

ISSUE BRIEF

Restructuring Library Collaboration

Strategy, Membership, Governance

March 6, 2019

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ITHAKA S+R



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We thank Ex Libris for their sponsorship of this research.



Academic libraries typically serve individual higher education institutions, yet their objectives require that they achieve greater negotiating power, more efficient distribution of collections, and stronger systems and services than even the largest academic library can provide itself. As a result, academic libraries have sought for more than a century to generate cross-institutional scale. In this paper, I examine efforts to generate that scale, including consortia and other membership organizations, which collectively I term “collaborative vehicles.” Yet collaboration is not good in itself, but rather only insofar as it supports libraries’ objectives as they develop and change over time. One of the great challenges facing academic library leaders is their understandable desire that their collaborative vehicles stay in sync with changes in their own objectives and the broader context in which they operate.

Library collaborative vehicles are at a crossroads. Many were initially organized to serve needs in a primarily print environment, often to facilitate resource sharing. Today, many academic libraries participate in what seems to be an over-abundance of collaborative vehicles, many of them membership organizations, including library consortia. And so these collaborative vehicles are facing a variety of pressures to show their value and differentiate themselves from peers. The consortia that were organized for print-related purposes especially need to grapple with how to adapt, if they are not doing so already. Adaptation in this case often includes a fairly fundamental rethinking of mission, membership, funding, and governance.¹

Ithaka S+R has conducted a number of formal and informal engagements with academic library consortia (defined hereafter to include higher education systems’ library offices and other collaborative enterprises). These have included:

- Consulting projects to help consortia examine their current strategy and structure;
- Convening sessions to help consortia and their members examine their objectives in a variety of areas looking out into the future;
- Visits with numerous consortia, both with staff and with membership;

To supplement the perspective that is generated from this work, I collected background information from a dozen consortia about their mission, membership, governance, and funding. Since I began working on this project, Lorcan Dempsey prepared a series of

¹ For reading drafts of this paper and providing tremendously helpful suggestions, I thank John Burger, Trevor Dawes, Kimberly Lutz, Tim McGeary, Deanna Marcum, Susan Parker, and Oya Rieger.

blog posts reflecting on library consortia and collaboration, and I benefited substantially from the ideas he surfaced.²

History

Libraries have a proud history of seeking cross-institutional scale. Many library collaborations have their roots in the dream of the universal collection, which is to say the ability to make available every book any reader could possibly want, delivered as efficiently and seamlessly as systems could enable.³ Library priorities have included resource sharing, shared systems, and collective buying. A selected version of some of this history can help to inform needs and best approaches today.⁴

Resource Sharing

Achieving the dream of the universal collection, leaders could see from the beginning, would require what we now call resource sharing. From the beginning of the 20th Century, library leaders began establishing interlibrary lending networks that were designed to ensure that libraries could collaborate as effectively as possible to move items between unaffiliated libraries to support patron needs. These lending networks were in many cases supplemented with a set of union catalogs designed to increase the efficiency of borrowing. Eventually, various kinds of library systems were developed to bring interlibrary lending to the digital environment.

Another comparatively early model for collaboration around collections is the entity we now know as the Center for Research Libraries. It was originally created as the shared offsite storage for a small group of major universities most of which now comprise what we know as the Big 10. That initiative -- “the Midwest Interlibrary Center” -- was designed in the World War II era, when expanding individual campus libraries would have been impossible, and launched in the post-war period, to provide a shared offsite storage facility. Over time, two factors caused its model and mission to change. First, it

² Lorcan Dempsey, “The Powers of Library Consortia,” (four part blog series), *Lorcan Dempsey's Weblog*, February 28 – June 20, 2018, <http://orweblog.oclc.org/the-powers-of-library-consortia-1-how-consortia-scale-capacity-learning-innovation-and-influence/>.

³ This is a topic that my colleague Deanna Marcum and I are writing about in a book that is forthcoming from Princeton University Press.

