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The Real Costs and Financial Challenges of Library Networking: Part 1*

ABSTRACT

Library networking has created a number of administrative and policy issues. Questions of governance, budgeting, cooperation, and reporting lines must be addressed. In some cases, these issues must be addressed by librarians; in others, by campus administrators. In any event, the importance of the research library must be recognized, and support for the library's priorities must be marshalled.

INTRODUCTION

This conference touches on themes of major importance to each of us involved in higher education—governance, budgeting, cooperation, reporting lines. These issues, although difficult in themselves, become even more difficult when most schools face fiscal problems and when there is pressure to take advantage of recent technological advances. Administrative and policy concerns raised at this conference will be the subject of discussions at our home campuses for months, probably years, to come.

*This paper summarizes comments made by the author as part of a panel discussion titled "The Real Costs and Financial Challenges of Library Networking." Panel participants included Kenneth Gros Louis, Paul Hunt, Thomas Shaughnessy, and William Studer.

As the chief executive of the Bloomington campus of Indiana University (IU) and as chair for the past four years of the Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC), I have been involved with these concerns and how they will increasingly influence the future of research libraries. I am not a technological expert; instead my role at this conference is to look at some of those administrative and policy matters that inevitably come to mind when we examine cooperative programs of any kind.

GOVERNANCE

All universities, of course, have a long and good tradition of collegial decision making—of bottom-up planning. But I feel that the issues linked to the kinds of cooperation discussed at this conference are so diverse, so new, require such a variety of levels of expertise, and carry such enormous financial implications that some new paradigm will be necessary if we are to plan imaginatively and successfully for large-scale national arrangements that protect the resources we have been asked to preserve and that our faculty expects us to make available. In all this, it is likely that a tension will arise between those models of governance most of us are long accustomed to—not that any of them is poor or inefficient—and the growing fear that they may not be equal to the task ahead.

Certain questions are obvious and indeed have already been touched on. Some of them librarians will be answering; others chief academic officers will be answering. It may be useful to make the distinction about who will be doing what. Consider some of the questions:

1. What technologies and communication systems will be necessary in the future?
2. What features are needed to make library automation networks compatible?
3. How useful are retrieval tools to the average user, and who will be the average user?
4. Who will control access to stored information?
5. Who will determine standards, and how will they be arrived at?
6. Does increased participation in networks mean significant changes in service priorities?
7. What are the implications for each of you?

The list, of course, goes on. My own experience with the Center for Research Libraries and more recently as a member of the Commission on Preservation and Access has underlined for me that much of the current national organization structure of libraries, however successful,

still remains enormously complicated, complex, intricate, hierarchical, and mysterious. At times, membership and participation seem to depend on relatively few people at each institution, and the ability to effect national change seems increasingly limited. All of the many acronyms that define who you are and what you do mean a lot, I realize, but the acronym is not always easy to get, and the multiple acronyms sometimes confound and confuse rather than clarify.

From my perspective, it is unlikely that the current models will be appropriate for any successful planning that will lead to national networked systems. I cannot imagine what organization will make budgetary and policy decisions for multiple institutions. I cannot imagine any of the existing administrative structures responsibly taking on these issues. I cannot imagine large research libraries preserving their collections to provide access to smaller libraries, nor can I envision smaller libraries giving up a good deal of their autonomy to become in a real sense branches of larger libraries.

These are the problems that must be addressed by librarians. The kinds of issues that provosts and chief academic officers must address involve the competition between the library of the future and other priorities of our institutions. Even now, as you all well know, the establishment of priorities is difficult, often puzzling. And not only will we face competing internal objectives, we must also be aware of external forces—state and federal agencies, local political interests, regional concerns, alumni, and the citizenry at large. I am not sure that we will be able to marshal the political forces necessary to gain the support needed. Think about other issues affecting us and requiring the same marshalling of the same forces: How often can they be called upon?

