Library and IT Collaboration Projects: Nine Challenges

by Marilyn J. Sharrow

The University of California Davis has for some time sponsored a number of collaborative efforts between the General Libraries and the Information Technology Office. These have included a jointly maintained demonstration site for new hardware and software; work on image protocol standardization, the campus Gopher, and CWIS; and regular coordinated teaching and publication projects.

Although the history of such cooperation at UC Davis has been remarkable for its successes rather than its failures, our collaborations have not been without a number of specific challenges that we think may be common to most library/IT collaborations. Being alert to these potential challenges can better position a campus to reap the many benefits that come with the move from fragmentation to collaboration in the management and use of information resources.

Based on our experiences, we have identified nine primary challenges to library/IT collaboration.

Priority setting. The first challenge facing collaborative efforts of any nature is the need to agree on priorities, for both joint and independent development. Information technologists and librarians alike agree that we are witnessing a revolution as we become an increasingly electronically oriented society. While more paper-copy books and journals are being published now than ever before, at the same time more information—including images—is becoming available in computerized databases and full-text electronic books and journals. The need to provide access in parallel to both types of information resources is pressing. Also pressing, then, is the need to set—and re-set—priorities. In the best of collaborative efforts, each group brings to the committee table a list of priorities. These priorities are negotiated and agreed upon by the team, funding sources are earmarked, and plans for implementation are designed. Within this framework of priority setting, the ability to remain flexible, to change plans rapidly and effectively, is essential.

Funding. The second challenge, funding, creates some tension by its very nature. There are already too few dollars to be divided among too many groups for too many worthwhile projects. It is important that the library and IT units avoid making claims that one group’s work is more valuable than the other’s. It is my contention that the IT/library team prospers as a team—that it does better when the units work together than when the units work separately. Both partners on this team share a common goal: to network and deliver information for the whole campus. Both partners can advance this goal by calling upon collaboration as an effective tool for grantsmanship, oversight of general funds, and application for fleeting opportunity money.

Staffing. The capabilities and expertise of the library and IT units are different; therefore, the potential for conflict is increased. The library is mandated to select content and work directly with the users. IT is responsible for delivering that content on the information highway. Although staff may at times seem to be focused in different directions, collaboration affords both organizations the opportunity to learn and appreciate true differences in approach, while reinforcing many complementary interests and goals.

Areas of responsibility, or turf. Similarly problematic is the issue of turf, although individual campus hierarchies vary widely, and conflicts between areas of responsibility can vary accordingly. At UC Davis the university librarian and the associate vice chancellor for IT exist in a peer environment. We both report to the executive vice chancellor and provost, and common committees bring us together often and effectively. In our case, the campus structure itself promotes equality in collaborative efforts, but this is not always so. The placement of library and IT administrators within the college or university hierarchy can often be a potential source of power conflict. Collaboration in such an environment requires extra care and attention.

Awareness of effort. Critical to the effectiveness of any collaborative program is the recognition of effect of activity. We know how easy it is to pursue our own projects without first considering their impact on other campus units. To minimize this risk, the library/IT team must pay attention to communication: it must focus on both the
communication process and the structure of that process. At UC Davis we meet frequently, on many levels, thereby managing to keep abreast of each other’s projects and activities. Nevertheless, we still feel the need to design more secure ways by which we can keep both partners informed as to how each is proceeding on various automated projects—this without killing the entrepreneurial and spontaneous efforts of our talented staffs!

Levels of authority. Another significant challenge to collaborative projects is posed by the problem of authority. Simply stated, someone must be in charge. Everything our teams do ultimately ends up in a committee or task force format, creating the risk that the final responsibility will slide. We have learned that we need to determine, and make clear, responsibility. To the extent possible, the opportunity to take undue credit or cast blame must be eliminated. During these early days of the electronic revolution, many of our projects are simply tests or experiments. At UC Davis we have accordingly agreed that we are still in the learning stage, and that the value of a project extends beyond a simple win or loss on the technology scoreboard.

Communication. It should by now be apparent, from my examples, that constant, constructive communication is key to any successful collaboration. This communication must occur in many forms and at many levels. In this respect, effective communication becomes a tool in responding to the other challenges that face collaborative projects.

Personalities, trust, and respect. Unfortunately, it only takes one or two bad experiences to create an environment of distrust. At UC Davis, librarians and information technologists are peers—friends, colleagues, and true partners. We recognize the bottom line, that any collaborative relationship will be only as good as the people who are involved in it, and we feel fortunate to have the opportunity to work with such talented and dedicated individuals.

Campus politics and climate. Finally, and usually beyond the control of an individual unit, the campus environment itself can sometimes dictate outcomes of a collaborative project—unless the individual units are sensitive to that climate. Historical precedent, prejudices about computer hardware and software companies, funding models, reliance on certain protocols—all can hamper effective cooperation. It is a fact of life for all support units that work must proceed among the campus mine fields! Awareness of the political climate of the college or university can do much to protect team members from unnecessary setbacks.

Both library and IT professionals have significant roles to play in the administration and delivery of higher education. As an important part of the education and training process, librarians are logical teachers and mediators of the electronic information transformation. As specialists who know how to acquire information and how to provide it on the network, information technologists are excellent gatekeepers and facilitators. Each group needs to acknowledge the expertise of the other. This is critical in building overall trust, by the entire academic community, in our new electronic world.

The motivation for creating all of this electronic access is the fact that without it one cannot be an active player within, or beyond, the campus of today. Without the appropriate functionality, researchers cannot acquire information available on automated databases. Students cannot register for classes. Staff cannot prepare payroll. In this regard, the use of IT has become a condition, not a choice. Yet there is no finite technology—we cannot wait until everything is in place and then assess our success. The long-term good of society depends in large part on how well colleges and universities educate our citizens. We cannot settle for mediocrity.

Both librarians and information technologists want to deliver the appropriate information in the appropriate ways and at the appropriate time. By working together and avoiding the pitfalls, our units—and our customers—have everything to gain. At UC Davis we have faced many challenges and the road hasn’t always been easy. Nevertheless, we have achieved a full, productive, and enthusiastic partnership between the library and IT. While this achievement is personally satisfying to the staffs of both organizations, its true value obviously lies in the services we are now able to provide to our users.

Nine Challenges in Library/IT Collaboration

1. Priority setting
2. Funding
3. Staffing
4. Areas of responsibility
5. Awareness of effort
6. Levels of authority
7. Communication
8. Personalities, trust, and respect
9. Campus climate and politics