

Collaboration in Maine Libraries

by David Nutty and Joyce Rumery

Maine libraries and librarians have a long history of statewide collaborations and cooperation. In fact, Maine was home to one of the earliest Union Lists of Serials (discussion started in 1915) and was among the first state in the country to adopt an online card catalog and computerized integrated library system in the early 1980s. Uniquely, both were multi-library type collaborations with public libraries, public academic libraries, three private liberal arts colleges, and the state library. Eight Maine library directors first met together as “Larger Libraries” in the 1930s to talk about collaborative projects and issues of mutual interest (Jackson Sanborn and Nutty 2013).

To this day multi-type library consortiums and initiatives are common in the state (see article by Bryce Cundick and James Jackson Sanborn in this issue) for the delivery of library technology, a statewide delivery system for books, shared collection development strategies, and other initiatives. Such similar arrangements are found in many states, but they almost always aligned within one library type, such as a shared catalog among academic libraries, or among only private liberal arts college libraries, or among a group of public libraries. The degree of openness to collaboration and sharing among all libraries has made Maine stand out as a model in statewide cooperation. At national conferences, it has been common for colleagues or vendors to remark on this statewide attitude for which Maine is known within the profession.

Libraries that work together recognize their similarities, not just their differences. This recognition results in outward facing initiatives and projects, not only for a common good, but often for efficiencies and fiscal benefits for the participants. For example, in many

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states each mid- to large-sized academic library will have its own library software system and online catalog managed by a local technology department. This arrangement is much more costly than the Maine InfoNet or Balsam models, where large numbers of libraries join together to support centralized software and technical assistance.

These activities have evolved because of relationships built over time by library leaders and staff, as well as through very conscious efforts to nurture these relationships. Collaborations require trust and trust is built through knowing each other. The COVID-19 pandemic may have eliminated in-person meetings, but it did not radically change the relationships that had been developed over the years. The large number of retirements and turnover at the library director level in recent years, however, has

served to end these long-established working arrangements.

With tight budgets, staffing issues and the myriad demands on library staff’s time, it is easy for library leaders to focus inward. However, efforts to continue Maine’s collaborative success, a deserved point of pride for Maine libraries, are well rewarded by committing to a common good with an outward focus. The rewards are substantial for our users, for the state collectively, and for our individual libraries. It is also good public policy. We urge current Maine library leaders to recommit to robust statewide and multi-library collaborations. They make all libraries stronger and enhance the services and resources for our users.

REFERENCES

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