals high, yet realistic; and our government leadership considerable, yet not domineering. In these respects, the problems confronting us in Taiwan today are analogous to those of our counterparts in America; each is seeking a solution catered to his local needs.

REFERENCES

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