

The Tri-College Consortium Bryn Mawr, Haverford, Swarthmore Colleges

The Tri-College Library Consortium plays an important role in all aspects of library collections and services. It was formally established by its parent Colleges in 1986 in order to create a joint online catalog. With roots in previous interlibrary programs dating back some decades, and notably an approval program for monographs shared by Bryn Mawr and Haverford beginning in 1973, geographical proximity and extensive academic program cooperation among the Colleges helped to inform the decision to acquire a LMS. Eventually named Tripod, the LMS project sought to improve materials access at a time when the advent of integrated library systems offered new opportunities for record keeping, sharing information about holdings, and flexible catalog searching.

At the risk of asking you to read more than is useful, we append to this report a chronology of the three Colleges' history of library cooperation. It chronicles a "pre-history" dating to the 1930s and shows how the Consortium has expanded collection services beyond the joint catalog to serving and licensing of databases, developing user guidance mechanisms on the Web, and generally leveraging a single-system approach to library technologies and materials. We thought it would be interesting to include it with this report because of the way it mirrors the evolution of cooperative library programs across the country.

Key Cooperative Programs

Working through a variety of committees, work groups, and task forces over the last 20 and more years, we are creating better collections access through cooperation on collections themselves and the technologies for accessing them. By working together, we have been able to build broader collections and take on more ambitious projects than any of us would have been able to do as single institutions. The following are some of the key programs of the consortium beyond the library system:

Collection Development. The increasing cooperation among the tri-colleges has enabled the tri-college libraries to build a shared collection that is comparable in size and scope to that of a small research library.

- Cooperative collection development with a joint approval plan and a collection development policy statement as well as shared bibliographic expertise and materials delivery systems. The program has resulted in a substantial reduction in duplication of academic monographs, and savings directed to expanding the range of monographs purchased and to investing in large electronic collections.
- Shared licenses for electronic resources, substantially reducing the price for many resources, expanding the resources available at each campus, and reducing the overall amount of staff time devoted to license negotiation.

Cooperative Efforts to Improve Access to Collections. The tri-college libraries divide up responsibility for enhancing cataloging records, adding individual title records from large electronic collections, and creating guides to key resources in dozens of subject areas. The major accomplishments are:

- Enriched catalog records, including tables of contents, publishers' descriptions, and first chapters.
- Subject portal for basic resources in all fields we teach, cooperatively maintained by librarians at the three campuses.

Shared Development of Electronic Systems and Content. By working together to develop and maintain new systems for creating and managing electronic content, the tri-college libraries are able to take on a more ambitious set of initiatives than they would be able to do individually. The major accomplishments are:

- Electronic resources management system, a cooperation that began by developing an in-house system
- Digitized special collections using CONTENTdm, supported by a team of tri-college staff members, and housed on a shared server.
- Shared image databases ARTstor and EmbARK, also supported by a team of tri-college staff members and housed on a shared server.
- Shared institutional repository using DSpace

Challenges

The impulse of libraries to cooperate on behalf of satisfying user needs is countered by well-known dynamics of independence, self-sufficiency, and competition. We are three Colleges with different institutional cultures, different budgets and overall wealth, different collection development organization, practices, and traditions, and different relations with each other. Some of the stresses on the consortium include:

Budgets: We have different budgets which can create problems when trying to share expenses for materials and services. For example, we strive to share the purchase of electronic resources but there are times when one of us does not have the funds left in the materials budget to contribute to a purchase.

Staffing: We are an ambitious group and as mentioned above we have only two full-time consortium staff positions. Much project management and project work is performed by regular staff members at the three colleges. The spirit of volunteerism is strong but with it comes a tension between time spent on local responsibilities and time spent on consortial projects. Librarians and systems support people are being pulled in many more directions than ever before.

Leadership: Our directors have different strengths and weaknesses, different management styles, and at times different priorities. While providing diversity and strength, these differences also create tension leading to questions concerning how conflicts get resolved, how decisions get made, and how the work of the consortium is prioritized.

Organizational Structure: Both Bryn Mawr College and Haverford College have merged Library and Information Technology departments while Swarthmore does not. Departmental organization and reporting lines within the three libraries show a variety of structures. For example, at Swarthmore, the heads of the Friends Historical Collection and the Peace Collection

do not report to the Library Director. At times differing structures can cause an imbalance of resources and of representation in project groups.

