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The ABC's of Building Information Partnerships: Factors for Success in Building Active and Engaged Partnerships

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Abstract

Building strong information partnerships is an essential first step to effective information literacy programs and services. The overall goal of this paper is to highlight several factors that are especially useful for establishing productive relationships with a range of potential partners including students, faculty, and other campus or community partners. Five key factors for success will be discussed to help guide the development of active and engaged partnerships.

Introduction

The library profession has seen an increasing need to develop effective information literacy programs. According to the American Library Association's Special Presidential Committee, an "information-literate populace fully participates in the workplace, in their education, and in community and family life" (American Library Association, 2004). Partnerships can be instrumental in bringing together school, academic and public librarians, community members and organizations to help prepare individuals how to effectively and efficiently utilize information.

Building information literacy programs and services requires collaborative efforts and can be challenging. These challenges afford libraries exciting opportunities to be more innovative with information literacy programming and to gain new advocates or partners.

Getting Started

The act of building partnerships "should mark the first step in developing successful information literacy programs" (Lampert, 2003, p. 253). Whether librarians are working to incorporate information literacy skills into the curriculum, developing online learning modules, or reaching out to neighboring communities, information partners work together to achieve a common purpose. Partners in collaboration share the risks and responsibilities, as well as resources, skills, and benefits.

Partnerships come in all shapes and sizes; however, partnerships should allow individuals to have meaningful experiences and benefit all parties involved. Therefore,

developing a clear understanding of the advantages and challenges of partnerships is critical when planning for information literacy partnerships. Several advantages and challenges of building partnerships will be outlined.

Advantages

Libraries partnering can attract or share expertise, resources, and skills which can ultimately add value to information literacy initiatives. Partnerships can also create visibility for the library and institution. Furthermore, partnerships also ensure that library programs and services are relevant to target audiences by obtaining input and feedback throughout the partnership-building process. In addition, partnerships can lead to creative solutions which can only emerge from the different perspectives of various participants. Partnerships can also serve as powerful vehicles to support change and transition.

Other advantages of building information partnerships include discovering new models or ways of improving existing models for the delivery of information literacy tools and skills. For example, librarians working with faculty to incorporate information literacy goals into their curricula or librarians seeking to better integrate library resources into course management software for specific assignments often learn significant lessons about both user and faculty needs as a result of collaborative partnerships. Finally, partnerships can also help to improve the relationships among diverse groups within an institution, organization, or community and can lead to new initiatives.

Challenges

The partnership-building process can present some interesting challenges. These challenges should be addressed and lead to productive and successful partnerships. Major challenges focus around issues of time, communication, and clarity of purpose.

First, partnerships must have an agreed-upon purpose, vision, and goals. The lack of clarity of a partnership's purpose and expectations, including an understanding of members' roles, can lead to unnecessary misunderstandings. Therefore, it is very important to have discussions regarding how a partnership will operate. Determining how decisions will be made, how finances and any data collected will be managed or published, and what type of documentation is needed to capture the progress of activities is crucial to a healthy and successful partnership.

Partnerships are also time-intensive. Partnerships require a substantial investment of time to meet deadlines appropriately, build trust among the members, and also to achieve realistic goals. In addition, technology is seldom compatible between groups. Thus, this technological aspect can cause time delays when sharing important files. This is also important to keep in mind when planning and developing instructional programs, especially if partners have access to different versions of software. Finally, partners are not always chosen carefully. Since it is difficult to "de-partner," investing the time to make sure how a partnership can benefit all of those involved is extremely

important.

Five Factors for Successful Information Partnerships

Gaining a clear understanding of the advantages and challenges to building partnerships is essential when considering collaborative work to promote information literacy. The following five factors will also influence the success of partnerships.

Environment

To begin this work, researching the environment is an important step to building information partnerships. Determining if the climate is favorable for partnership opportunities includes knowing if there is a history of collaboration or cooperation among the partners. Other “environmental” factors to be considered include identifying possible partners that may have stake in both the process and outcome as well as having sufficient funds.

Purpose

When bringing people together for collaborative work, a careful review is needed of the vision and desired results of the partnership. Keeping in mind that “a partnership is an agreement to do something together that will benefit all involved,” the initial vision may not always meet the needs or interests of all parties and warrant some fine tuning (Frank and Smith, 2000). In addition, determining the length of the partnership’s activities (*short-term, long-term, etc.*) is important to discuss at the beginning of the partnership-building process as well as creating an atmosphere that embraces complexity, flexibility, and sometimes even ambiguity. Overall, a shared vision and unique purpose will help to define the purpose of a partnership. Furthermore, clear expectations as well as concrete and attainable goals are needed.

Participation

One of the unique strengths of collaborative work is that partnerships can bring together diverse perspectives to address an issue of common interest. Therefore, a range of knowledge, expertise, and resources should be reflected among the membership. Furthermore, actively involving all members in the development of the vision, goals, plans, and deadlines not only encourages participation but also creates a strong sense of ownership.

Accountability

Creating accountability standards helps partnerships to demonstrate their action. Accountability issues include determining the role and expected contribution of each member and defining what determines “success” for the entire group. These questions can be addressed in brainstorming sessions and refined with the total group. Outlining an action plan, determining “milestones,” and drafting responsibilities are also important for accountability.

Communication

Communication issues are important for various reasons. As mentioned, having a shared vision and clear purpose for partnering is essential. Second, communication among the entire group needs to be open and frequent. Creating feedback mechanisms for the entire group to use, such as regular in-person meetings or establishing a project web site, listserv, or web blog, can allow partners to share and contribute on an ongoing basis and also lends to a sense of comradery. In addition, determining how both informal and formal modes of communication will be utilized to communicate progress with various stakeholders (such as administration, funding agencies, etc.) needs to be considered.

Conclusion

Partnerships are instrumental in bringing people together with various skills, resources, and perspectives to creatively address issues. Partnerships for information literacy can strengthen initiatives and ensure that information literacy programs and resources are relevant for intended audiences and partners. Considering the issues of time, communication, and clarity of purpose while building partnerships can often lead to successful collaborative work. Furthermore, five key factors that can influence successful partnerships have been outlined. In summary, a “collaboration is a process that gets people to work together in new ways. The process does not end but spawns new collaborative ventures” (Winer and Ray, 2000). Overall, building information partnerships is an essential first step for librarians wishing to develop information literacy and other library programs that require collaborative work.

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