

Chapter 3

Building the “Bridge” between Two Liberal Arts College Libraries: A Case Study in Deep Collaboration

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ABSTRACT

The Bridge Consortium was formed in 2003/04 for the express purpose of sharing library materials between Carleton and St. Olaf Colleges more efficiently. The first step was the decision by the libraries to adopt a single shared library system. The success of this endeavor set the stage for a much deeper level of collaboration between the two institutions. A consortium governance structure was established, which included working groups to manage and develop shared operations in key functional areas. Through these working groups, policies and procedures were developed to guide Bridge Consortium work, and new initiatives were developed to broaden the scope of collaboration. Since then, the combined staffs of the Carleton and St. Olaf Libraries have expanded the range of resources available to faculty, staff and students on both campuses, improved search and retrieval of materials, and provided comparable user services and experiences.

INTRODUCTION

This essay will provide a brief overview of the history of the Bridge library collaboration between Carleton and St. Olaf Colleges. It will then present a case study on both the successes and challenges of this cooperative effort. Projects to date have focused on maximizing the benefits of shared collections, enhancing the data available to users, developing better search tools, and making the user experience

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more alike on both campuses. This collaboration allows both Carleton and St. Olaf to maximize the return on their investment in each library through enhanced support, services and collections for faculty, students and staff on both campuses.

While there are a number of successful collaborative efforts between liberal arts college libraries, very few can demonstrate the same level of deep collaboration that Bridge has achieved. The staff-driven approach to the Bridge also sets it apart from other cooperative and collaborative efforts. This essay will also focus on the projects and policies Bridge has worked on – both successfully and unsuccessfully.

The chapter will provide staff at college libraries with a blueprint for collaboration that can contain expenditures for participants, enhance services and collections for the patrons of the participating institutions, while also providing a rich and rewarding work environment for the staff.

BACKGROUND

Northfield, Minnesota is a quaint rural town of 20,000 people located fifty miles south of Minneapolis and St. Paul. The town is best known for the failed 1876 bank robbery by the Jesse James / Cole Younger gang immortalized in the 1972 movie *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid*. Beyond a botched bank heist, Northfield is also unique in that there are two nationally-ranked liberal arts colleges located in the city limits. Situated less than two miles apart, Carleton College is on the east side of the Cannon River while St. Olaf College is on the west side.

Both colleges were founded in the second half of the nineteenth century by religious organizations. With approximately 3,000 students, St. Olaf is half again larger than Carleton. Although one campus has fifty percent more students than the other, there are a number of similarities in curriculum, focus and facilities that make both schools ideal partners for collaboration. The biggest difference between the two schools is the academic calendar with St. Olaf operating on a two-semester / January term system while Carleton has three ten-week terms.

Given their similarities, their semi-rural location, and close proximity, one would assume that Carleton and St. Olaf would have a long tradition of working with one another. With the exception of the libraries, there has been limited cooperation between the institutions until recently. The libraries have a history of working together going back decades. Each school’s library has always been open to the faculty, students, and staff of the other campus, as well as to Northfield community members. Additionally, both libraries have moved physical materials between the two campuses for a number of years, and since the 1970’s the libraries have shared a science librarian. This basic cooperative model moved to a new level when the libraries received an Andrew W. Mellon Foundation grant to acquire and implement a joint library management system in 2004. The Mellon Foundation’s mission statement expresses the intentions of their work:

The Foundation endeavors to strengthen, promote, and, where necessary, defend the contributions of the humanities and the arts to human flourishing and to the well-being of diverse and democratic societies. To this end, we support exemplary institutions of higher education and culture as they renew and provide access to an invaluable heritage of ambitious, path-breaking work (<https://mellon.org/about/mission/>).

In order to jointly implement and operate a single library system, the staff at both institutions had to work closely together to align core policies and procedures for cataloging and circulation. The combined

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