⁴ One area I have intentionally omitted from this selected history is collaboration around digital preservation of published materials. There is a rich and important history, and associated key success factors, which my colleague Oya Rieger and I plan to examine in an upcoming project.

was possible for individual campuses once again to make capital investments in their library facilities. But, more importantly, the collections of the Midwest Interlibrary Center were borrowed more and more by non-library members, and a substantial free-rider problem grew up as a result. To address these changes, the membership was expanded from regional to national and the mission of the center was shifted, along with its name, to be about collecting materials that would be rare or uncollected otherwise across North American research libraries.⁵

A newer area of activity for consortia is a return to resource sharing, albeit with a model now known as shared print. Today, we see many existing consortia, and a number of new ones, establishing networks designed to help them manage down their print collections, to use a term coined by Lorcan Dempsey. They are designed to ensure that an appropriate number of copies of print materials are maintained and remain available when needed, even as duplication is reduced substantially. Starting with journal backfiles, these shared print initiatives now are beginning to cover book collections and in at least one case shared data preservation as well.⁶

Shared Systems

Libraries have for many decades sought to build systems that allowed them to collectivize the challenges of resource description discovery.

The need for scale in collections description efforts, or library cataloging, was identified early, well before network technologies developed. The Library of Congress began distributing catalog cards to enable local libraries to populate their own catalogs more efficiently, a smart central process that saved resources and improved discovery and access.

This approach gave way when OCLC created not only the systems infrastructure, but also an innovative business model, that enabled libraries to share their cataloging information and customize it, eventually on something approaching a peer-to-peer basis. Like other organizations discussed in this paper, it was created as a membership organization, albeit one that would encourage every library to join as a member and thereby to grow to include tens of thousands of libraries worldwide.

⁵ I have written about the fundamental challenges associated with organizing preservation activities regionally in "Taking Stock: Sharing Responsibility for Print Preservation," Ithaka S+R, July 8, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.241080>.

⁶ See EAST (<https://eastlibraries.org/>) and the COPPUL Digital Stewardship Network (<https://coppul.ca/digital-preservation>).

As technology-based products have become the heart of these library systems, which increasingly serve as infrastructure for collaboration, real questions have emerged about whether they themselves should be built collaboratively. Both the categories of integrated library systems and institutional repositories have their history in systems created by individual libraries or library collaboratives. In both cases, commercial providers have in recent years taken the lead, not least because they were quicker to invest in the transition away from a locally hosted architecture to the cloud-based multi-tenant models that themselves seem to be major collaboration enablers. The competition between collaborative and commercial models for developing systems to enable collaboration is an important matter that for many remains unresolved.

Collective Purchasing

Efforts to purchase collectively, so that a group of institutions buys only one copy of an item that can then be shared, has a long history. It includes a number of local and consortial targeted efforts, as well as wide information-sharing tools like the RLG Conspectus, designed to help research libraries understand one another's collection focus areas. Of course, in a digital environment, probably the most frequent area for cross-institutional collaboration is a new kind of collective purchasing, content licensing.

In content licensing, many libraries have seen the potential for driving significant scale in negotiations, as a vehicle for driving down price and achieving other preferred terms.⁷ Content providers, in turn, have favored consortia as vehicles for driving down the cost of sales. Sometimes collective purchasing is managed through core funding (for example through a state) to support their licensing activity, sometimes licenses are negotiated on a purely opt-in basis on behalf of members, and sometimes multiple models are at work concurrently.

Membership Organizations

Today, libraries continue to seek to generate scale as a mechanism to enhance their efficiency and improve their services. The purposes that they are trying to achieve as a result of scale have evolved or expanded considerably. They have moved beyond ILL to include shared print, beyond shared purchasing to shared licensing, and beyond shared cataloging to shared systems. The basic questions still remain: What are the best ways to

⁷ For a look at some recent issues and tactics, see my "Advocating for Change by Limiting New Business: An Interview with BTAA's Kimberly Armstrong," *The Scholarly Kitchen*, August 15, 2018, <https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2018/08/15/advocating-change-btaa/>.

generate cross-institutional scale? The models for achieving scale may vary depending on the purpose.

