Library Collaboration and the Changing Environment: an Interview with Rick Lugg, R2 Consulting

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"From the Field" Section Editors, Cory Tucker and Chris Sugnet interviewed Rick Lugg from R2 Consulting.

During this economic crisis, libraries will need to collaborate more than ever to save money and to deliver services more efficiently with less staff. Rick Lugg, Partner at R2 Consulting, has several years of experience with Yankee Book Peddler and consultant to academic and research libraries, library consortia and other library organizations. R2 has had a significant impact throughout the library world in helping libraries and related organizations improve service performance and adapt to an ever-changing environment.

For a full biography see:
http://www.ebookmap.net/pages/About%20R2.php

CL: Beyond buying clubs, where do you see fertile ground for collaboration among libraries?
Lugg: I think the opportunities are almost endless, especially related to sharing scarce and expensive expertise, and to sharing workloads. The pattern of shared effort will be different for electronic resources than for tangible materials, but there are potential benefits in both – as there are potential benefits in sharing effort in both public and technical services.

Systems expertise and language skills are interesting in this respect. There are many examples of several libraries sharing an ILS administrator. Collection development expertise, especially in specialized disciplines or foreign languages, can be amortized over many libraries through the work of a single individual. In recent years, discovery and resource sharing, through systems like WorldCat Local, InnReach/Encore, Summon, URM, and others have begun to demonstrate the power of network-level and regional-level cooperation. RAPID has had a major impact on the speed and reliability of document delivery. Consortium-wide authentication will encourage even higher levels of collaboration. As print-on-demand becomes more mainstream, consortia and other regional organizations could be natural homes for that activity.

CL: One of R2's strengths is your experience assessing traditional technical services. What areas of technical services do you think hold potential for collaboration?

Lugg: Many individual libraries continue to struggle with e-resources management: knowledgebase and proxy server updates, cataloging, link maintenance, implementation of ERMS modules, etc. Some libraries are fortunate enough to have talent and expertise in these areas. With the right kinds of agreements and infrastructure in place, that expertise can be leveraged across more titles and IP ranges. Shared work on e-resources is attractive in a couple of important ways:

1. Experts can be physically located anywhere, since there is no artifact or object that requires proximity.
2. E-Resources workloads are extensive, often claiming 60-70% of the materials budget.
3. Many individual libraries do not have good solutions in place.
4. Because e-resources are more often accessed than owned outright, there is less resistance to sharing both expertise and access.

Even with print and other tangible resources, however, there are some interesting opportunities. Shared storage, print archiving, and last-copy responsibility comes to mind. There is an immense amount of low-to-no-use content for which many copies are held. The sort of "managed drawdown" that ITHAKA's "What to Withdraw?" framework suggests is ideal for consortial collaboration.

In the slightly longer term, the number of incoming print materials will begin to decline. To retain efficiencies that are based on volume, it may be useful to aggregate individual streams of print work into a larger, consortial stream. Under that scenario, a centralized collaborative technical services operation begins to make sense – especially when those tasks can be supplemented with the record maintenance and physical handling for storage and withdrawal decisions.

We've also seen some interesting examples of shared work and expertise on the public services side. For instance, by sharing base materials for developing instruction sessions—this might include anything from simple outlines or Lib-Guides to full video sessions that can be linked for streaming or podcast. Similar sharing of course-specific pages in learning management systems is another example.

It goes on and on. Government documents collections, shared institutional repositories, direct borrowing and document delivery, shared discovery tools – all of this is fertile ground from a practical viewpoint. It's the trust-building and ownership agreements and Memoranda of Understanding – getting over the mental and political hurdles – that are more problematic. In a strange way, the current economic situation may be helpful, as it forces some changes in thinking.

CL: How about some best practice examples from your experience with collaborative efforts?
Lugg: There is a lot of great work going on, and I'm continually learning about new initiatives. A few that stand out for me:

- The Hathi Trust, a Michigan/CIC effort to apply research library values to the digitization work being done by Google—5 million full-text digital books at this point.
- The Center for Research Libraries has begun to coordinate print archiving and preservation efforts at the national level, building on numerous regional and consortial projects.
- ASERL, the Colorado Alliance, the CIC and others have begun to tackle the questions related to Government Documents and the future of the Federal Depository Library Program.

