

## **Building a Stronger Community Presence** by Melissa Mannon

While an organization must focus on its own bottom-line, it must also recognize the need to team up with others. When the institution gives some of its time and resources to a collaborative, it is working to meld its own ideals with the community at-large. Doing so allows outsiders to see the vital role the organization plays in the community. In the long run, working with a group can make achieving goals much easier by boosting support for an individual institution's mission.

Over the past eight years, my consulting work has focused on building stronger collaboratives for managing archives. For a collaborative to achieve success it must, at least to an some extent, put the needs of the group before the individual. At this time, when budgets are even tighter for non-profits than they usually are, the theme of collaboration must play center stage in our work. My purpose in this month's newsletter is to encourage you to think more about establishing cooperatives in your town.

I find myself talking more and more about community these days. I have learned from my work as an archivist that the history we maintain in our collections is most important for preserving our past,

continuing our sense of identity, and highlighting our purpose as a member of a larger whole. Our importance in the community and our very existence depends on how our presence is perceived by our communities. While budgets are slashed, we have the opportunity to position ourselves as vital to the community. The alternative is to fade away with our limited funds and limited audience.

This time last year, I recognized the Essex National Heritage Commission as a model for collaboration. However, today I want to emphasize that a collaborative can work on a smaller scale — in an individual community.

Many towns across New England have established successful non-profit collaboratives that have benefited their archival programs and their missions to preserve history. Collaboratives also have the benefit of boosting civic pride by emphasizing a shared purpose.

This week, I have been invited to visit a small business collaborative in a local city. With the hope of revitalizing downtown and attracting more business, the main street businesses are meeting to

discuss their needs and future direction. In talking to a local shop owner, I suggested that the businesses might want to team up with local non-profits to build a stronger sense of community, relying on historic resources to highlight the uniqueness of the city. This kind of cross-purpose collaborative can breed new ideas and a new vision for the downtown, encouraging townspeople and outsiders to find new reasons for visiting the area, while also encouraging local residents to develop (or re-develop) a sense of pride in their town.

Consider your community and begin to think about potential collaborative partners. Consider partnerships with the local library, town hall, the historical society, educational institutions, small businesses, and large businesses hoping to gain some community presence. Though our individual goals may seem discordant with those of others in our community, we can build a successful foundation for our organization's mission by collaborating. Organizations can come together recognizing the goal to sustain a sense of community and thus facilitate a stronger local presence for all.

## Building a Stronger Community Presence

### Easy to measure and tangible benefits of collaboration for an individual collecting repository

- Increase visibility to town government, others in positions of power, and potential patrons - A group with common goals can more effectively demonstrate a significant need for support than an individual organization
- Reach a larger audience through cooperative outreach projects including exhibitions and lectures
- Develop standardized access tools, town or area wide - Databases and web sites with information about a variety of collections are helpful to researchers trying to determine the best place to find useful resources
- Increase "people resources" - A group can work together to find solutions to problems and volunteers can be pooled and placed where they are most needed
- Reduce costs for supplies - Purchasing in bulk as part of a consortium is less expensive than purchasing supplies for your institution alone
- Ensure safety of records and historical information with pooled resources to develop collections, identify gaps in the historical record, and support an adequate facility for preservation of materials
- Obtain grant funding for collaborative projects - many grantors encourage collaboration

Whether a locale establishes a formal incorporated cooperative or an informal group, there are basic procedures to encourage its success. Groups are often unsuccessful due to miscommunication, insufficient planning, or setting unachievable goals. The group must work to keep communicate and keep everyone informed of intentions and developments as the collaborative proceeds. The group must also be sure to plan activities by creating formal written documents describing goals and objectives that are created with the input of all group members.



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"You [the record keepers] contribute value to your communities by listening well to people's concerns, assuring that adequate records are kept of history-making events and of the acts spoken by history-makers, and doing that in a way that allows you to be effective partners for history-makers as they re-member the past and invent the future."

- Chauncey Bell. *Organizational Change and the Role of the Archivist*. Keynote Speech at California Society of Archivists meeting. Pasadena California: 1998.

Begin your collaboration by forming a solid historical foundation in your community. Before attempting a collaborative on a grand scale, begin by collaborating with other local historical organizations in town.

Some of the initial tangible steps for a successful archives collaborative may include:

- Create a team to create an historic timeline of your town's history and decide what should be documented
- Figure out who has what through archival surveys
- Create Collection Development Policies
- Determine what materials are missing from historic record
- Perform outreach to garner new materials and to fill documentation gaps