Upending the Consortial Narrative: Our Story of Affecting Change Through Board Volunteerism

Maureen Clements and Susanne Markgren

Abstract

The nature and purpose of academic library consortia can be both complex and obscure. Two technical services librarians discuss their involvement with the WALDO (Westchester Academic Library Directors' Organization) consortium, its history, its growth, and its future in the current times of market consolidation and contraction. They also share some of the challenges, pitfalls, and joys of learning how to become a board member of an academic library consortium and the benefits of building new relationships across the vendor, library, and consortia spectrums.

Keywords: consortia, consortium, WALDO, academic libraries, vendor relations, procurement, board membership

Introduction

The nature and purpose of academic library consortia can be both wildly complex and woefully obscure. Two technical services librarians, Maureen Clements of the State University of New York (SUNY) Library Services and Susanne Markgren of Manhattan College, discuss their involvement with the WALDO consortium, its history, its growth, and its future. WALDO is an acronym for Westchester

Academic Library Directors Organization. The presenters take a look at the often behind-the-scenes role that consortia have historically played and continue to play in today's evolving library landscape; the challenges, pitfalls, and joys of learning how to become a board member of an academic library consortium; and the benefits of building new relationships across the vendor, library, and consortia spectrums.

As anyone who has worked in technical services can attest to, this quote by Carol Pitts Diedrichs, published twenty-four years ago, still rings true today,

> "Innovation is essential for the survival of libraries in the rapidly chang-ing information world. In particular, technical services will be expected to acquire and process material more quickly than ever before and with fewer human resources. The economic environment and the speed of technological change demands and provides new alterna-tives [. . .] As a result, strong, competent technical services managers are an essential component to this process. These managers must con-tinue to envision the future, to think intuitively and creatively, and to implement innovation effectively."[1]

To be effective library leaders—and we would add effective consortium leaders—we need to be innovative, creative, and adapt-able. We need to learn from our past to protect our futures. And we need to communicate and consolidate with others who share our vision and goals.

Library Consortia

Markgren began the presentation by discussing the definition and over-all nature of library consortia and emphasized that they embody many different variations and serve many different purposes. A consortium is ". . . a cooperative arrangement among groups or institutions."[2]

Its membership ". . . can encompass libraries of a single type or of different types and sizes, and the consortium may be local, regional or national in scope."[3] And finally, ". . . the bedrock principle upon which consortia operate is that libraries can accomplish more together than alone."[4] We could not agree more with this final statement.

Library consortia can be geographically focused, they can be population-focused, and they can specialize in one service, or provide multiple services. Like their nature, their organizational structures and governance can be widely varied. The Triangle Research Libraries Network (TRLN), which formed in the 1930s, is the oldest library consortium in the United States, the Center for Research Libraries was founded as a consortium of ten major research libraries in 1949, and the Online Computer Library Center, now simply OCLC, formed in 1960 with its shared cataloging focus. By the 1990s and the early 2000s, many consortia were created to assist libraries in the procurement and licensing of electronic resources.[5]

More recently, as academic institutions have shuttered or shrunk and the vendor/publisher landscape has contracted, some consortia have dissolved, some have merged, and others have formed inter-consortial partnerships to maximize their influence and diversify their services. So, what do library consortia actually do? Markgren offered the following non-exhaustive list:

- Licensing and content negotiation
- Electronic resource procurement
- Shared technology and software development
- Resource sharing and shared collections
- Professional development/knowledge exchange
- Open Access initiatives
- Scholarly communication
- Consulting and industry research
- Hosting services

The WALDO Consortia

Clements then introduced the audience to background and historical information about the WALDO consortium. WALDO was conceived in the early 1980s by a group of library directors from Westchester County, New York, who regularly met for coffee to discuss the collective challenges they faced, particularly those issues related to the electronification of information. They shared cataloging best practices, information about new electronic databases, and how to manage the challenges ahead. These directors thought their semi-regular meetings were so helpful they wanted to create a more formalized structure.

