Collaborating in the Digital Era: Challenges and Rewarding Experiences of Library Collaboration Among JULAC Libraries

Samson Soong, Ph.D.
University Librarian
The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

A History of Collaboration: the Case of JULAC

The words “cooperation” and “collaboration” are sometimes used interchangeably. When we discuss group efforts of libraries of varying sizes, they probably should not be. As O’Connor, Wells and Collier have penetratingly suggested, “cooperation in a library situation implies that the larger cooperate with other libraries, recognising that the small will be unable to contribute to the same extent. Collaboration recognises that all libraries, large and small, are under pressure and that each can contribute to the solution in different but ultimately useful ways for the benefit of the whole.” So it is, I think, with almost all joint efforts of academic libraries in Hong Kong. Thus, the word “collaboration” is preferred and used in this paper which focuses on collaborative efforts made by academic libraries in Hong Kong to support learning, teaching and research at their own institutions.

Academic libraries in Hong Kong have a history of collaboration. At a time, however, rarely did people find broad-based collaboration or collaboration across any type of libraries in Hong Kong. A cultural shift began to take place some 30 to 35 years ago. Since then, a number of factors, especially advances in information technology, have been putting collaboration on information resources and library services on the front burner for all types of libraries -- especially academic libraries. The formation of the Joint University Librarians Advisory Committee (JULAC) is very much an outgrowth of a collaborative design. JULAC was established in 1967 by the Heads of Universities Committee (HUCOM). It is a forum to discuss, coordinate and collaborate on library information resources and services among the libraries of the eight institutions of higher learning funded by the University Grants Committee (UGC) of the Hong Kong Government. While the membership of JULAC is limited to the university librarians or library directors of the eight UGC institutions, there are standing sub-committees, special task forces and working groups which involve a large number of librarians and library staff members from these eight university libraries.

Collaboration as Part of Library Transformation

Collaboration among JULAC member libraries is closely connected to the ongoing transformation in academic libraries. To better understand increasing collaboration among JULAC libraries, we need to understand that there are a number of factors that have
influenced the general climate in which academic libraries operate. As a result of these influences, academic libraries have been changing and transforming. These changes and transformations in academic libraries are made in the context of the ongoing changes in academic institutions and of the very process of scholarly communication. Just as the transformation of the academic institution reflects broader societal and cultural changes, transformation in an academic library to a large degree mirrors the ongoing change of the academic institution or university. Therefore, library collaboration, which is closely related to the transformation of the academic library, cannot be understood apart from this larger context and the cultural changes and trends that shape academic institutional or university growth.

Among other changes currently underway in universities, these significant changes include undergraduate curriculum reform, with the incorporation or infusion of research into undergraduate education; increasing support for learning and research on interdisciplinary and global issues; increased sharing of resources within and across universities in ways not previously likely or possible; and new opportunities for reaching more students through distance learning and additional self-financed programs. These new opportunities have allowed greater access to higher education, especially for non-traditional populations. At the same time, information technology is creating massive changes in how scholars work and communicate, what they produce as scholarship, and how they teach. Within this changing environment, JULAC member libraries understand more keenly than ever the new ways in which library users are seeking and using information. JULAC libraries sharply notice an expanding base of users and, in many instances, changing service demands. JULAC libraries rightly see the need to collaborate with each other to meet these increased demands.

Faculty and Student Users as Key Beneficiaries

Effective collaboration among JULAC libraries has realized many benefits, with student and faculty users at UGC-funded universities being the primary beneficiaries. For instance, all faculty members, academic equivalent staff, research assistants and postgraduate students at these eight universities are eligible for JULAC cards. The JULAC card enables them to use the facilities of other JULAC libraries and borrow materials from them. As a result of reciprocal interlibrary lending and borrowing agreements among JULAC member libraries, library users at all these universities, including undergraduate students, may request materials through interlibrary loan from other JULAC libraries.

