

2010

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Recommended Citation

Kramer, Jason (2010) "Nontraditional Partnerships in Pursuit of the “Information Infrastructure”," *Collaborative Librarianship*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 4 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/collaborativelibrarianship/vol2/iss4/7>

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Nontraditional Partnerships in Pursuit of the “Information Infrastructure”

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Abstract

The New York State Higher Education Initiative (NYSHEI) represents the public and private academic and research libraries of New York, and differs from other state-based academic library organizations in both its size and mission. NYSHEI holds about 150 member institutions, including all 87 of the state’s public colleges and universities, and nine ARL members. Founded in 2002, NYSHEI evolved into its current form in 2007 by adopting a focus on political advocacy. NYSHEI applies its diverse collection of collaborating libraries toward achieving a statewide “information infrastructure” that supports not just the academic enterprise, but all research, innovation, and entrepreneurialism in New York. An important lesson learned during the formative phase of NYSHEI is that collaboration as a strategic value can be fairly meaningless. Rightly understood, collaboration is a tactic that helps two or more parties attain separate but shared aims. As such, NYSHEI approaches information resources as a required utility for the modern era, and actively works with partners in the business community, state government, and health care fields to promote widespread access to information resources.

2002-2007: The Early Initiative

New York State is home to the largest public university system in the nation, the State University of New York, known as SUNY and is also home to the nation’s largest urban public university system, the City University of New York or CUNY. These two large public systems operate quite separately.

Both SUNY and CUNY are fairly modern inventions and were developed in a state that already had the largest collection of independent colleges and universities. The relationship between the “publics” and the “privates” is historically notorious for its animosity, distrust and, on occasion, its outright belligerence.

Lamenting this climate, as so many others have, the former SUNY Provost and current Senior Fellow at the Manhattan Institute of Public Policy, Peter Salins conceived of NYSHEI. His idea, both grand and specific, was to cultivate collaboration among these three groups to the benefit of all. Rather than overreach on ambition, Salins began

where the culture of collaboration was strongest – the libraries.

Clarity in Collaboration

The idea worked and NYSHEI was formed among the public and private academic and research libraries. At its founding NYSHEI had 125 members, including all 86 public schools. The membership ranged from 34 community colleges to nine ARL libraries that included both the New York State Library and the New York Public Library. It was a wide-ranging group brought together in the spirit of collaboration and under the leadership of a small group of visionary library directors.

The collaborative spirit began to fade and by 2006 member institutions were beginning to leave NYSHEI. As a philosophy, collaboration in itself was not enough to stem the erosion of dues paying members. Though strikingly simple, it is a commonly overlooked reality that collaboration is a tactic that must be employed for specific goals. While NYSHEI was not without goals and projects during its formative phase, the group had



failed to articulate and coalesce around powerful *raison d'être*.

ARIA

One of the first projects that originated from NYSHEI was the Academic Research Information Access (ARIA). Simply, the idea was to gain state support to establish state-wide contracts and licenses for high end, electronic databases in support of science, technology, engineering and medical research. With skyrocketing product costs and growing demands for more research at campuses across the spectrum, ARIA was a desired end. When complete, ARIA would bring together New York's public and private higher education sector, creating a massive consortial buying arrangement. The seeding of a state appropriation would allow for the state to serve as a single point procurement agent. As a result the libraries would see cost savings from current expenditures, new access to desired resources, or a combination of the two.

What changed the equation was a robust effort to make ARIA not merely a library buying club, but to court additional partners. This began in earnest with NYSHEI's commitment to non-traditional collaborations. During 2007, ARIA was developed as a written proposal and introduced in the state legislature. In addition to seeking support among the usual boosters of libraries and of higher education, ARIA was presented to backers of economic development.

In the State Senate and State Assembly, ARIA was introduced in each house by the respective chairs of the Economic Development committees. The hook in the legislation was that ARIA resources would be made available not only throughout the higher education sector, but also to select portions of the small business community. Entrepreneurs engaged in the sectors of the "innovation economy" as the Governor termed it, would gain access to cutting-edge information resources largely unavailable without the academic libraries. This community of interested entrepreneurs included

the occupants of incubators and state designated economic development zones, among others.

Through diligent outreach, ARIA came to be embraced by business and trade associations, their lobbying arms, and public officials of all stripes. In a competitive global environment, ARIA marketed itself as a means to efficiently leverage the clout of New York's considerable higher education sector to directly support developing business interests.