- OhioLINK has begun to reduce the extent of multiple copies across its regional storage facilities.
- The Orbis Cascade Alliance has begun an ambitious Distributed Print Repository program, and has begun to explore collaborative technical services.
- The University of California system has a successful Shared Cataloging Program for e-resources, and is expanding its efforts on shared print cataloging, and has embarked on planning for a Next Generation Technical Services operation that will be collaborative in nature.

What's interesting about all of these to me is their scale. These are sizable projects that have already delivered, or seem likely to deliver, sizable results, in the form of reduced overlap, redundancy, and costs.

CL: How does your concept of sustainable collection management work in the larger context of collaboration?

Lugg: I've become extremely—even unnaturally!—interested in the questions of use and overlap of print monograph collections. There is enormous redundancy at the regional and national level, which made sense when resource sharing was slower and less developed, and when digital delivery was not an option. But now, in most of our libraries 50% of the shelves are occupied by books that have not circulated in more than 10 years. While we need to assure that no content is ever lost completely, we have an enormous opportunity to reduce redundancy and reclaim space.

The sustainable collections concept is simply a recognition of the fact that we may need to manage to our scarcest resource—which is likely to be space. As a community—or better yet, as regional organizations—we need to create a framework to manage the growth of our tangible collections that simultaneously assures that no content is lost, but which grows no faster than the amount of unique new content produced. Consortia and other regional organizations are well positioned to apportion responsibility, to coordinate activity, and to create and monitor capacity at the regional level.

CL: What do you believe are some of the greatest current challenges to library collaboration?
Lugg: At root, I suppose human nature is the biggest challenge. Sharing can be difficult and uncomfortable. It involves a loss of control – and to some degree a dilution of one's institutional identity.

On the collections front, the question of legal ownership surfaces immediately. If we agree that University A will retain the last print copy of a journal run on behalf of the consortium, what does that mean? Does University A still own it, or does it become the property of the collective? In some cases, collections are state property, and subject to those rules. In other cases, there is no incorporated entity at the consortial level to assume ownership.
Competition between libraries and institutions also is part of the mix. In the past, library collections have served to distinguish one institution from another; what happens when everyone owns everything? Accreditation bodies in some disciplines still rely on volume counts; can a consortially-owned copy be weighted in the same way?

And of course decision-making becomes more complicated. More meetings and consultations are required; travel absorbs otherwise productive time. Sharing well is hard work.

CL: Is there a time when a library needs to look beyond the consortia they currently work with?
Lugg: This is an interesting question. A surprising number of libraries are members of more than one consortium, though usually for different purposes. I suppose that satisfaction must be based on the effectiveness of the consortial strategy and management; i.e., is the consortium focused on those issues that have the highest value or chance of success—and, how well does the consortium actually decide and execute against its members' priorities?

CL: How does the current economic crisis impact the effectiveness of collaborative projects?
Lugg: Ironically, the need for collaboration is intensified, and even though that may be recognized by funding agencies, they may be forced to act differently. I spoke last week with a librarian in the University of California system, who reported that the California Digital Library, which licenses and supports a huge number of electronic resources on behalf of all ten UC campuses, had been targeted for significant staff reductions. That means all those tasks that had been handled centrally will likely revert to individual campus libraries—which are no longer staffed to handle them. In the end, that decision may end up costing more than it saves, but the immediate pressures are so great that it can't be stopped. And that's a case where the benefits of collaboration had been long recognized and sustained.

On the other hand, the tight economy has opened up discussions that may not have been possible in better times—collaborative patron-driven acquisitions projects are on the table, as are coordinated cancellations and withdrawal of JSTOR and other secure journal titles. It will be interesting to see what happens with larger-scale collaborative initiatives that rely on central funding, such as the OLE systems development. While they may prove valuable in the long run, they require significant staff commitments during the development phase—and economic pressure may focus attention on the short-term opportunity costs.

CL: What about strategic planning across members of an alliance, have you seen successful efforts recently?

Lugg: I have never been directly involved in this kind of strategic planning, other than to draft a white paper or two. But I think the potential for "designed cooperation" is immense, especially now. As I mentioned in a recent article in "Against the Grain", I believe that consortia are more important now than ever—especially as a stage in bringing library services to the network level. Eventually we will reach that network level, especially for discovery and delivery of e-resources. But there remains an ongoing need for management of legacy print collections, resource sharing, digitization, print-on-demand, and other concrete tasks. Most of these are too complex or expensive to handle in individual libraries—and potentially very well handled at the regional level.