Successful collaborative efforts of the JULAC member libraries have also resulted in great savings on a wide range of electronic information resources. The intensive efforts of the JULAC Collection Development Committee in working assertively with vendors to enable every member library to realize savings has paid off significantly. With the rising cost of journals and databases and ever-limited library budgets, all JULAC libraries have actually taken various measures to try to maintain their library collections at a level sufficient to support learning and research at their own institutions. As a result of good collaboration, they have been able to count on the JULAC consortium of the eight libraries to achieve value
through consortial purchases of databases or packages of electronic journals to bridge the gap caused by their decreasing and ever-limited budget. There have been many other positive outcomes as a result of JULAC’s collaborative efforts over the years. As a number of papers at this conference will speak more fully to the rewarding experiences of some current JULAC efforts, the overall benefits resulting from the collaboration among JULAC member libraries are merely encapsulated here.

On the whole, JULAC library collaboration has led to better and broader access to information resources needed by faculty and students at the eight UGC-funded universities. While we often categorize libraries by size or by type, library users do not. Library users don't care where they get the book or the information they need, as long as they get it. Students and faculty members at UGC institutions are significantly better served as a result of collaborative JULAC agreements. As a result of these efficient resource-sharing arrangements, the user base for any individual library has expanded to include library users beyond the parent institution. Collaboration among JULAC libraries has also resulted in better solutions for many service problems. These encouraging experiences suggest that different libraries that see aspects of a problem differently can constructively explore their differences. The resulting joint solution is always stronger and better than what one library could achieve alone.

Collaboration among JULAC libraries has helped implement projects that require a significant investment of staff time and other resources as well. Often libraries with a small staff that might not be able to attempt a project on their own can participate in a collaborative initiative which will benefit all participating libraries. JULAC collaboration has made it possible for every library to capitalize on the professional expertise of all. For instance, catalog librarians with cataloging and metadata expertise of some libraries can work together with library systems experts at other libraries. Working together is also cost-effective. In IT-enabled projects, such as the Hong Kong Chinese Authority Name Project (HKCAN), the infrastructure, both software and hardware, is shared by its members and the cost is reduced or minimized. Many JULAC collaborative projects also share the training costs. Since collaborators at JULAC libraries share a common vision, they always develop the best possible procedures and practices to support these collaborative initiatives. In addition, collaboration among JULAC libraries has greatly increased funding opportunities for projects that benefit all libraries, and consequently, the students and faculty at all eight universities.

A Few Lessons to be Learned

While the results of the JULAC collaboration have been encouraging, there are still a few lessons that can be learned from its various collaborative initiatives and efforts. First of all, library collaboration is a choice. It can be expected, but it cannot be mandated. The work involved in collaboration is often hard, but the binding on libraries often is soft. Library collaboration comes naturally, but it doesn't come easily. As JULAC libraries are budgeted and staffed at significantly different levels, these non-trivial differences can sometimes create barriers to collaboration among these libraries.
While a goal required to begin a collaborative project is always shared, the method needed to start the collaboration is understandably lacking at the beginning. Library collaboration therefore requires patience, understanding, making tradeoffs, sharing control and having some tolerance for ambiguity. As collaborators, JULAC libraries need to be more proficient in making tradeoffs, sharing control and having some tolerance for ambiguity. JULAC members will need to continue to do their best to get beyond the subtle barriers caused by their different library budget and staffing situations. In other words, they have to continue to pay enough attention to providing the latitude needed in library collaboration.

JULAC members have also learned that all collaborating libraries need active and good relationships with their university administrators, as well as other constituencies, e.g. HUCOM, UGC, to ensure the best outcomes from collaborative efforts. Some of these constituencies need to have a say in library collaboration, especially if they are expected to provide necessary resources or funding for collaborative projects. These stakeholders must always be shown specific benefits and key trade-offs, if any, of a collaborative project to be supported or funded. Collaborating library leaders also need to be able to agree on the priorities of various collaborative initiatives. In addition, good communication must be the central focus if collaborating libraries are to ensure sufficient support or commitment at all levels within their own libraries.

