

Maine Libraries: An Update on Sharing and Collaboration

by Bryce Cundick and James Jackson Sanborn

In *Maine Policy Review's* 2013 special issue on libraries, David Nutty and James Jackson Sanborn (2013) gave a strong overview of the collaboration between libraries in the state from the early 1900s to the then-present day. However, over the following years, several significant changes have occurred in Maine's library landscape, which we will cover in this update.

Some changes are stark. For example, the Maine Health Science Libraries & Information Consortium (HSLIC), highlighted in the 2013 article, voted to disband in December 2018, and encouraged their remaining members to participate in North Atlantic Health Sciences Libraries (NAHSL). Funding levels, technological changes, and an ever-changing attitude to the access and evaluation of information can result in some large shifts in the library landscape. However, for the most part, the changes that have occurred in the past 11 years are an evolution and response to current events.

REVITALIZATION OF THE MAINE LIBRARY ASSOCIATION

An excellent example of these kinds of shifts is the renewed interest in and influence of the Maine Library Association (MLA). In 2012, MLA's total membership had eroded to the mid-200s, half its membership in the 1990s. This membership decrease was likely due to multiple factors: change-over in membership, a significant technological shift to more online material,

and a general questioning on where exactly the future of libraries lay. For a time, some within the organization were hearing librarians questioning the need for a statewide organization because they believed they could participate at the regional level with no real loss.

However, since that time, MLA's membership levels have soared to its current level of 969, an increase of over 400 percent. The organization has proved its ability to facilitate cooperation across libraries: continuing to host its yearly conference, bolstering its capacity for statewide advocacy, and adding virtual events for different interest groups. This change also illustrates a larger shift, as library workers in positions other than director have shown an increasing desire to connect and collaborate. To meet this need, MLA has started to host regular smaller events like virtual coffee chats around various topics, or in-person socials. This greater involvement from across the library community offers the promise of more collaboration and cooperation at all levels of library efforts.

GROWTH OF CONSORTIAL CATALOG SYSTEMS

Since the 1990s, shared library catalog systems have been a key feature helping to define library collaboration in Maine. The past decade has seen further growth and development of both existing and new consortia based around shared catalogs, collections,

and services. At the same time, we have seen a growing divergence between public and academic libraries in terms of collections and services, which has led to differing system needs that have strained longstanding partnerships.

The Minerva group of libraries is a self-governing consortium that operates under the auspices of the Maine InfoNet collaborative. Since its inception in 1996, Minerva has been a multitype organization comprising public, academic, school, and special libraries. Sharing in Minerva operates under the policy of "open lending," which dictates that libraries share their collections openly with the other member libraries. In 2014, there were 56 member libraries in Minerva. Over the last 10 years, Minerva has added 10 more public libraries to its ranks, but lost two academic libraries and two school libraries, bringing the current membership total to 62. Both academic libraries that left Minerva did so as a result of the de-centering of physical collections at their libraries and the move to all-digital (in one case) and digital primary (in the other) collections. The two school libraries that left Minerva did so because of budget issues in their respective school districts. The loss of school and special libraries from Minerva is keenly felt at the governing executive committee, as it has been increasingly hard for the organization to fill seats previously reserved for representation of those types of libraries. Whether it is the addition of the new libraries to Minerva, or the aforementioned growth of partnerships at the staff level that have enabled the change, Minerva has taken on a larger role in training staff and in governing their daily operations through increased activity and leadership within the cataloging and circulation committees. Most notably,

Minerva is now funding a part-time cataloging specialist whose work helps with both data cleanup and with training and support of catalogers within the consortium.

The success of the Minerva group, which caters to the needs of mid- to larger-sized libraries in Maine, helped highlight the needs of smaller libraries to have access to robust sharing networks. For budgetary and staffing reasons these libraries needed a simple, cost-effective but full-featured system. In 2014, the first two libraries went live in the MILS (Maine InfoNet Library System) consortium. This system, managed and governed by Maine InfoNet, was designed to meet the needs of smaller libraries and is priced on a sliding scale based on the population of the town served by the library. MILS followed the successful model of Minerva and operates on the principles of patron-initiated open lending within the consortium along with direct access to the MaineCat requesting and lending system. MILS has grown quickly and now supports 29 libraries with more libraries lined up to become members.