BUDGETING

Brett Sutton, Charles Davis, Jim Neal, and others have described to me the issues as they perceive them. In their letters and conversations, I have been struck by the similarity, at times the repetition, of certain words, certain phrases—networks, open and public access, distributed library, integration, community, communication, interconnections, collaboration—all suggestive of cooperation in ways that we have never seen before in American higher education.

I think of the most recent meeting of the CIC on March 18, 1990, in which the chief academic officers agreed that the fiscal crises now facing most of us are unlikely to be alleviated in the years ahead. We believe that public higher education will not fare well in debates at the state and national levels, that sentiment for raising taxes will not

grow, that other demands on state and federal funds will increase, and that concerns about what we do with our resources will increasingly be central to a growingly suspicious public. How can we do more with the same dollars, or perhaps with fewer?

COOPERATION

That is the context, it seems to me, in which we must consider future scenarios, and in which we must realize that what we do may need to go far beyond what we have done or even imagined doing. The issue may not be the saving of particular traditions or even particular institutions; rather it may be a matter of preserving national resources. The CIC, for example, has been considering academic programs at each of our campuses. How many exotic programs should be offered in the Midwest? Is it possible for us to work cooperatively so that only two or three institutions offer certain programs? If we do not work cooperatively, is not there a danger that in the next decade or two it will turn out that no one in the Midwest has a program in some small enrollment area or, perhaps as bad, that half of the institutions in the region have such a program? It seems to us that only by pooling resources, not our resources but those of the nation, can we fulfill what the public, sometimes without knowing it, really expects of us.

As I cannot imagine universities doing business as usual in the next several decades, so too I cannot imagine libraries doing business as usual. I understand how enormously complex it will be for regional libraries to cooperate in collection development, resource sharing, perhaps even personnel sharing. I do not know how to do it, I am not sure it can be done, but I do believe that responses of academic officers, faculty budgetary advisory committees, and university presidents will be much more favorable if the level of cooperation among libraries is greater than it has been in the past. The real challenge is how to enhance collections with an existing or even shrinking budget by sharing collection development policies as well as databases and other means of accessing material. Ownership, like the ownership of some exotic degree program, must be abandoned in favor of access.

There are other concerns. I am not confident that integrated networks and greater cooperation will necessarily lead to better services for students and scholars. I am not even confident that such collaboration will lead to financial savings. The costs involved go well beyond the obvious investments in hardware and software and buildings, beyond the cost of staff recruitment and training.

Perhaps the issue of governance is the largest one we face. If each of us does participate in elaborate networks with other libraries, who

will bear the initial costs? The major research libraries cannot by themselves carry the burden for everyone else. I suspect that the federal government might be willing to bear a good portion of the burden if members of Congress could be persuaded, as they have been on the issue of brittle books, that a truly national effort was underway to enhance collections for students and scholars in a coherent, coordinated plan that identified specific sites for certain collections, the mode of access to those collections for others not at that site, and in ways that radically altered the nature of libraries and the role of librarians.

REPORTING LINES

If the previous issue is complex, equally so is the issue of control of information on a single campus. Who will be in charge? Librarians? Those in administrative or academic computing? Those in telecommunications? Even if that decision is made locally, what happens at regional, indeed national, levels? If there are individual czars and czarinas on campuses, can or should the library community identify such individuals for regions as well?

CONCLUSION

I always come back to the questions surrounding the process of resource allocation. At Indiana, Jim Neal, our dean of libraries, participates as a member of my campus cabinet, attends staff and dean's meetings, and is involved in the setting of campus priorities. We now face a reduction from the state for the first time in fifty years, and as we consider our basic priorities, I am pleased to say that library support has risen to the top of the list. That speaks well for Jim, for the faculty confidence in him and his staff, but also for the value that faculty and staff place on the research library. We need to tap that support, understand it, explain to it what it is we believe needs to be done, marshal and organize it, and bring it to the attention of our state legislators and members of Congress.