BUILDING STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS THROUGH COLLABORATION BETWEEN LAW LIBRARIES

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“Collaboration” and “partnership” are two words that most of us hear on a regular basis. It has almost become a truism that it is important to collaborate with others to succeed professionally. However, as law librarians and legal information professionals, it is incumbent upon us to actively embrace collaboration and form strategic partnerships with other law libraries.

Why Collaborate?
First, collaboration is a significant way to provide additional benefits and services to our end users, be they judges, attorneys, students, faculty, or members of the public. Not only do collaborative partnerships maximize the resources available for services to these users, but they also allow for faster, more efficient service and the potential for creating more unique and innovative services. Examples of such innovative services could include embedding an academic law librarian in a public law library to improve access to justice, or creating an advanced legal research course that has an experiential component that takes place in a law firm under the guidance of a law firm librarian.

Secondly, collaboration is a major benefit to our institutions and organizations because it can result in saving money and resources through cost-sharing, which in turn allows for more services to be provided.

Thirdly, collaborative partnerships help foster good relationships with other entities that may prove important to our employer institutions and organizations in the future.

Finally, collaboration is a boon to our profession because it improves the skills of the individual law librarians and legal information professionals involved and leads to the creation of best practices that can be shared across the profession. It is also worth noting that the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) Body of Knowledge (BoK) specifically encourages partnership and collaboration in the domains of Professionalism + Leadership at Every Level, Marketing + Outreach, and Management + Business Acumen.

Networking
You cannot have a meaningful discussion about building strategic partnerships without talking about networking. However, it is critical to think about networking in a new light and push yourself outside of your typical networks. It
It is not unusual to take a siloed approach to networking by only networking in your established communities (e.g., attending continuing education events that only apply to your current role, only attending events where you already know most of the attendees, etc.). However, the siloed approach, while convenient and comfortable, may not yield the best results for dynamic partnership building.

To really stretch yourself professionally and grow a diverse network takes some thought and planning. Below is a short list of suggestions for improving your networking skills.

□ Take advantage of social media platforms such as Meetup and seek out like-minded librarian groups in other disciplines.
□ Reach out to the alumni association at your alma mater.
□ Attend webinars and conferences hosted by AALL chapters or groups of which you are not already a member.
□ Get involved with your local bar or other professional association.

If you are willing to push yourself outside your established network of law librarians, the possibilities for collaboration are infinite.

**Collaboration Methods**

Once you identify strategic partners through networking, you’ll find that there are endless methods for collaboration. For example:

**Government Law Libraries**

Government law librarians may consider:
□ Providing tips or strategies for regulatory or legislative history research to incoming clerks or to new associates at law firms.

**Law Schools and Academic Organizations**

Academic law librarians may consider:
□ Introducing graduating law students to law firm or government librarians, thereby helping students build important professional connections.
Hosting or sponsoring a “Bridge the Gap” program with a law firm library; 

Offering a professional development program or workshop for law students and alumni; and 

Providing trainings related to access to justice.

**Law Firms**

Law firm librarians may consider:

- Hosting or sponsoring a “Bridge the Gap” program with a law firm library; 
- Offering a professional development program or workshop for law students and alumni; and 
- Providing trainings related to access to justice.

**Public Libraries and Institutions**

Public libraries may consider:

- Expanding access to resources 
- Providing CLE (continuing legal education) programs 
- Hosting law-related book clubs 
- Collaborating on community resources such as law-related online guides

Additionally, all types of legal information professionals may consider resource-sharing and serving as contacts for interlibrary loan needs. Other possibilities include collaborating on grant applications to develop library outreach and programming, and working together on technology-related efforts such as the digitization of resources.

Remember, collaborating on small projects can lead to big opportunities for greater collaboration.

**Overcoming Barriers to Collaboration**

Unfortunately, barriers to collaboration may come up from time to time. These tend to fall into two categories: administrative and practical.

Administrative barriers can include difficulties getting buy-in from senior leadership, IT restrictions, and other rules and regulations, such as licensing restrictions.

Practical barriers can include lack of time, fear of failure, and, most commonly, lack of financial resources. In regard to this last barrier, remember that lack of financial resources is a common condition among all types of law libraries and that there may be grants or other funding sources available depending on the type of collaborative project being developed. As part of the process, it is well worth investigating the availability of such sources as additional ways to fund the partnership.

It is important to acknowledge potential barriers early in the process, because if they are anticipated at the outset they will be easier to eliminate. Our best advice is to be realistic but resolute. Do not give up unnecessarily, because the benefits of collaboration can far outweigh the efforts.

**Onward to Success**

Even though we may think of our own areas of law librarianship as distinct, all law librarians and legal information professionals are facing similar concerns. Shrinking budgets, collection reductions, security concerns, vendor negotiations, and the overall need to “do more with less” pervade our professional lives. If we can look at the bigger picture of law librarianship as a whole, we can work together and share our unique perspectives on how our similar challenges can be overcome.

Continuing to network and to collaborate with colleagues in our own organizations and at other organizations will be critical to our own success, the success of our organizations, and the success of our profession.

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCE**

Visit Teaching Legal Research: A Collaboration in My Communities at bit.ly/AALLMyCommTLR to share information, strategies, and resources to help law students and new attorneys build solid legal research skills. This group is open to all law librarians (academic, private, and government).

**Teaching + Training**