

## APPENDIX B.6

### The Tri-College Library Consortium Experience 1986-2005: The View from Bryn Mawr College

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The idea of the Tri-College Library Consortium, measured from the inception of its first working collaboration in 1986, is twenty years old. Two years later, the presidents of Bryn Mawr, Haverford and Swarthmore signed an agreement creating the Tri-College Consortium to support and sanction the release of a request-for-proposal to acquire a shared integrated library system (ILS). That system, Tripod, provided a digitized, networked catalog of each collections' holdings merged in a single, souped-up equivalent of an electronic card catalog. Brought online by staff in 1990, officially opened to the Tri-College public in 1991 – Tripod is still the signature project that Tri-College library staff, faculty and students associate with an initiative that began with the retrospective conversion of its card catalogs into machine-readable form, but with roots stretching back to the 1930s. In those beginning explorations of seventy-five years ago the emphasis was on the potential for increasing the ease of discovery of each institution's local holdings; in the intervening years the library staffs discussed sharing or better maximizing human resources, then planned to build together the collection of knowledge resources. By 1988, however, the agreement that the three library directors executed focused the question of more efficient discovery; Tripod, ambitious in the technical challenges it was conceived to meet, was essentially the sole product the signatories knew they wanted to create.

In 2006 the Tri-College imprint is far bigger than Tripod. The consortium now operates six distinct but related systems spread over 17 computer processors. The libraries are half-way through working on their fourth major grant from the Mellon Foundation; this largess – exceeding \$1.8 million since 1998 – has advanced the handling of reserve materials, stakeholder assessment, staff development, user interfaces, evaluation of the knowledge collections and collaboration on managing and building those collections. The vast majority of physical materials held at one institution are treated as if held by all, with bound volumes (and films and sound recordings) directly requestable by our patrons and delivered twice daily to the library of their choosing. Conscious duplication of books is becoming more an act of exception than intention. Other projects, with and without outside financial support, have led to the innovative use of computer technology to enhance interest in and use of the colleges' special collections. The Tri-College community also enjoys licensed access to electronic information resources often exceeding those available at the largest research institutions. These digital resources are not merely textual – images and sound are increasingly in that mix – and attracting national recognition both for the quality and breadth of content and the means of delivery and access.

What follows is an attempt to examine areas where the Tri-College libraries together have significantly and progressively marked the libraries' programs, almost always for the good but not always without tradeoff. These areas include **knowledge resources and access, human capital, and financial position**. This analysis will draw upon the experiences of other peer group academic library consortia – and relatively isolated cohorts – and will rely on both empirical and anecdotal data. This undertaking will conclude by proposing opportunities and identify potential challenges for further development of Tri-College energy.

## Knowledge Resources and Access

The point of collaboration is to provide better services, programs and resources than any of our institutions could independently. The success of this undertaking is especially apparent with knowledge resources, that is, in intellectual content. Tri-College students demonstrably benefit from the strength of each College's library budget working often as one, especially in joint licensing and subscription of databases and electronic journals. The working assumption that the Tri-College will purchase as a consortium databases and other electronic resources leverages the consortium's status as a single entity to obtain pricing significantly more favorable than any one of the Colleges could obtain on its own.

There is hard evidence that this maximization of resources works. A sample of seven databases – albeit an arbitrary subset – available for all Tri-College students, staff and faculty was compared against four similar consortia and our leading peer institution spenders. These results, tabulated in Appendix I, demonstrate that none of the other consortia offer all of the students all of the databases.

Such back-end collaboration has enabled Tri-College librarians to provide in the catalog virtually all of our electronic holdings, with individual records for all e-books, e-journals, e-newspapers, and databases where full-text is available online, even when the only data from which to start is a list of titles and corresponding URLs. Librarians here are currently investigating whether efficiencies may be found by outsourcing this record creation to a vendor. Some of this work, particularly for e-books, will still need to be done in-house, because the vendors that can provide such services currently only have the ability to provide records for e-journal and database subscriptions.