Almost all of the collaborative vehicles mentioned above, and many more like them, are membership organizations. Membership organizations are characterized by an inclusive governance model in which each of the members has some portion of a “vote” in the key decisions of the organization.⁸

Inclusive governance typically means that the governing board members are elected from among the members. In some cases, this yields frequent rotations at a board level, which can in turn make it difficult to set an unambiguous strategic direction and follow that direction purposefully over a sustained period of time. Inclusive governance can also require that all the members vote on budget approval, which is an important way to ensure alignment but also can yield challenges in terms of strategic agility.

For many membership organizations, revenue is generated through some kind of annual membership fee. Because the membership fee covers a variety of core operational services but is unconnected from any single product or service that the consortia provides, members over time can become jaded about the value of the price they are paying. This becomes especially problematic if the work of the consortium has drifted from its original objective or is no longer suited to a member’s current priorities.

Membership fee models frequently involve a fee structure that focuses on minimum operating revenue. Consequently, they have little means to generate the surpluses or other access to capital necessary to rebuild themselves over time.

Trust Networks

All of the organizational models referred to in this paper are not-for-profit organizations. For many efforts to achieve cross-institutional scale, the most important question about organizational form is what the principal purpose of the shared effort is to be. Many of the collaborative vehicles have at their heart the need to generate trust among their members on a certain topic or set of priorities, such as content licensing or collection management. I call these trust networks.

⁸ Membership organizations are distinguished from the other major form of not-for-profit organization, in which the board of trustees is self-perpetuating, in electing its own successors. There are also hybrid models.

Trust networks have, as their most substantial intangible asset, the trust among their participants. Trust networks are especially important for the longest term commitments, such as shared print and other forms of preservation. But to the extent that members have a deep trust relationship even for content licensing, it enables them to focus on the broader benefits they receive through their collaboration rather than attempting to calculate which member individually benefits more or less from each transaction.

A key challenge facing trust networks is that it is not simple to create a trust network that is durable across the leadership transitions of its participating organizations. One reason is that while the library directors, when they convene, may come to trust one another deeply, it is an altogether different task to institute the kind of organizational change needed to ensure that each of their organizations trust one another. When there is a leadership change, either at the level of the library director or sometimes higher up, such as the provost, if trust has not been institutionalized it can dissipate with remarkable speed.

Consortia

Consortia are collaborative vehicles that bring together a subset of libraries, but do not intend to encompass all libraries. There are many dozens of academic library consortia in the United States alone, representing different groupings of institutions that have come together based on institutional type, through membership in a shared state system, on a regional basis, or otherwise.

Many consortia are membership organizations. When they are, it is most typically the directors of the member libraries that serve in a governance role. In these cases, there is often a very direct connection between the work of the consortium and its governance.

Other consortia membership organizations have provosts or other organizational leaders serving at least formally in a governance role. These models can add organizational power but if not handled delicately can also complicate the relationship between the executive director and the member library directors.

A minority of consortia are not membership organizations. Some are parts of state university systems, in which case they are often called a “system office.” System offices are sometimes funded directly by the state or university system, and there are sometimes elaborate advisory bodies among the “member” libraries in an effort to ensure adequate communications and alignment.

Many consortia were founded during the print era. As a result of the logistics associated with sharing print collections, and travel and transportation generally, they often have a regional structure. The regional structure therefore may not always be as essential today as it once was.

Other consortia, especially newer ones, have been organized for a variety of other or additional purposes. For example, the NERL licensing consortium of the major research libraries, although founded as the “NorthEast Research Libraries” has since come to represent many of the largest research libraries of private universities from across the country in license negotiations. While not all consortia today are “buying clubs,” the vast majority of academic library consortia have at least some licensing activity, and it is the major activity for many consortia.

Consortia that are membership organizations typically build their fee structure around an annual membership fee, whether a flat fee or set on some kind of tiered basis, for example by library materials expenditure or FTE. There can also be added fees for particular services or content licenses.

To achieve their objectives, especially around resource sharing, some consortia have determined that running a common integrated library system will be a key enabler. Sometimes, the consortium has conducted a common RFP and signed a collective contract. Sometimes, the consortium’s central office has provided hosting or first-tier support.

Challenges

Today, existing library collaborations are facing a number of challenges. The search for cross-institutional scale is no less important, but to remain successful collaborative vehicles will need to navigate a number of major shifts and pressures.