Communication: In the past, consortial work was centralized in the consortium office. The then “Automation Librarian” managed every project and was the person to whom we turned whenever we needed to know something. But now with a decentralized consortium structure and its many active committees and working groups, communication between them can be a challenge. We need to ensure the sharing of information and awareness of each other’s work.

Conclusion

As we continually negotiate the tensions in our Consortium, we feel we have arrived at a point where pride in what we do locally for users, pride in amassing a local collection, and a place-based sense of the library are making way for a federated and networked view of collections and services. Having cemented an approach to collaboration based largely on information technology projects, we feel that we have accomplished the following:

- begun to produce an environment for cooperatively developed and maintained collections
- set ourselves on a track to a common web presence
- redefined our notions of what constitutes local and cooperative work
- created a climate that values staff-initiated working groups and values staff creativity
- created a sense of collegiality and of a large professional workgroup than would otherwise be the case for three small college library staffs

As the result of recent work on collaborative collection development, we have set the following agenda as we, like other libraries, explore options for a next generation catalog and related technologies and look increasingly to partnerships outside our own cooperative and to the national network of libraries to provide materials and services to our users.

- Continue to develop resource-sharing and cooperative collection development mechanisms with PALCI and other partnerships. In the short term, we will join PALCI in an experiment to create a distributed regional archive of printed journals now held in trusted e-repositories
- Participate in PALCI/PALINET discussions on centralized collective storage of print materials
- Contribute funds and texts to the OCA mass digitization project that will be organized by PALINET in 2008-2010 under grant from the Sloan Foundation
- Develop a new strategy for saving space in our stacks; in addition to removing as many unnecessarily duplicated older materials as we can, we will consider whether adding more digital collections is a better way of "saving space" than putting effort into weeding print monographs
- Decide what we mean by creating a "diverse collection" once we have joint approval plans in place for all areas of the curriculum where they are practical
- Address the ironic situation posed by buying e-resources: with e-resources we gain more flexible and convenient access, but their licensing terms limit our ability to share them in the way we share our print collections

- Perform collection analysis to see what previously published works we do not have and might want
- Add more e-monographs to the catalog and study readers' responses to them
- Replicate surveys and focus groups from our Planning Grant using the 2001/2 data as a baseline from which to track changes in user perceptions of our collaborative collections work; in particular, explore how users' sense of convenience is working for or against us in our collection efforts
- Consider conducting a longitudinal study of senior thesis bibliographies to demonstrate any effects of shared collections on the scope of student research
- Study interlibrary loan transactions to see what they reveal about changing use patterns
- Continue to improve our catalog interface and its links to other collections and research databases
- Discuss whether we should assemble a complete collection of works on a subject in one library location as opposed to distributing the collection on a subject over the three libraries

Goals for collection management

- Pursue opportunities for further weeding where resistance is lowest, starting with the PALCI scientific journal project
- Re-visit the question of weeding older, little-used monographs as the availability and usability of e-books improves
- Continue ongoing collection maintenance routines we have established under the grant in order to ensure the trustworthiness of our records

Goals for acquisition

- Explore collaboration on firm ordering
- Jointly acquire e-books and more e-resources
- Train bibliographers to use our Collection Analysis tool
- Establish a routine for creating not-bought lists and circulating them among Tri-College bibliographers, in order to facilitate broadening our collections
- Work toward streamlining the processes used for virtual selection as much as possible in order to save the time of bibliographers and acquisitions staff members
- Set up mechanisms to review circulation statistics for jointly collected works, in order to see what impact our collaborative efforts have had on borrowing patterns
- Explore the possibility of more closely coordinating our materials budgets

Goals for staffing and communications

- Further improve consortial communication about curricula, research, and collections through regular meetings of the Heads of Collections, bibliographer lunches, and an annual collections symposium
- Look for ways to reintroduce more synchronous communication into the approval selection process
- Continue to explore staffing structures as positions become vacant, considering using the single-bibliographer model as appropriate.

Goals for Digital Imaging

- Grow our collections for teaching and research
- Jointly purchase digital image collections when feasible
- Explore ways to connect users to free online image resources related to our collections.

Plans for disseminating what we have learned and for learning more from others

- Use remaining grant funds to sponsor a national workshop on current and future trends in collaborative collections work and other aspects of collections in liberal arts college libraries; publish the results of this workshop with CLIR as a take on "the future of liberal arts college library collections"
- Publish an elaborated version of our own final report to Mellon as a "bookend" to the report CLIR published in 2003 from our 2001 Planning Grant, "Library Buildings and the Building of a Collaborative Research Collection for the Tri-Colleges" (CLIR Report 115)