## Human Capital

From the initial hire of the Consortium's first coordinator in 1987, the Tri-Colleges have generally shared funding of between 2 and 3 FTE. Up until 2001 .5 FTE was dedicated to a van driver to move books between the campuses; it effectively increased then to 1 FTE when the Consortium began year-round and week-end deliveries, including twice-daily during Fall and Spring in-session weeks. (On average, materials are delivered within 24-hours of request.) The other half-time/full-time position was historically an assistant to the coordinator; for a brief period, the Consortium employed a coordinator and a special projects librarian. Now the coordinator works with the assistance of an applications programmer (who for three years worked under a Mellon grant). All along the running of Tripod – and the systems spawned from our collaboration in the past several years - has drawn on contributions of time and talent from Bryn Mawr's systems administrators and networking staff.

When the Tri-College staffing position is compared to “stand alone” institutions and those of other consortia of liberal arts college libraries, it quickly becomes apparent that Bryn Mawr, Haverford and Swarthmore are deriving great value. Comparisons of the Tri-Colleges to other consortia of similarly liberal arts colleges: CTW around Hartford; “The Bridge” in Northfield, Minnesota; the Ohio Five/Four; the Five Colleges in central Massachusetts; the CBB schools in central Maine<sup>1</sup> – shows a range of joint-funding of staff positions, ranging

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<sup>1</sup> CWT (Connecticut, Trinity, Wesleyan); The Bridge (Carleton/St. Olaf); Ohio Four/Five (Kenyon, Wooster, Denison, Ohio Wesleyan, Oberlin-the latter a member of the Five but not the more closely collaborating Four); The Five Colleges (Smith, Mt. Holyoke, Hampshire, Amherst with the decidedly non-small liberal arts institution, University of Massachusetts); CBB (Colby, Bates, Bowdoin).

from zero to three but with 2 or more the norm. And the University of Delaware, a stand-alone shop that hosts a collection no larger than the Tri-Colleges' unified holdings, devotes 4 FTE to the operation of its integrated library system.

It is true that each of the Colleges separately employ at least one full-time applications developer in their IT operations, and that each of our libraries also depends on major time investments from its library staff in developing its Web-based initiatives, but it is also true that each had a full- or nearly-full time person working solely on the Web when the Tri-Colleges hired its shared developer. In each of our libraries, those positions still exist, and their incumbents work on web development, but they also are able to contribute to many more dimensions of the libraries' services and programs relative to the first years in which the positions existed.

Of course, an isolated academic library that does not share its collection with collaborating neighbors expends nothing on a delivery service. In 2005-2006 the Tri-College van service cost just under \$41,000 (salaries/benefits, gasoline & repairs, basic service supplies such as rubberized storage tubs). But that \$41,000 was split three-ways, while our most recent vetted data (from 2001-2003) suggests that each of our institutions would spend eight to ten times \$41,000 annually simply buying titles that each of our libraries now need not duplicate because of our success in making one collection for all. The Tri-Colleges still duplicate – roughly 21% of our current acquisitions in the Knowledge Collection<sup>2</sup> are for materials held in two or more of our physical stacks – and the Tri-College libraries still spend a great deal on that Knowledge Collection – collectively \$4,837,803 in 2004-2005 – but the breadth of resources collectively offered to our community of scholars and learners vastly outpaces the redundancy of “just in case” accumulation. Clearly this is an instance where investments in both the Tripod system – which facilitates discovery and makes possibly this easy sharing of materials – and the delivery mechanics bring a demonstrable return.

The Consortium experiences its greatest recoup on human resources spending not by hiring dedicated staff to work on a particular program or service but rather by maximizing local time and talent for the benefit of the others. For instance, in 2000 Swarthmore maintained a major government document repository, Haverford and Bryn Mawr two smaller but not small collections; since 2002 the Tri-College government information program has been centered and managed at Swarthmore; quality control of the hundreds of thousands of names and subjects in our combined cataloged is overseen by Haverford; and Bryn Mawr, in addition to being the Consortium's system and financial center also coordinates the acquisition, licensing and cataloging of electronic information resources, facilitating the creation of a unified library of digital resources across the three campuses.