The Transition to Open Access

The transition towards increasing open access is putting real pressure on many library consortia. Those consortia that facilitate licensing subscriptions have developed strong internal processes, communications, and systems to support this work. But as they increasingly seek to negotiate a variety of license agreements that resist current models or instantiate new kinds of models such as Read & Publish, they face a number of limitations. Most obviously, many lack the scale of membership and ability to achieve unanimity among them that are necessary to secure transformative agreements. In addition, many lack the systems, for example those that manage budget allocations and

transfers, necessary to enable open access or hybrid models. For consortia whose value proposition has principally been seen to come from monies saved through licensing, some open models may diminish its value proposition. As one reader put it, “those consortia that rely on marginal profits from group purchasing to generate operating revenues will need to develop new business models as OA systems become common place.”

Ultimately, the lack of systems to enable open access is a part of a broader challenge. Many consortia are beginning to face questions about the degree to which collections and systems are beginning to meld with one another. They cannot treat content licensing or collections management as priorities removed from the systems and platforms that enable their use. These factors are exacerbated by budget structures that do not acknowledge the emerging reality.

Systems and Sharing

Resource sharing and the library systems that support them is another important area where consortia face some challenges to their practices.

The increased reliance on digital formats and the comparatively if not absolute decline in usage of print has reduced demand for “returnable” resource sharing, creating some real value imbalances in many traditional systems. In addition, dramatic improvements in logistics associated with package delivery and tracking has created substantial growth in user expectations. The mismatch between actual demand and user expectations has put pressure on the existing logistics networks and systems that undergird them.

The consortia that run library systems ultimately do so in support of various kinds of shared purchasing and resource sharing. They have faced dilemmas about whether and when to upgrade to the cloud-based offerings. Those consortia that have upgraded have found themselves and their members devoting substantial staff resources, and even leadership bandwidth, to the technical complexities of these systems migrations. In too many cases, the complexity of the migration has caused leaders to lose sight of the purpose of the systems migration. Is it simply about getting off an outdated architecture? Or is it about something more strategic, such as driving efficiencies across the consortium or enabling a new generation of user services? The promise of these new platforms has been transformational, but if the leaders of library groups are not prepared to seize the opportunity as soon as the new system is implemented, it can take several years to generate that momentum if it is possible to do so at all.

Funding and Value

Finally, funding is a key factor. It is not necessary to rehearse once again the stagnation or decline in public support for higher education we have seen in many states. As a result of these declines, and other factors, many libraries are seeing continued scrutiny of their budgets. This has caused pressures on a number of their providers, including consortia and other membership organizations.

For trust networks, membership organizations, and consortia alike, interlocking memberships can pose a real challenge to libraries. Many libraries and publishers are members of a large number of collaborations, including trust networks, consortia, and membership organizations. Sorting through all these relationships can be a challenge for the individual organization. Each comes with its own overhead, in terms of both budget and governance.

Of course, when one looks at the allocations from an academic library to all its collaborative vehicles, they generally represent a very small percentage of the overall budget. So funding may be less of a factor than value. And indeed, it is unusual to see libraries with sufficient trust in their collaborations to remake themselves around them; and thereby extract the maximum value they possibly can from cross-institutional scale. If libraries cannot maximize the value they derive from collaborative vehicles, there is a risk that some come to be perceived by library leaders as little more than expensive goodwill efforts.

On the one hand, membership models tend to be durable because once organizations are sufficiently well established there can be a kind of peer pressure to remain in the club. This has to some degree shielded them from market pressure.

But, in recent years, library leaders have increasingly spoken up about concerns they have paying recurring membership fees for their collaborative vehicles. They have wondered about the implications of withdrawing from a number of them. In some cases, as we have seen with the single-purpose Digital Preservation Network (DPN), membership-type models are not always sustainable. Some have described a membership crisis facing our collaborative vehicles.

Some traditional consortia are also experiencing membership pressures. Because consortia are typically not single purpose organizations, they have tended to be more adaptable. For them, even if few have closed, the shake out is all about realigning their mission and their membership for today's needs. In some cases, this could mean an increasing turn towards mergers, where work practices may have changed and missions may align.