In 1982, the library directors established WALDO and created a mission for the organization. Clements and Markgren could not locate the original mission statement, but the following statement, which was likely revised from the original, has been in place since their initial involvement in the organization: "The purpose of this organization shall be to share resources among its members and to promote library services in Westchester County, in the New York City metropolitan region, and in the nation at large."[6] Clements then listed the original WALDO Library members, also referred to as charter or full members:

- College of Mount St. Vincent
- Concordia College
- Manhattan College
- Marymount Manhattan College
- Mercy College
- Monroe College
- Nyack College
- St. John's University
- St. Thomas Aquinas College
- Sarah Lawrence College
- The College of New Rochelle
- The College of Westchester
- Wagner College

Clements went on to discuss how the WALDO consortium initially focused on three aspects of critical importance at the time: implementing and maintaining a shared library services platform, the Project for Automated Library System (PALS); sharing print resources across the colleges; and securing group discounts for electronic databases which were beginning to flood the market. The library directors also developed a more formalized governance structure to guide the activities of WALDO. They formed a voluntary, eleven-member board, comprised of library directors from across the consortium. The board enacted membership dues and codified bylaws.

The board also created three advisory committees, made up of librarians from within the WALDO system, to examine resources and recommend best practices in the following areas: electronic resources, technical services, and reference and instruction. Many librarians from around the Westchester area served on these committees, which was an expectation of job duties for some. Before the prevalence of online communications, the committees held frequent, in-person meetings to gather and connect.

During the late 1990s and the burgeoning of electronic subscription databases, the need for libraries to band together to obtain better deals from vendors became more urgent. The WALDO board hired an executive director to steer procurement. The board also developed an associate level of consortium membership with the same rights and obligations as original members. These two moves increased the buying power of WALDO, expanded networking opportunities, and created a larger pool of resources. Clements then presented a list of colleges and universities that took advantage of associate-level WALDO memberships:

- Fordham University
- Iona College
- Marist College
- New York Academy of Medicine
- Pace University

- Putnam/Northern Westchester BOCES
- SUNY Purchase
- Westchester Community College

Clements noted Fordham became the consortium's go-to campus, because of its size, resources, and central location. She also noted the New York Academy of Medicine is no longer a member, having dropped out several years ago after a realignment of its mission.

WALDO's Growth

From the late 1990s to the early 2000s, WALDO continued its growth as an organization. In 2001, WALDO contracted with an independent procurement organization to manage its administrative services, and in the same year filed for and was granted 501(c)(3) non-profit tax status. An additional limited membership level was developed to help bolster procurement purchasing power. Members in this level pay no dues and have no voting rights, and they currently make up the bulk of WALDO members,

   Clements then discussed WALDO's phenomenal growth during the late 1990s, illustrated by figure 1. In 1997, WALDO's total operating
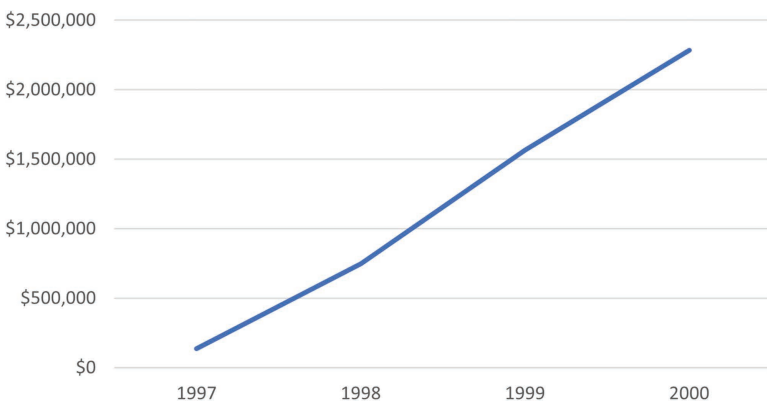

Figure 1. WALDO's Total Expenses 1997–2000

expenses were $136,232. By 1998, total operating expenses increased fivefold to $747,487. Total operating expenses in 1999 doubled to $1,565,183 and by 2000, total operating expenses rose to $2,285,751.

