

Library/IT Partnerships
Constituent Group Meeting, CAUSE96
minutes submitted by Malcolm Brown, Dartmouth College

This constituent group meeting convened at noon on Thursday, 12/5/96. It was quite well attended, with over 70 participants squeezing into a space set up for 50. Discussion was lively and easily consumed the full two hours. What follows is a summary of the comments that were made.

We first went around the room and had each participant introduce him- or herself and share the 1 or 2 key issues they had in the context of library and IT partnerships. Interests and issues varied to some extent, but some common themes emerged. Very much on everybody's mind is The Question: to merge or not to merge library and IT organizations. Given that the interests and activities of librarians and IT folks are converging, does it make sense to fully merge the two organizations? What are the rewards, perils, and pitfalls of such a merger?

It was stressed several times that the strongest sense of partnership arose out of collaborative activity done at the middle layers of the two organizations. It was emphasized repeatedly that frequent contact in a variety of contexts was fundamental to building successful partnerships. Several participants mentioned that cross training of IT consultants and librarians helped a great deal in the breaking down of barriers.

It is vital to build a sense of collaboration before the formal merging of the two organizations. A top-down approach, done simply because it seems like a good idea, will have a difficult time in truly succeeding unless there has first been a great deal of both professional and social interaction. According to this suggestion, you should ask first what concrete things you want to do, and worry about the organizational structure later. This was characterized by one participant as operating at the "beg-borrow-steal" level.

Others warned about falling victim to stereotypes. For example, the group bristled when it was suggested that librarians are formal, structured, and rigid and that IT workers are not. Many suggested that you can find rigid or highly opinionated as well as flexible workers in both organizations. The key was to enter into interactions with a respect for the expertise that one's counterpart possesses.

A faculty member warned against too much "splitting hairs" when it came to the division of duties. He pointed out that both library and IT staff need to keep in mind that for the faculty and students, it doesn't really matter who provides the answer. What the users want is the answer.

The importance of becoming closely familiar with what the "other" staff is doing was also highlighted. One participant put it succinctly: "to assume is to err." Another suggested that "declared ignorance" was important, as it prompted the asking of questions which in turn initiates dialogue.

Given the overall context of rapid change, it is important to approach projects, assignments and restructurings as experiments: planned or educated guesses at what should work. As in scientific experiments, it is vital to watch the proceedings carefully and be ready to alter the arrangements as needed.

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It was also stressed that it is important not to overlook the issues, strengths, and weaknesses that are idiosyncratic to one's institution. Any planning and partnership will need to take into account all aspects of the institution's situation. Plans and organizational reshufflings that are based solely on models from other institutions most likely will not succeed. The reorganization by itself doesn't solve anything.

It was also stressed that merging the library and IT will not work if the organizations are weak and struggling to begin with. Simple mergers, in the sense of mere adjustment of reporting lines, will tend to exacerbate and not correct existing weaknesses. The result of merging two weak organizations most often will be a larger, though still weak organization.

The facilitator introduced Arnold Hirshon of Lehigh University. Arnold has begun work on a CAUSE position paper that will deal with library and IT mergers. The paper will not advocate merging or remaining separate; instead, it will focus on the issues involved and try to help educate the reader so that he/she is better able to judge whether a merger would help or hinder at his/her institution.

The number of librarians attending the CAUSE conference has increased significantly. One participant urged IT folks to consider attending the ACRL conference next spring.

The session ended with the facilitator suggesting that participants make use of the CAUSE listserv that is devoted to this discussion. Details on subscribing can be found on the CAUSE Lib/IT Web page at <http://cause-www.colorado.edu/member-dir/cg/libit.html>.