Needs

Academic library priorities have changed substantially over the past twenty years, a factor both of changes in the nature of the information ecosystem and of changes to the overall business model of higher education institutions. As library priorities have changed, so too have their objectives for cross-institutional scale.

The essential transformations facing the academic library are well known. Our format and collections transitions are most well known: from print towards electronic, from local towards shared, from licensed towards open, from general towards distinctive. But there is also a transition taking place beyond collections as the heart of the library's work towards user workflows taking primacy, and associated shifts in the librarian's role.⁹

These latter shifts towards workflows and in the librarians' roles get at the underlying transformation that many library leaders are navigating: to ensure the library remains aligned with the university or to realign it accordingly. Libraries seek to demonstrate direct contributions they make to student success, research excellence, and community development in ways they never before sought to do. To make these contributions and to measure them, libraries need to build closer collaborations within and beyond their parent organizations and integrate with university data and systems in ways they never before had to do.

In recent years, the academic library community has expressed a variety of new and emerging priorities that can benefit from cross-institutional scale. These types of needs suggest a radically new role for work at scale. But equally, they suggest challenges in adapting existing collaborative vehicles to support new needs.

Structural Observations

As collaborative vehicles face renewed pressure to modernize their work, they are facing a variety of structural considerations. For example, a consortium grounded in resource sharing can no longer hope to lead in this area without taking on complicated systems implementations. Or, a membership organization charged with creating a key piece of systems infrastructure faces competition from commercial providers and lacks the strategic agility to keep up. In these pressures, there are some underlying strategic dynamics.

⁹ I have provided an overview and diagram of them in this post: "Essential Transformations," Ithaka S+R, January 12, 2018, <https://sr.ithaka.org/blog/essential-transformations/>.

First, in these organizational shifts, we see consortia and other collaborative vehicles being asked to move well beyond inclusively governed trust networks to take on a different kind of role. They are being asked to deliver a given service efficiently, in a competitive environment, rather than simply being a shared vehicle for trusted exchange. Many collaborative vehicles have come to straddle these two categories (trust network and product organization) at least to some degree. But it is not easy to do both. The key question is whether to optimize for strategic agility or inclusive governance. To the extent that service efficiency or strategic agility have become prized characteristics, membership organizations may be the wrong organizational form for their provision.

Second, in order to deeply benefit from the kinds of cross-institutional scale discussed again and again in this paper, individual libraries must fully integrate the mission of the collaborative vehicle into their own work, staffing, and organizational structure. Yet there are many cases where individual libraries have shied away from making the kinds of changes to operational process and organizational form needed in order to maximally benefit from, and therefore maximally rely upon, collaborative vehicles.

Finally, we see a proliferation of collaborative vehicles, each taking on a different set of ambitions. One reason for this is that, at least in their simple form, the ambitions of a membership organization must be coterminous with the scope of its membership; any member uninterested in its work is a major strategic drag, while any organization outside the membership wanting to benefit from its work is a free rider. So a different organization is created for each new purpose, to get the scope of the membership exactly right.

But there are other reasons also, which are less structural but deserve attention nevertheless. Our profession has chosen to recognize and reward leaders for creating new organizations. There is as a result an incentive to create a new organization above and beyond the needs of the libraries themselves.

It can be problematic to repurpose a given trust network for a new purpose without carefully assessing its governance and capabilities, but at the same time each organization has governance obligations and other forms of overhead as well. We are also seeing a number of structural challenges driven by efforts to adapt existing organizations and organization models to new purposes.

Organizational Transformation

There appears to be something of a cycle of organizational transformations. The last cycle peaked around 2008, in a period of resource constraints as a result of the economic

recession. During that period, for example, OCLC severed its relationship with its regional networks, three of which merged to form Lyris; while DuraSpace was forged out of the merger of Fedora Commons and the DSpace Federation. Now, it appears we are hitting the peak of a new cycle of organizational transformations among academic library collaborative vehicles.

Most vividly, we see announcements of mergers and even outright closures. For example, just in the past six months,

- The Digital Preservation Network has been “sunsetting,” winding down its operations;¹⁰
- DuraSpace is merging into Lyris, bringing together what could become a scholarly communications powerhouse;¹¹ and
- NFAIS is merging into NISO, creating some interesting synergies across two organizations that create a substantial amount of community programming.¹²

Each has its own distinct story, but a common thread across these three is that reducing the membership fee burden on academic libraries and other member categories is at least one of the drivers.

