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Considering Community Partnerships and New Projects: Advice from the Field

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Column Editor's Note: "In the Public Interest" is an open forum for anyone connected to public library administration to explore the issues affecting our field. In today's global environment, library administrators must make complex decisions to help institutions achieve their identified mission, vision, and goals. Keeping the bigger picture in mind can be challenging amid all the detailed demands of running a library. This column, then, offers breathing room—space to reflect on a lesson learned, to articulate an insight, to grapple with a question, to clarify a perspective, or to recognize a trend. The ideas expressed here will, I hope, inspire and spark dialogue. Have a topic in mind for a future column? Contact me at cmbrown@chipublib.org.

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Considering Community Partnerships and New Projects: Advice from the Field

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Abstract:
There are many considerations to take before embarking on a new project or creating a new community partnership. Many such considerations are undocumented and not widely taught in Master of Library and Information Science programs. This article fills in the gap with suggested steps to take before implementing a new service or partnership. Recommendations stem from the author's own experiences and aim to help public library workers—from staff to administration—avoid possible pitfalls and become effective advocates for focus and intentionality.

Keywords: community partnerships; partnership assessment; warm handoff; job creep; mission creep

Considering Community Partnerships and New Projects: Advice from the Field

Opportunities for community partnerships, grant work, and new projects abound for public libraries. It is tempting to take them all on but evaluating which ones to pursue requires holistic consideration. Avoid pitfalls by embracing communication, evaluating potential benefits to the community, and studying potential impact on staff. The last few years have turned this profession upside down; as you emerge from the COVID pandemic, take a pause to realign all work with your mission and be mindful of the extraneous. The advice detailed in this article is drawn from my own experience working in small and large public library systems and teaching a Community Partnerships class at San José State University's School of Information.

Community Partnerships

What is a community partnership? It could be as simple as sharing information with another organization. Or it could be as complex as a wide-scale, collective-impact project. Partners can include government agencies, non-profits, business entities, other library systems, and many more. What all partnerships share is reciprocity, created out of clear mutual goals and an agreed-upon system for evaluation and refinement of the collaboration.

Step one is to be honest about the potential project. Is there an organization already doing this work? Does the library need to insert itself into this space?

If the answer to the last question is yes, the next step is to identify the right partner. Are there certain entities with more potential than others? Are there some you would never work with? For example, how does the library feel about working with political associations? Religious groups? For-profit businesses? There are no right or wrong answers. In fact, your

decision may vary from situation to situation or change over time. For example, a local church might make an ideal partner for working with an immigrant population. Or, if your library's budget leaves something to be desired, corporate sponsorship may be a beneficial avenue. Just be aware that people on your staff or in administration may have dissenting opinions, so build in plenty of time for internal discussion before you need to make the decision.

Once you have decided to approach a partner candidate, be sure that you have common goals. Will the work truly fulfill a community need? Do you have an existing relationship that you can build upon? In determining the answers to these questions, practice humility and make sure to listen to your potential partner, especially if they have deep community ties. Respect their knowledge base and experience and consider how the partnership will benefit them and support their mission. Some libraries create a rubric or "stress test" that staff use to evaluate the potential benefits of a possible partnership. At the very least, work with your staff to develop a list of considerations and goals so that you can ask the right questions.

This last point underscores a critical aspect of building a successful partnership: communication communication communication. I can't say that enough. Make sure expectations are outlined in writing and refer back to this list frequently. Defining and agreeing upon responsibilities could be as informal as an acknowledged email or as formal as drafting a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). Every library system has different practices around this kind of agreement. If yours doesn't have a boilerplate, you can't go wrong referencing Nolo Press's *Ten Tips for Making Solid Business Agreements and Contracts.* Nolo's website also has excellent pointers. Some systems require an attorney to look over such agreements, so make sure you have that step written into your timeline if necessary.

In the nonprofit and library world, staff change frequently, a reality that seems to have escalated in this post-COVID labor market. You may set up a partnership with an organization's staff only for all of players to change a year later. An agreement or MOU can be very helpful in this scenario—for onboarding new staff and for providing continuity in terms of expectations, measuring success, and gathering feedback.