As professional librarians or information professionals, many of us have long realized the value of working together and sharing with others our expertise or resources. However, sometimes it is hard to collaborate with other libraries when we are overwhelmed by our daily duties or tasks. A good book by Marc B. Silverman, Teamwork and Collaboration in Libraries: Tools for Theory and Practice 3, provides some inspiration and ideas. Marc B. Silverman is Assistant Director for Public Services at the University of Pittsburgh's Barco Law Library. In his short introduction, he says, “[t]he theme of this volume is library collaboration ... Ideas and experiences are the points I want to highlight.” This collection of essays actually prepared by a number of professional librarians offers different perspectives on working together. While it focuses on law libraries, many of the projects and procedures could apply in other academic library settings.

**Need for Continued Collaboration**

A prevailing theme of discussions at many library forums or meetings in recent times is how to collaborate further among academic libraries and with other stakeholders in higher education. The rapid changes in the environment of information technology and scholarly communication continue to present new opportunities and challenges for academic libraries, especially in regard to information access strategies and library collection development and management decisions.

For instance, scholarly journal prices continue to rise significantly faster than inflation and library budgets. These increases have led to continued journal cancellations,
with fewer journals needed by faculty and students being subscribed by libraries. Concurrently, the scholarly communication practices in the humanities, social sciences, and sciences continue to be transformed by the use of information technology in support of research and publishing. Scientists and many social scientists have been developing databases and conducting research online for years and are pushing ahead dramatically, demanding increased functionality, massive storage capabilities, and publishing options that include datasets, images, and simulations. Humanities scholars have also begun to develop their own research databases and are experimenting with reinventing the book and the article online, often using the digital data that they and others have amassed.

At the same time, academic libraries are expected to serve more students, support new research projects and additional self-financed programs, deploy innovative technologies, and expand or rebuild aging infrastructures. How can we convey forward movement and growth while also repeatedly taking large cuts to our operating budgets? There are, as we all know, only so many places to make these cuts, and often no matter which way we slice it, some professors or students won’t like it. As a result, academic libraries need to collaborate further or deeper in existing and additional areas.

JULAC is exploring new arenas for collaboration, e.g., cooperative storage of library materials, and experimenting with deeper collaboration in access services. In the future, JULAC members could also take the principle of library cooperation into the reference arena. Based on the positive experiences of the HKUST Library’s past participation in the global Collaborative Digital Reference Service (CDRS), we could encourage reference librarians at JULAC libraries to share the results of their intellectual effort with other institutions. JULAC libraries could, for instance, use OCLC’s QuestionPoint system to support such collaboration. QuestionPoint is a library-to-library system for responding to, tracking and managing questions from library users via the Web. The system also provides libraries with tools to add simple links from the library's portal to support a locally branded and customizable question-and-answer service. The system actually would link our library users to a worldwide network of library experts in various fields to tackle their most difficult queries. JULAC libraries have used technology to serve library users better. With collaborative virtual reference or other initiatives, they can use technology collaboratively to serve library users even more.

Conclusion

Collaboration is key if academic libraries are to adequately support the information needs of their users, especially in the current environment. No one academic library alone has all the information resources needed to support the wide range of disciplines found within institutions of higher learning. As social, economic and technological complexity increases at an accelerating rate and as resources of all types become more limited, library collaboration will grow more important every day. There are fewer and fewer arenas in which individual or unilateral action suffices. Library collaboration is not simply desirable, it is inevitable.

2 The JULAC Collection Development Committee was formed in 1998/99. “The initial objective was to concentrate on negotiating the largest discount for high-priced electronic resources. After gaining substantial discounts ranging from 10% to 40% for core databases such as IEEE Xplore, Web of Science, ProQuest and LexisNexis Academic, the group expanded its scope to include negotiations for e-journal packages. To heighten its bargaining power, it also started to accept affiliate members including the libraries of the Open University of Hong Kong, the University of Macau and the Academy for Performing Arts.” *Notes from the Library*, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, Issue No. 50, November 2003, p. 1.


4 OCLC’s QuestionPoint system actually comes in two packages. The “basic” package allows subscribers to conduct chat sessions, track and manage e-mail queries, route questions to other institutions within a local group or consortium, compile a local knowledge base of frequently-asked-questions, and customize the whole package so it bears your library's name and logo. The “full” package offers this functionality plus a set of local reference management tools, and integrated access to hundreds of institutions in the global cooperative network of participating libraries.