In a way, the comparatively small number of mergers and closures only serves to mask the far greater number of organizational pivots. Perhaps most difficult among recent pivots was the Digital Public Library of American (DPLA), which incurred some negative publicity as it terminated or failed to renew a number of employees late in 2018 as part of its effort to put a greater share of its resources towards ebooks.¹³

Over the past two years, there have been a number of consortia that have also sought to substantially redirect their work. For example, consortia that devoted substantial resources to managing ILS systems for their members have sought new identities as they helped their members migrate to cloud-based offerings. And, consortia that have been

¹⁰ Roger C. Schonfeld, “Why Is the Digital Preservation Network Disbanding?” *The Scholarly Kitchen*, December 13, 2018, <https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2018/12/13/digital-preservation-network-disband/>.

¹¹ Roger C. Schonfeld, “More Scholarly Communications Consolidation as Institutional Repository Provider DuraSpace Merges into Lyris,” *The Scholarly Kitchen*, January 25, 2019, <https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2019/01/25/lyris-duraspace-merger/>.

¹² Todd A. Carpenter, “NISO and NFAIS Announce Plans to Merge,” *The Scholarly Kitchen*, February 14, 2019, <https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2019/02/14/niso-and-nfa-is-announce-plans-to-merger/>.

¹³ Roger C. Schonfeld, “Learning Lessons from DPLA,” *The Scholarly Kitchen*, November 13, 2018, <https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2018/11/13/learning-lessons-from-dpla/>.

substantially involved in resource-sharing have made efforts to rethink the primacy of this work to the extent that print circulation has declined, in some cases by investing in creating systems infrastructure that they believe will allow them to bring greater efficiencies to this work. Finally, in cases where university systems have changed budget allocations to the system office or the libraries, there can be substantial pressure to adapt structure accordingly.

The work of redirecting a consortium is not simple. How can the leaders of library members, the individuals involved in governance, focus their governance bandwidth not on the day-to-day shortfalls in the services that ultimately they wish to move away from and towards the new directions that in time will be most valuable to them individually and collectively? Facing larger questions like this, issues of equity are almost always front and center. Should larger or wealthier members have a greater voice in determining the strategic direction? Or will all library members be counted equally? Shifting from one purpose to another is not simple.

Lessons Learned

Looking across recent organizational mergers, failures, and pivots, a number of lessons are beginning to emerge.

- *Every good idea does not require a new organization.* Organizations bring enormous overhead and are difficult to retire once they are created. New organizations should be launched only when demonstrably necessary. A rigorous product definition and a clear business model should be prerequisites to found a new collaborative vehicle. Sadly, we have had a professional environment and incentive structure in which we reward individuals for founding organizations. We should find ways to substitute instead a reward system that celebrates those brave leaders who resist new initiatives, who find ways to build capacity to address new ideas and challenges without the costs and administrative burdens of new, single-purpose organizations, and who retire those that are no longer delivering sufficient value.
- *Membership models are ill-suited to product organizations and marketplace competition.* While memberships have proved to be a durable way to fund certain kinds of “clubs” such as professional organizations, they seem to be misaligned when there is a need to match value with actual products or services.¹⁴ Membership organizations necessarily seek a degree of consensus in their governing and cross-subsidization in their fee structures, while product organizations need to be able to deliver a clear solution to a

¹⁴ One of the few types of membership organizations that co-exist as product organizations are scholarly societies, which have often developed various kinds of separate governance structures to manage their publishing operations, whose customers are often libraries while their members are individuals.

well-defined problem for a reasonable price and to adapt their approach aggressively as marketplace conditions dictate.¹⁵