As far as division of labor between partners, it's important to establish not only what the library can do, but also what it can't. Be clear up front that patron contact information and data contained in your ILS are not on the table. Protecting patron privacy is a foundational tenet to our profession, but this is a value that many organizations don't share. Because demographic information is a highly valued asset in today's world, it's best to be clear about this limitation up front.

The same goes for marketing the project. Be sure to establish roles and responsibilities at the outset. Which organization oversees publicity? Who writes and approves press releases? Does one partner handle social media posts or do you create them together? Making these kinds of housekeeping decisions at the start will help avoid confusion and inconsistency.

And don't forget it's perfectly acceptable to end a relationship that is not working. I recently counseled a colleague to bow out when a partner consistently missed deadlines. The two organizations had a written agreement, but that only goes so far when the work just isn't getting done.

Embarking On a New Project

Grant applications often require community partners. Make sure you get your partners fully on board before you submit the application. Do not make assumptions. But before you even begin deliberating potential partners, assess the needs and mission of your own library. If your library budget is flush, does it make sense for you to apply for grants when you could afford to do projects without them? Does your staff have the capacity to carry out the necessary work? Does the idea align with your mission statement and strategic plan? Most of all, have you sought out community input? The idea that a library system simply knows what's best for its communities is antiquated. Along those same lines—and apologies if this sounds harsh—projects and attendant programming are not your baby. You may find something interesting, but that does not mean it's a benefit to the community. Public libraries exist for patrons, not those who work in them.

There are many paths to building a successful model for implementation. Here again is the importance of communication communication communication. When decisions come down from the top with no explanation, it engenders resentment in staff. If you can, create a committee of staff members to help evaluate the project's potential impact. Include staff from all levels and divisions, but particularly from areas that will be most impacted by the project. If for instance, you are going to start a program in which patrons can check out hotspots, you will want to involve front-line and circulation staff. They will have invaluable perspective. I was lucky enough to be on two such evaluation teams, so I have firsthand knowledge about how staff input can make a huge difference in terms of project success and staff buy-in.

All of that said, sometimes it is not possible to glean input from staff before implementation. Take the time and effort to explain why the decision was made. A little

explanation goes a long way to smooth troubled waters and foster understanding. And be sure to give staff plenty of warning before the project starts and schedule a session to review new processes, tools, and protocols. This feels like a logical and simple step, but it often gets skipped to the detriment of staff morale and success of the project.

Job/Mission Creep

An important question to ask before implementation of a new service or project is whether it really belongs in the public library sphere. I used to start my Community Partnerships class by telling the students, "Under the banner of public service, you can do anything." A relevant addendum is, "But should you?"

COVID saw many unique partnerships arise out of the need to keep people employed and serve communities under stress. Libraries adapted quickly. Moving programming online opened libraries up to new audiences and eliminated physical barriers. When not bound by geography and funding rules, programming reach is boundless. This pivot feels like something that will stand the test of time.

However, other efforts were decidedly not part of a public library's normal purview. For instance, San Francisco Public Library workers were classified as Disaster Service Workers, assigned to activities like contact tracing and monitoring hotel sites for vulnerable populations (San Francisco Public Library, 2020). In Sacramento, library workers made phone calls on behalf of the Great Plates program, which delivered restaurant-cooked meals to area seniors during lockdown (Vellinga, 2020). While I generally cringe when someone complains "I didn't go to library school for this," I wholeheartedly agree that providing administrative support for a food

program and contact tracing are well outside the arena of library services, even when done out of necessity. In a time of crisis, the library's role as an information service provider may come with work that is emotionally or even physically challenging. When a partnership is formed out of necessity, reflect how the new tasks are benefitting the community, and then apply your insights into effective ongoing community support.

In pre-COVID times, I encountered many initiatives that left me shaking my head. A decade ago, I heard of a library program marketed as an underwater Easter egg hunt. I was profoundly flummoxed—so much so that I roped my colleague into a debate for the California Library Association Conference that we called, "Your Library Did What? Wants vs. Needs in Library Programming." We flipped a coin to decide which side to argue and, ironically, I ended up having to defend the Easter egg hunt.

