Collaborative Librarianship

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Guest Editorial: Partnerships and Collaborations in Tough Times

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Guest Editorial: Partnerships and Collaborations in Tough Times

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For more than 25 years Joan Frye Williams has been a successful librarian, consultant, vendor, planner, trainer, evaluator and user of library services, with a special emphasis on innovation, technology and emerging library trends. She is the president of her own library and information technology consulting firm.

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You can find Joan and George at their joint website, http://www.georgeandjoan.com. The archived version of the Infopeople webinar on which this article is based is available for free at: http://infopeople.org/training/webcasts/webcast_data/364/index.html.

We don't need to tell anyone that these are tough times for libraries and library workers. And sometimes it feels natural to just try to hunker down and wait it out, like we might cocoon through a blizzard.

So why would we want to think about library partnerships at times like this? When we have decreasing resources concurrent with increasing demand, when community expectations for greater efficiency and cooperation continue to grow, and when we are facing questions about the relevance of the library, it's more important than ever to reach out to other organizations and individuals to align with the needs of our community.

It's not easy to create a true partnership. We like to be in control of everything that we do, and we can be pretty thin-skinned, so we avoid situations that might create criticism. We also tend to have a love/hate relationship with success, so we can be tentative about trying new things.

But these rough economic times have created some special opportunities for libraries. We know that the wolf is at the door, so we have a new sense of urgency for change. The uncertain times have provided us with cover for thinking the unthinkable, challenging some of our basic practices. And everyone is in the same boat: it's not just libraries, but other government agencies, non-profit organizations, and even for-profit companies are trying to stretch every dollar.

Before you begin to look for any new partnerships, two caveats: first, you don't add these partnerships to your ongoing work. You have to find time by cutting other tasks. And you shouldn't do all the heavy lifting yourself. Get support from your colleagues, either in your own organization or in your partner groups.

So how do we traditionally find partners? First we get an idea, and then we identify the gaps in what we need to make the idea a reality. Then we try to guess who might be sympathetic to that idea and have the assets to fill the gaps, and we invite them to collaborate, by which we usually mean, "Donate and get out of our way."

We suggest an easier route. If you know your community well, you will have cultivated contacts outside the library, people you've already talked to about the interests and assets of your individual groups. From this, you can recognize your common ground, especially your shared audiences. Then, together, you can develop ideas that take advantage of the assets you each already have.

Please note that we tend to focus our partnerships to organizations that think and act like we do. This is very limiting behavior. Contrasting organizations working together can find some amazing synergies. One example that might be easy to emulate: the Calgary, Alberta, Public Library, worked with the city police department to come up with a joint project called "It's a Crime Not to Read!" (For a brief overview of the program, see: http://www.cbe.ab.ca/Partners/Corporate/highlights_literacy.asp#crime.)

Dare to create unusual partnerships. You—and more importantly, your community—can create new opportunities and extend everyone's assets in these difficult times.