- *Not-for-profit organizations are not immune from the marketplace.* Independent mission-driven organizations frequently face competition from commercial enterprises. All organizations compete for the budget allocation of their customers or members. A strong purpose is a vital underpinning for any not-for-profit, but recognizing the marketplace dynamics, implementing sound and transparent business processes, and being willing to operate within the reality of their constraints is essential for long-term success. Business planning should include realistic risk assessments and should happen transparently rather than being buried in budgeting processes.
- *Open source solutions have an especially precarious balance between community governance and strategic agility.* Open source solutions also compete in the marketplace, where the pace of innovation is relentless. In the library and scholarly communications sector, stand-alone applications with comparatively static product definitions are increasingly giving way to integrated solutions, with fast-moving boundaries and a growing emphasis on data and analytics. The latter require an emphasis on coherent strategic direction, organizational and product development agility, and a common data storage or access layer. Community open source initiatives are especially complicated because in order to be sustainable over time through community contributions, they also require inclusive governance. Efforts to strike the right balance in an environment of increasing integration may require a new set of governance principles, business models, or a new approach to technical architecture.
- *University systems should take a clear approach to funding the collaborative work of their libraries.* The change from one university system president or provost to a next should not yield radical changes in how the libraries across a university system scale their efforts. The libraries themselves, along with the system office, can sometimes help by demonstrating the good that comes from collaboration and showing the benefits of working together within the system.
- *Systems are enablers, not strategies.* The choice of system may have substantial strategic implications for an individual library as well as consortial collaboration, and the structure of the agreement for a system is all-important. But leaders should stay focused on the collaborative purpose, delegating the complexities of a migration to competent project managers, so that they can remain laser focused on the strategic opportunities that having completed the migration they can attain. Too many library groups have completed a major systems migration without being prepared to seize these opportunities.
- *Board governance should regularly assess organizational purpose and strategy.* It is easy for boards to become mired in the day to day of an organization's operations, or to become too comfortable in the clubbiness that can develop from trust networks. Too often they begin to involve themselves in how to address operational failures, rather than

¹⁵ Adapted from Roger C. Schonfeld, "Why Is the Digital Preservation Network Disbanding?" *The Scholarly Kitchen*, December 13, 2018, <https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2018/12/13/digital-preservation-network-disband/>.

holding executives responsible. Especially for membership organizations, boards need regular opportunity to examine strategy and strategic execution. And they should seek regular opportunities to reexamine organizational purpose and mission. These are among a board's most important duties and it is essential that the chair foster the culture needed to undertake these duties successfully and hold the board accountable for it.¹⁶

Directions Forward

When my colleagues and I advise an existing consortium or other collaborative vehicle in undertaking a self-assessment and seeking to determine whether and if so how to transform itself, we focus on four fundamental questions. These intersect with one another, so the process of answering them is necessarily iterative, but there is a logical order to them.

1. *Mission:* What is the mission and what are the objectives we hope to achieve together? What is our strategic role given the changes taking place in the ecosystem and competitive landscape? Are our objectives sufficiently ambitious yet ultimately realistic? Have our objectives expanded or changed? Do we unnecessarily duplicate the work of another community organization or initiative?
2. *Membership:* Do we have the right partners/members to accomplish our objectives? Are they sufficiently aligned around the core set of objectives? Can they generate the resources necessary to achieve the mission?
3. *Governance:* Is our governance model well adapted to the strategic role we envision for ourselves? If a membership organization, is our membership coterminous with those organizations that align with our strategic role? Who makes the core strategic and policy decisions? Is there an elected board of library directors or provosts -- or a model more inclusive of other kinds of employees? How is the work of the board assessed? Does the executive director or other staff leader report to this board or to an individual as part of a state system or other larger enterprise? How is the executive director employed, on a renewable terms or do they serve at will? How are they reviewed? Is there a regular risk assessment process for the organization?

¹⁶ See Alison Muddit's thoughts on this important question here: "Building an Effective Board," *The Scholarly Kitchen*, February 20, 2019, <https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2019/02/20/building-an-effective-board/>.

4. *Funding:* Are we able to generate the resources necessary not only to accomplish our regular operations but also to reinvest in our organization? Does our business model match revenue with value generated or have mismatches emerged?

It is ultimately the responsibility of the member libraries and their leaders to govern the collaborative vehicles that they have created. While it is almost always more professionally rewarding to create something new than to sustain, repurpose, or sunset something that exists, good governance requires a willingness to do any or all of these.