More recently, a colleague found herself writing a grant for librarians to go door to door checking and installing smoke alarms. Why? There had been a fatal fire in local senior living community owing to faultily installed smoke alarms. Whoever came up with this program had good intentions, but the idea was rife with problems: liability, the librarians' personal safety, and more. The fundamental question is why would such an initiative be the library's responsibility? A better approach might have been to work with the fire department or emergency preparedness department to educate library staff on potential resources that they could pass on to patrons. Or why not partner with those departments to host information sessions about fire safety?

Yet another grant project paired a public library with a nursing college to acquire an electric vehicle. The plan was for library staff to drive nursing students to under-resourced neighborhoods where they could provide on-the-spot health services. Again, good intentions, but

where is the library's footprint in this idea? Chauffeur services are decidedly not part of a public library's purview. A better approach might have been to coordinate bookmobile stops with a visiting nurse. Or, now that in-person, indoor programming is in full swing, why not invite nurses to the library to serve patrons or offer healthcare information?

Unexpected Outcomes of Partnerships

Sometimes community partnerships evolve beyond their original intention in wholly positive ways. Several years ago, I partnered with ARMA Silicon Valley, a records retention organization, for Money Smart Week (MSW). As part of a program about financial records, ARMA Silicon Valley ended up sponsoring an on-site shred truck, the week's crowning event. Over the years, the partnership grew exponentially, with ARMA Silicon Valley donating personal scanners and shredders for a raffle. On shred truck day, which they continued to sponsor, ARMA came with an army of volunteers—and donuts and coffee for all. The relationship also had positive impacts that extended beyond MSW. Knowing that I teach at San José State University, ARMA reached out to me to help them set up a scholarship for archive students. Meanwhile, Silicon Valley submitted a description of our partnership to ARMA International for a contest about public service and won!

Saying No or Something Like it

Once again, you are not obligated to greenlight every possible idea that comes your way. So, what happens when find yourself contemplating a project that seems ill-fitting, not properly vetted, or outside the bounds of staff capacity? Granted, some library cultures do not welcome

push back or inquiries. But if you have any wiggle room, here are some strategies to address the elephant in the room.

First and foremost, know who you are talking to. Some people cannot handle honest questions; others are more open. Either way, a good opening gambit is to ask about the genesis of this idea. Such a non-confrontational question can shed light on the thinking behind the project. If you are still lukewarm but the project seems unstoppable, suggest a pilot program instead of embarking on full-scale rollout—try it in only five of your 50 branches to evaluate its efficacy. Everyone wants the project to be successful. Working on a smaller scale allows for course correction and establishing best practices. And if the pilot program has shaky results, you have the justification you need to end the project.

Just Don't Do It or the Warm Handoff

Though COVID is not over, libraries are mostly open for business. At the same time, the stress of the past three years has led to burnout and a great deal of attrition and retirements. Having to police masking puts staff on the frontlines in potentially dangerous situations with angry patrons. At the very least, staff must answer endless questions about the efficacy of masks. Given such burdens, now is the time to stop mission creep. As Kelly Jensen wrote in her illuminating article, "Public Libraries Aren't Essential Services," "The fact of the matter is, public library workers are not equipped to do the roles of anything other than those in which they're trained." (Jensen, 2022) We are not smoke alarm inspectors or healthcare chauffeurs.

People who go into the library profession tend to be helpers. It's endemic. And that's part of the reason why I love our field so much. But all parties might be better served with a "warm

handoff." This term pops up most often in health care or social work. It is the transparent transfer of care from one helper to another, done in a way that encourages clear communication. Think of it as an informed referral. Before the handoff, get to know the organization taking on the project, such as a local service agency, and make initial contact for information-sharing purposes. You can then be confident that patrons will get what they need.

There are plenty of ways serve your community. Concentrate on what you already do and do it well. You don't need to be first; you don't need to do it all. When staff is stretched thin, outcomes and morale suffer.

Conclusion

Reject crow librarianship; you don't need to go after everything that is shiny. Now is the time to reinvigorate fallow relationships and create new ones. Collaborating with outside agencies, implementing new services, and focusing the attention of your library can be fraught, but common pitfalls are avoidable. Communication, thoughtfulness, and clearly defined intention are keys to success. Ask what you are doing and why. The answers may surprise you and lead to better solutions for staff and patrons alike.

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