During the 2000s, WALDO's limited membership grew to almost 800 libraries, including libraries outside academia and the regional area. The dissolution of Nylink in 2010, a New York-based procurement consortium, helped spur more growth. WALDO started topping out around $40 million dollars in annual business as the focus of the consortium shifted away from resource sharing towards procurement.

A Changing Landscape

In 2008, the economic landscape began to change. The 2008 recession hit WALDO libraries hard, forcing staff contraction across charter members, particularly in technical services. Budget freezes and cuts prevailed. The staff at some schools were so severely affected they could no longer participate in WALDO activities. More recently, two WALDO charter member colleges, the College of New Rochelle and Concordia College, shuttered their doors and several other members have endured severe financial difficulties. In this landscape, WALDO's governance and its committees' sustainability became much more difficult. Vendors trying to undercut the consortium and a deeply saturated market also contributed to these challenging times.

Involvement with WALDO

It was against this backdrop that both presenters became involved in WALDO. Clements joined WALDO's Technical Services Committee in 2011, soon after joining St. Thomas Aquinas College. The Technical Services committee met in person several times a year to review changes in metadata standards, discovery systems, ebook administration, and various technical services concerns. In her first Technical

Services Committee meeting, Clements was elected secretary and, in two short years, after moving to Mercy College (another WALDO charter school), she became chair of the committee.

Markgren joined WALDO's Electronic Resources Committee in 2007. This committee met several times a year to discuss (and share experiences with) new resources, vendor relations, renewals, usage, pricing, and collection management, and held a vendor showcase once a year. After several years, committee membership grew slim as people retired, or became too busy to attend meetings, or lived too far to travel to in-person meetings. At this time, the presenters realized that the committees had overlapping agendas and they were both suffering from shrinking membership, so the presenters decided to hold joint meetings and finally join forces under the new name: Collection Services. Despite the presenters' involvement with the WALDO committees, they knew very little about WALDO's structure and governance. They were involved in committee work but only attended open board meetings to present the required committee reports.

The presenters were asked to join the board in August 2017 at the request of the then WALDO president. Interest in board positions was waning among library directors, many of whom had served multiple terms. The board was looking to expand the pool to librarians within the WALDO charter and associate membership, and to librarians who did not hold directorship positions. Both presenters were looking forward to the opportunity, but once they began their tenures on the board, they quickly understood that they had a lot to learn, such as: what board governance would entail, how the organization's finances and contracts worked, and how did the original mission of the consortium translate into today's digital landscape.

Cyberscam

In 2018, Clements recounted the board's experience of being the victim of cybercrime when a fraudster impersonated a vendor, requesting

a bank account change and making off with a considerable sum. This event became the crux of everything that came after. It forced the board to re-examine its current practices, its contracts, and its finances. The board realized they needed to start planning for the future. Both presenters, as well as the entire board, knew they could only move forward. The board sought legal counsel, who advised them to evaluate all current practices and create a strategic plan for addressing these changes. Senior members of the board were supportive of the possible changes, which was crucial for providing confidence in exploring more options. Everyone on the volunteer board knew they could no longer sustain the immensity of governing such a large purchasing club without a major rehaul and more expertise to assist with evaluation. The cybercrime incident occurred in the summer of 2018, just as Clements was stepping into the role of WALDO Vice President. In 2019, when presenter Clements took the helm as President, the board began to re-examine its past practices.

The Pandemic and a New Partnership

Markgren then described that, prior to the shutdown in 2020, the board met in person at Fordham University once a month for ninety minutes. These meetings were mainly informational and transactional, with discussions about new member libraries, new vendors, and updates on finances and contracts—all reported to the board from its procurement agent. In other words, there were not a lot of board-only discussions on the organization itself, its governance, its oversight, its mission, or its future.