The Balsam library system, an independent group, which in 2013 included 12 libraries sharing an open-source library catalog known as Evergreen, has also continued to grow and evolve. The Balsam library system now supports 33 library systems, with a strong showing of multi-library school systems. Some of these libraries are very small and run by volunteers, while others are larger with paid staff and strong collections. Balsam libraries do not require open lending between their libraries, but in recent years they have enabled patron-initiated interlibrary requesting and lending on an opt-in, per library basis. Currently 12 member libraries support this function.

Work has been ongoing, but has not yet been completed, to build a technical bridge between the Balsam System and the MaineCat system.

The newest shared catalog system in Maine is the Chickadee Library System. This consortium formed in the fall of 2023 with start-up and organizational support from Maine InfoNet. The Chickadee libraries are all located in the Sebago Lake area of Maine, and they share a catalog system powered by the open-source library software called Koha. Unlike Minerva and MILS, which both receive direct technical support from staff at Maine InfoNet, Chickadee libraries receive their support through a contract with ByWater Solutions, a vendor specializing in support of the Koha software.

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The oldest shared library system in the state, URSUS, which formed in the mid-1980s, has recently undertaken steps to radically change how the group functions. As the result of a request for proposal (RFP) process, the URSUS system has divided into two systems: one catering to the needs of the academic libraries of the University of Maine System and one focusing on the needs of the system's public library members. This division was not due to disagreement or acrimony between the two types of libraries, but rather through a growing realization that the needs of academic and public libraries were diverging. Academic libraries have continued to increase electronic collections,

which demand a different workflow from the library management systems—a workflow not supported by traditional legacy catalog systems. While public libraries do offer electronic collections, they have continued to focus on physical collections with a new emphasis on social connectivity and community building.

The new system supporting the University of Maine System Libraries went live in June 2024, while the new system that will bring together Portland Public Library, Bangor Public Library, the Maine State Library, and the Maine Law and Legislative Library will be rolled out in early 2025. At the same time, all former URSUS directors agreed on the importance of continued collaboration. As a result, several committees have been formed with representatives from both public and academic libraries, focused on continuing the strong relations across library types. These involve staff at all levels of member libraries. The inclusion of the state's largest public library, Portland Public Library, in a consortial system, a long-standing yet previously elusive goal, is a notable achievement for the URSUS group. Their participation in the committees and planning should help ensure success of the newly reformed group.

LIBRARY LEADERSHIP CHANGES

After years of relative stability at the director level in Maine, there has recently been a lot of turnover at both public and academic libraries. It is hard to determine if this is the result of regular demographic and economic pressures or the result of COVID-related changes to library services. However, since 2019, statistics drawn

from the Maine Public Libraries Annual Report website¹ show a total of 203 director changes in public libraries. In a state with 257 public libraries, that total represents a massive upheaval. These changes were not necessarily uniformly distributed across all public libraries, however, as some libraries had multiple director changes in that time period.

Academic libraries were also not immune to this trend. There have been director changes at seven of the eight University of Maine System libraries and also at six of the seven Maine Community College System libraries. Private colleges and universities have also seen turnover in the top position, with library director changes at Colby College, Bowdoin College, Husson University, Unity Environmental University, Thomas College, and College of the Atlantic.

This turnover has not been without consequence. Libraries across the state had benefited from the longstanding congenial cooperation of directors who had been in their positions for a decade or more. After such a quick change, however, it takes time to create new relationships. For example, the larger libraries group mentioned in Jackson Sanborn and Nutty (2013) has only met once in the past two years, as directors have focused on settling into their individual organizations before being widening their scope. This same shift is present across the library landscape of Maine, and it remains to be seen what new relationships and efforts will grow from the changeover of leaders. Similarly, the Maine Shared Collections Cooperative has not met often in recent years. While the member libraries still honor their commitments to cooperatively preserve monographs, there has not been any significant extension or evolution of the work originally performed.