The Value of Non-Traditional Collaboration

After a year and a half of coalition building ARIA managed to pass both houses of the legislature, each time with unanimous bipartisan support. Were it confined to being merely about and for libraries, ARIA could never succeed. But that is not to say the first concentric circle of collaboration – that of the academic and research library community itself – was unimportant.

Speaking to a group of NYSHEI Board members during a meeting in his office, the powerful Speaker of the State Assembly stressed that ARIA was remarkable in that it bridged the public and private portions of higher education. According to the Assembly Speaker, overcoming the existent historical distrust was responsible for getting his colleagues and staff to pay attention to ARIA. ARIA was, even before passage, something of a breakthrough. On this merit the support of higher education interests came to ARIA.

From that foundation, gaining the advocacy support of various groups representing the business community pushed many outside of higher education to begin thinking of academic and research libraries not merely as part of the campus, but as a deeper resource, as part of an "information infrastructure" that could carry the entire state into the information age.

The effort behind ARIA worked toward helping libraries and in due process came to offer opportunities for the business community. To an organization like NYSHEI, the result was an even greater, though not at the outset, primary goal. By succeeding in promoting and sustaining collaboration, NYSHEI elevated its standing as an advocacy group, which had the on-going effect of moving the role of academic and research libraries into the consciousness of state policy experts and appropriators. As a result, scores of groups have sought NYSHEI testimony at budget and legislative hearings, sought NYSHEI support of their bills, and sought NYSHEI collaboration on other projects because now, NYSHEI and its member institutions had something to offer. That is, NYSHEI could be seen as a partner because it had something to offer of benefit to the potential collaborator.

On campus, several library directors have shared anecdotes of their enhanced stature with their administrations. By engaging, winning allies, and gaining some notoriety, academic libraries are now seen as being - in the colloquial - "a player."

Lessons Learned

Where ARIA sought and gained the support of economic development interests for an initiative that would benefit both libraries and businesses, other ideas could follow. NYSHEI is now developing a legislative initiative that focuses not on STEM information resources, but on clinical information resources.

Still envisioning the academic and research library as part of a comprehensive information infrastructure, NYSHEI is currently collaborating with health care interests, practitioners, clinics, hospitals, and the like, to establish a statewide program for medical practices. Again, whereas ARIA collaborated with, and in crude terms leveraged, small business to pursue desired materials for innovation and entrepreneurialism, NYSHEI is seeking to leverage the strength of the health care field. When realized, colleg-

es and universities will win state support that will lower costs and increase holdings, and practitioners will gain electronic access to expensive resources that can be decisive in delivering quality medical care.

At the same time NYSHEI is following the lead of the State Librarian to push for a comprehensive information system. While many of those resources would most directly benefit public and school libraries, some gain would be realized for the academic sector.

Recently NYSHEI went so far as to convene a summit of the many and varied library organizations throughout the state. In New York there exist for academic librarians buying clubs, professional development groups, networking and support organizations, and professional peer-group associations. The summit sought improved information sharing among the 21 participating groups, and resulted in some beneficial partnerships. Those groups with broad membership offered great communication systems while a group like NYSHEI could offer its expertise in lobbying and political reporting.

Collaboration, as an overarching strategy, certainly is seductive. But, if lacking tactical specificity, this collaborative spirit can be meaningless. At the cost of time and effort, NYSHEI was reminded that all collaborations must have at the core clear communications so that the prospective partners understand what is involved with the collaboration. Clear communications are dependent on having specific and easily understood goals, for it is difficult to walk together if the two parties think they are headed toward different destinations. Finally, when real goals are shared openly and honestly, all prospective collaborators can find their own reason to aid in the larger effort. The overlapping self-interest of the partners ensures a dependable and productive shared effort.

Clearly, not every effort at collaboration is embraced by both parties. Indeed, many hopeful efforts never mature. Here an anal-

ogy of a bus is useful. No one is apt to get on a bus if they do not know where it is heading. Many people do not ride the bus the entire distance from points A to B. Yet, people will happily pay the fare to ride the bus, and share that ride with fellow travelers. In some collaborations your organization may be in the driver's seat, and in others, be merely a passenger. In either case the "fares" of co-travelers makes the ride much more cost-effective (regardless of how one measures cost).

What NYSHEI has discovered is that academic and research libraries have a vitality that is valued, though little known, beyond the usual bus routes of academia. By opening the bus doors, and accepting that new riders may only want to go a very short distance, NYSHEI has found opportunities to include other, non-traditional, riders who will eagerly climb aboard. In exchange they have welcomed us on their routes ensuring that new possibilities will flourish as we continue our journey.