

Library Consortia and the Future of Academic Libraries

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Academic libraries are at the crossroads of dramatic change, and the pressure to adapt is increasing due to the consequences of the severe economic downturn of 2008–2009. Major concerns include ongoing budget stagnation and/or budget cuts and the need to acquire serials materials whose costs rise annually at unsustainable rates. In order to save money and streamline operations, taking advantage of consortial arrangements to eliminate redundant activities among member libraries seems more significant than ever. Fortunately, new Internet-based technologies make collaboration more possible than ever before. Library consortia are uniquely positioned to help their member libraries in this collaborative process.

Since the mid-1990s we have witnessed the rise of library consortia as a major force in the acquisition of electronic resources for libraries. This coincided with the emergence of electronic resources as an ever-increasing portion of a library's materials budget. With this trend we have seen the controversy over the "Big Deal," where libraries have chosen to purchase large packages of e-journals, rather than the old legacy model of choosing title by title and managing those titles via a subscription agent. Similar adaptation to e-books in the monographic realm remains somewhat uncertain, but consortia have been leaders in promoting large multidisciplinary e-book collections to libraries. Finally, consortia have been key in popularizing the marketing and sale of large database aggregations from vendors such as ProQuest, EBSCO, H.W. Wilson, and Gale.

Library consortia play a major role in the world of academic libraries and have been particularly influential in the following areas:

- Acquisition of electronic resources, with a particular emphasis on pricing and price models
- Negotiation as a skill to be mastered by librarians responsible for the acquisition of library resources
- Licensing terms and conditions that are acceptable in the higher education environment
- The preservation and archiving of electronic journal and other e-resource information
- The importance of usage statistics as a metric for the value of acquired information
- Developing collaborative models of print resource sharing
- Streamlining and consolidating technical services through a centralized (i.e., union) catalog
- Professional development and training
- Collaborative digitization projects, including setting standards for best practices and providing training therein
- For those consortia which are statewide or government funded, providing advocacy for libraries and library funding

This is undoubtedly a partial list; depending on the type of consortium other bullet points might be added. If one wants to peer into a crystal ball and predict how the future of academic libraries

becomes intertwined with that of library consortia, it is likely that consortia will play a key role in many of the issues listed above.

Another way to look at this might be to take a holistic view of the current library environment, casting aside old models and looking ahead to new, more sustainable ways to provide resources to library patrons. For example, with the aforementioned example of e-journal packages, in consortial negotiations we strive to move beyond legacy print-based pricing models to a database model approach. In light of the atomization of all kinds of information into discrete subsets that users want to access (e.g., songs in iTunes instead of albums or chapters within books), perhaps it's time to move beyond thinking of journals and books as we know them in print, and instead think of how that information might optimally be accessed and used in the electronic environment. With journals we see high use of articles, and metrics to measure the impact of journals persist. If faculty in the academy were to move beyond the "publish or perish" syndrome, which seems unlikely, journal impact models might become less significant. In their place might arise similar metrics to measure the value of self-publication in repositories, for example, or in other open access publishing models. In e-books or new models for e-textbooks, we will likely see new pricing models for accessing chapters of books. Pay-per-view models might in some instances supplant subscription models. Micropayment models might emerge that fit accessing microsets of information instead of entire journals or books.

Consortia, as exemplified by the activities of ICOLC, the International Coalition of Library Consortia, have helped influence the library marketplace for the aforementioned electronic resources and new approaches to pricing information. Via statements, such as the recent *Statement on the Global Economic Crisis and Its Impact on Consortial Licenses* and multiple iterations of the *ICOLC Statement of Current Perspective and Preferred Practices for Selection and Purchase of Electronic Information*, the directors of consortia have taken the lead in moving publishers to a better understanding of the library marketplace. Interactions between consortia and publishers have highlighted some of the adversarial aspects of those relationships, but it has also magnified the codependence of these two parties as they relate to the greater library environment.

Despite the emergence of open access as an alternative to the commercial publishing model, the need for libraries, consortia, and publishers to work together persists. While one can hope that new models will gain greater ascendancy, commercial publishing remains the dominant and preferred form of conveying scholarly communication among most faculty. Even with consortial collaboration, libraries have found it challenging to manage a large-scale peer-reviewed open access publishing operation, making it difficult for libraries to convince faculty that open access alternatives can replace the dedicated commercial publisher. While this is a complex topic requiring more attention than can be given in this short essay, library consortia will continue to advocate on behalf of alternative models due to the unsustainable economics of the current publishing models, where annual 5–10 percent increases are typical, while most faculty will likely persist in their support for the current peer-reviewed model with journal impact factors as the most important measure.

The consortial–publisher dance has illuminated the need for librarians to engage in the process of negotiation, which is not a skill that is emphasized in library school curricula. At the

semiannual ICOLC meetings, publishers have been invited to “vendor grille” sessions that become public negotiations of various positions regarding publishers’ approach to the library marketplace. At the individual consortial level, skilled negotiation is key to obtaining the best possible terms, conditions, and price for member libraries. It has also magnified the need to better understand publishing and to reach common ground for the greater benefit of libraries whenever possible. The biggest publishers, such as Elsevier, Wiley-Blackwell, and Springer, often present at ICOLC meetings because the ICOLC members are said to represent as much as 70 percent of the library marketplace for such publishers. Consortia have excelled at negotiation because they have a bird’s-eye view of the information marketplace that better equips them to engineer deals. Often the stand-alone library does not have as broad a view, limiting its negotiation effectiveness. The consortial view can also help reinforce and validate a particular library’s purchasing decisions, since they are aware of what their colleagues are acquiring. This helps peer institutions collaborate more effectively.

Library consortia promote new standards that are helping libraries better manage their usage statistics with Project Counter and SUSHI to standardize the transmission of statistics. Consortia are also promoting the utilization of new standards such as ONIX-PL for the XML transmission of licenses to ease the burden of license management and bring some order to the chaos of electronic resource management. Finally, consortia work with NISO, the National Information Standards Organization, to promote SERU, the Shared Electronic Resource Understanding, where libraries and vendors working together can eliminate the need for a signed license altogether to reduce the overhead costs of licensing.

In all of these scenarios consortia can play an important role as promoters of new paradigms. Consortia excel at promoting collaboration, and the most effective library consortia will move beyond being buying clubs for electronic resources and provide significant value in other ways. They might help libraries create institutional repositories, and promote the aforementioned new models for new forms of publication that move beyond the old print model. Consortia will also help libraries collaborate in other ways, including support for digitization and preservation projects and union catalogs for patron-initiated borrowing to reduce ILL costs and to create opportunities for cooperative collection development. Innovative approaches may also include technology support activities, such as helping consolidate redundant technical services activities among member libraries. As libraries move print resources into storage to create more public services space, consortia will assist in the creation of print repositories and finding aids that will hold the copy of record for a particular work.

These are but a few concrete examples where consortia will be partners with their libraries, helping libraries adapt to the rapidly changing information landscape. As commercial publishing will continue to play a major role in the mix of library resources, consortia will continue to play a key role in the negotiation and licensing of electronic resources, providing significant savings to libraries when the cost of those acquisitions would otherwise be unaffordable. As library budgets shrink and the old ways of operating become economically untenable, consortia become more important than ever.