CHANGES AT THE STATE LIBRARY

The State Library was also affected by the trend of leadership changes, with State Librarian Jamie Ritter leaving in 2022 and being replaced by Lori Fisher. Under her direction, the State Library has undertaken some significant new endeavors. Notably, it ran two separate RFPs last year to renew contracts for the statewide van delivery service and statewide shared electronic databases. Due to delays in the RFP process, the van delivery service was paused for several weeks, which resulted in a slew of emails and phone calls from patrons concerned the service might disappear. Thankfully, it started up again at the end of August, but that outpouring of consternation highlights how important this service is to the state as a way to connect its many smaller libraries to resources that go far beyond the books in their physical stacks.

Another MSL offering, the Maine MARVEL! Service (see Jackson Sanborn and Nutty 2013) has been rebranded as the new Digital Maine Library. It offers the same types of databases as MARVEL! although some of the platforms have changed. The state library has also joined with the Maine State Archives and community organizations across the state to establish the DigitalMaine Repository, Maine's service hub for the Digital Public Library of America (DPLA). It focuses on making digital collections from all Maine cultural institutions freely accessible to the world.

Additionally, some of the infrastructure the state library uses to facilitate cooperation across the state has changed. The District Liaison Committee and the three library districts were reformed into a system of nine

different regions, each with its own staff consultant. As new challenges and opportunities arise, the state library will continue to adapt to best serve the needs of Maine's citizens and libraries.

WHAT LIES AHEAD?

If the past 11 years have taught anything about libraries in the state, it's that the future will bring new challenges and libraries must work together to address them as they arrive. When the internet burst onto the scene in the 1990s, many saw it as a challenge to the fundamental concept of libraries, a challenge that only grew in the minds of many when Google rose to importance. In a world where anyone could get the answer to anything with a few clicks of a keyboard, what role could libraries play?

Of course, the answer is clearer than ever today, in a landscape where misinformation has increased to the point that many struggle to accurately evaluate the validity of a source. Libraries and librarians play an increasingly important role in helping their patrons navigate this bewildering situation. By providing access to quality information sources and teaching users how to use them, libraries help people learn about trusted, reliable approaches to finding anything they might need.

So, what might the next 10 years hold for libraries in Maine, and how can they best prepare for that future? The advent of generative text and artificial intelligence and their swift rise to prominence across all sectors illustrate how quickly things can change. Once again, some begin to question the role libraries might plan in this new reality. At present, GPT (generative pretrained transformer) provides unreliable results to questions; even if and when its accuracy and reliability improve, it will still be

important that users understand the source of the information and how or why it may be biased. Much as librarians help users effectively run web searches, they might show users how to create the best prompts for getting the most reliable and accurate results from AI. To provide such services, however, it's important that Maine library staff develop the proper skillset. Maine has a high number of small libraries with limited staffing and budgets, which makes it difficult for the staff to attend conferences and training. Partnerships with larger libraries or the state library can go a long way to bridging this gap.

While we have seen some retrenchment in the activity of historical partnerships, Maine libraries retain a strong sense of the value of collaborative effort, which can be clearly seen in the growth of both existing and new consortial library partnerships. As these libraries grow comfortable in their new shared systems, and as the recently appointed library directors across the state are able to shape their organizations and begin to look outward, we feel confident that collaborative groups, both old and new, will experience a rebound in the level of their shared activities.

Ultimately, predicting the future is becoming more and more difficult. However, because of the many different close ties Maine libraries have developed, they are well positioned to handle and adapt to the changes as they arise.

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NOTES

1 <https://www.maine.gov/msl/libs/statistics/annual/index.shtml>

REFERENCES

Jackson Sanborn, James, and David Nutty. 2013. "Maine Libraries: A History of Sharing and Collaboration." *Maine Policy Review* 22(1) 52-61. <https://doi.org/10.53558/UWTC5712>.