Finally, collaboration has fostered the reconfiguration of all three of the local library staffs, particularly by shifting operations (Technical Services) staff into more patron-focused roles (reference, circulation) and by integrating certain once-separated technical functions (government document processing, inter-library loan) into Technical Services. (At Bryn Mawr, 6.8 backroom staff have been converted into 4.8 public services staff, while a two-person Interlibrary Loan office managed by the senior public services library administrator is now a one-person, Technical Services operation occurring in the backroom. The other two, vacancies created by retirement, were given back to Bryn Mawr's general pool of staff positions.) Doubtless these shifts occurred because of demands (and opportunities) unleashed by the electronic information “revolution,” by a need to reprioritize and most decisively by changes in leadership, but the ability to implement these changes is largely a

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<sup>2</sup> Intellectual content: books, periodicals, digital resources, and increasingly sound and images.

by-product of Tri-College collaboration. The staffs catalog one item one time; generally, one item is bought one time, one digital license is executed one time, one vendor performs “authority control” on those myriad names/subjects on one unified file; one subscription agent has the libraries’ business; each staff draws on an organic set of best practices.

## Financial Position

While the creation of the online catalog at the Tri-Colleges occurred later than many institutions, that delay – in the cause of building of collaborative energy and waiting for greater market maturity – enabled the creation of an online environment that has been relatively comprehensive in power and scope. In 1999, and again in 2005, the Consortium investigated the ILS market and concluded that possible benefits of migrating from Innovative Interfaces – the commercial system adapted into Tripod – to a newer player in the market did not outweigh the costs involved with such a migration. For instance, one system that has seized significant market share in the last few years appears to require four times more dedicated staff.

Most ways in which the Consortium saves can be traced to its historical decision in 1988 to merge bibliographic holdings and build a centrally-maintained system, a decision, incidentally, that in the group of consortia studied for this paper only the Massachusetts Five Colleges preceded. For instance, the Tri-Colleges paid only once for certain first-pass quality control data processing. It has paid once for each server running its systems, not three times. The Tri-Colleges jointly negotiated a slightly better price in 2000 for a major upgrade to the ILS underpinning Tripod than each institution running the same brand system in another consortium (but as separate, not central, installations) budgeted a year later for the same purpose. The software that links citation databases to Tri-College licensed electronic journals was priced at 1.25 times the best price any of the Tri-Colleges on its own could have secured. Other software licenses have cost not a dollar more than each institution would need to pay separately.

The most subtle form of investment payoff has been in holding the line on the Knowledge Collection. In 2004-2005 Bryn Mawr, Haverford and Swarthmore were each among the top-15 small liberal arts-college spenders on Knowledge Collection dollars per student.<sup>3</sup> But a study of the spending history among this group of 15 libraries back in time at 5-year intervals to 1989/90 reveals that Tri-College expenditures in this same crucial category are much less than among its cohorts. In fact, the average increase in spending in these 15 years is at first glance almost identical – 9.25% for the Tri-Colleges, 9.46% for its peers – but that is largely because in the first five years of the Consortium the priority was on learning to run the system, not collaborating on collection development. Indeed, in the span from 1990 through 1995 local spending at Bryn Mawr, Haverford and Swarthmore increased at 9% compared to 6% for its peers, possibly because Tripod allowed each campus community to see what it did not hold locally. Yet from 1995 to 2005 Tri-College Knowledge Collection actual expenditures went up 5.5% compared to 7.7% for its peers, then from 2000 to 2005 by less than 4% compared to 5.5% for the rest. (For a graphical representation of this data, see Appendix II.) While it is true that the libraries could only expend what it was allocated in their respective budgets, surely most of this line-holding is manifestation that the Tri-College libraries were bringing more unique resources into its patron community for relatively less money.