As COVID-19 took hold and everyone switched to all remote work, the board was able to meet via Zoom several times a week, if needed. They researched other consortia, how they were managed, and identified areas of their own consortium that needed updating and changing—things they had not addressed as a board in many

years—or perhaps ever. Markgren discussed the following changes: 1.) they created a shared Google Drive for storing and archiving board documents, 2.) they created new e-mail accounts to pass down to successive board members so information does not get lost, 3.) they changed the bylaws to extend the term of the board president to two years, as one year was not long enough for any one person to effectively get things done, 4.) they hired legal counsel to review vendor contracts because some were more than twenty years old, 5.) they created smaller working groups: a finance team, a negotiation team, and a communication team, 6.) they hired an accountant to take a deep dive into the organization's finances, 7.) they began the work needed to change their procurement agent to LYRASIS, another 501(c)(3) non-profit consortium with a wide-ranging offering of services.

In June 2021, the WALDO board signed a one-year contract with LYRASIS with the goal of moving all its procurement business to them by January of 2022. Although the board understood that making this change would be a lot of work and would be disruptive for both its members and its vendors, they felt strongly that they needed to make this change now. Moving the procurement business to LYRASIS would allow to the consortium (and the board) to conduct the proper succession planning to safeguard the future of the organization and its member libraries.

The board held several online meetings in Fall 2021 with various member groups, including other consortia, to break the news and discuss upcoming changes. The following three talking points explained the board's decision for this move:

- Help contain costs by increasing the scale of our consortial power
- Bring greater efficiencies into the process with improved communication and transparency
- Create new opportunities for WALDO members to engage and collaborate with the larger library community

Board Membership

If you want to affect change, get on a board! This thought was empha-sized as Clements and Markgren discussed their involvement on the WALDO board. They shared the following tips:

- Engage in Discovery
  - Ask questions, be curious
  - Learn about the consortium and how it functions
  - Learn about the various roles and responsibilities
  - Is there an on-boarding document?[7]
- Engage in Evaluation
  - Regularly evaluate mission, bylaws, requirements
  - Review workflows, governance
  - What do members want?
- Engage in follow-through (implementation)
  - Do the actual work
  - Be confident in making decisions
  - Be flexible when plans change
  - Communicate and be transparent with all stakeholders

Clements and Markgren concluded that most libraries are members of at least one consortium. If you do not know which consortia your library is part of, find out, and then find out what they do, how they work, and how you can get involved. Librarians' skills and backgrounds can come in handy. The presenters discovered their knowledge of the lifecycle of electronic resources and their work with vendor and license negotiations contributed significantly to their ability to affect change through the board. The presenters also had a vested interest—being both customers of WALDO and board members—and this helped to create buy-in from WALDO directors and institutions. Finally, board membership is a great way for those who may not be in formal leader-ship positions to gain valuable hands-on leadership experience.

Appendix 1: Board Resources

ALA: Budgeting & Finance: https://www.ala.org/tools/atoz/library-budgetfinance/budgetfinance

BoardSource: https://boardsource.org/

Center for Nonprofit Advancement: https://www.nonprofitadvance-ment.org/training-hub/board-basics/

NASIG: Guidelines for Board Members: https://www.nasig.org/Competencies-Eresources

National Council of Nonprofits: https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/

Nonprofitready.org: https://get.nonprofitready.org/board-directors-training/

Contributor Notes

Maureen Clements is Associate Director of SUNY Library Services.

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Notes

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2 The Free Dictionary, "Consortium," accessed May 5, 2022, https://www.thefreedictionary.com/consortia.
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4 Jill Grogg and Hannah Rosen, "Consortia: An Evolving Landscape," *Collaborative Librarianship* 12, no.2, article 7 (2020), https://digitalcommons.du.edu/collaborativelibrarianship/vol12/iss2/7.

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6 WALDO in partnership with LYRASIS. "WALDO Bylaws," accessed August 4, 2022, https://waldo.lyrasis.org/by-laws/.
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