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<sup>3</sup> These peers, all members of the informally-affiliated “Oberlin Group” of 75 selective liberal arts institutions, are Amherst, Bowdoin, Carleton, Colby, Davidson, Franklin & Marshall, Grinnell, Middlebury, Smith, Wellesley, Wesleyan and Williams.

## The Next Challenges

The question becomes in the end, “what will our user community expect of us over the next 10-20 years?” As for-profit entities with large financial resource pools such as Google continue to digitize, index, and make available – for now, often freely - large swaths of human intellectual output, what role will libraries and librarians play for our students and faculty? The integrated library system vendors know that their current indexing schema and user interfaces are becoming obsolete, and the smarter ones, ours included, are working on the next generation of software to address the more complex, yet specific ways in which users are becoming accustomed to searching. We do not expect library users to abandon the services that librarians provide. Library patrons will for the foreseeable future still need help in finding many types of resources, particularly those which are not to be found through Internet search engines, whether the information resides in proprietary databases, to which many libraries subscribe, or whether the information resides in the “dark areas” of the Internet that are not easily linked to or crawled by the search engines.

We do not know whether federated search products will fully realize the dreams of their creators, given the difficulties of mapping data accurately across disparate databases. We do know that the college classroom and research experience for students of the future will be increasingly digital and it will include not only traditional text, but also sound – the Tri-College Consortium is working on a pilot project called Variations with Indiana University which delivers music files for academic use – streaming video, and images of just about anything anyone could want. For example, the Tri-College consortium continues to work together to create and use databases of digital art images for use in the classroom. We do not know how and whether non-art images for other disciplines can be integrated into the same database, the same indexing schema, the same user interface. Will we need the use of digital art images in the classroom to become routine before we answer the broader question of those other resources? Additionally, the Tri-Colleges will be implementing a pilot institutional repository (a form of electronic archiving) project in the fall of 2006. This project may help us digitally present collections of materials unique to our institutions. We believe there will be a shift in work-centered focus from processing and handling the items one can get anywhere to the items we hold that are unique.

Libraries are not alone in coming to terms with these technological changes. As Thomas Friedman said in his latest book, “the experiences of the high-tech companies in the last few decades who failed to navigate the rapid changes brought about in their marketplace ... may be a warning to all the businesses, institutions, and nation-states that are now facing these inevitable, even predictable, changes ... not because they are not smart or aware, but because the speed of change is simply overwhelming them.”<sup>4</sup> Bryn Mawr needs to be ready to meet the challenges for change brought about by technology, while respecting and advancing our ultimate tradition of educational excellence and the creation of scholarship. We are more apt to be successful working collaboratively with our peers than by ourselves. We will also need to continue to pursue tighter collaboration on the “computing” side with Haverford and Swarthmore because the digital data we produce, collect, provide access to, and disseminate will need the technological infrastructure of a robust network, servers that can handle the data and traffic, as well as people to run them. The grant monies awarded to us cited above have enabled the Tri-College consortium to look at ourselves and take some of the advice provided by consultants as far back as the 1940s, and also to take the idea of collaboration further than they were able to envision at that time.

Further collaboration will not be easy. We have successfully achieved the easiest collaboration: representing the physical holdings of our libraries in digital form. It is much harder for us to answer how knit together we want

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<sup>4</sup> Friedman, Thomas L. The World Is Flat. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005. p. 46.

to be. Can we share a computer systems group, an administrative information group, a cataloging department, research and reference assistance? Should a Haverford book borrowed by a Bryn Mawr student then sit on the Bryn Mawr stack shelves until the next time it circulates? Whatever we ultimately decide, we should continue to explore the costs and benefits of such resource sharing.

## **Contributors and Acknowledgments**

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Persons interviewed outside of the Tri-Colleges were: Helen Aiello, Serials/E-Resources Librarian at Wesleyan University; Christopher Barth, Director of Information Resources at Kenyon College; Carol Eyler, Head of Technical Services at Carleton College; John Harrison, Associate College Librarian for Collection Development and Bibliographic Services at Bates College; and Kathleen Norton, Head of Collection Development at Mount Holyoke College.

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