

Community connections, community collections: Building partner support for collaborative digitization projects

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Abstract:

Purpose

This paper aims to explore library–community collaboration from both a theoretical and practical perspective, highlighting successful collaborative strategies and projects and illustrating important considerations for libraries that are considering community partnerships.

Design/methodology/approach

This paper consists of a literature review and several “capsule” case studies of projects completed at one academic library to illustrate principles that can result in successful collaborative projects.

Findings

Library–community collaboration presents significant benefits if the needs and priorities of all collaborating partners are taken into account. Successful projects will use the strengths of one partner to balance the weaknesses of another, will be based on shared goals, will offer credit to all partners and will result in stronger relationships for all involved.

Originality/value

Although library–community partnerships are not uncommon, many of these partnerships are housed in public libraries or involve only large, institutional players. This paper explores several non-traditional academic library initiatives involving youth service learning and outreach to smaller community groups that might otherwise be ignored by large university libraries.

Keywords: Collaboration | Community | Engagement | Libraries | Digitization | Grants

Article:

Introduction

Libraries have always seen themselves as community partners, and community collaboration has been a major factor in large digitization projects for the past two decades or more. Despite demonstrated demand for community digitization projects, many potential players lack even the

most basic resources, particularly those institutions who work with low income and underserved communities. Outreach to community groups has often been seen more as a function of public libraries than academic ones, as one may observe from the number of public librarians contributing to books such as Carol Smallwood's *Librarians as Community Partners* (2010). In recent years, though, there has been a distinct trend toward community engagement in academia as well, focusing on the more efficient use of resources, outreach and recruiting, and community relations and support. Libraries are also drawn to collaborative projects because of increased external funding opportunities, enhanced collection synergies and credibility, and a sense of community obligation.

By reaching out to community partners large and small – and by stressing interdepartmental collaboration within the library – The University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) University Libraries have built lasting community relationships while simultaneously making available to the public a wealth of historical materials that document community history. A supportive environment focused on community engagement has allowed the digital projects unit at UNCG to use its expertise and digital infrastructure to benefit partners whose strengths may lie in other areas such as content or volunteer base. These collaborations have resulted in arrangements that further the goals of everyone involved and also provide an attractive model for external funders.

This paper presents strategies for developing support and building trust for collaborative community digitization partnerships, illustrated with real-life examples of successful collaborations at UNCG and other institutions.

Community collaboration and outreach

Waibel and Erway (2009, pp. 4-5) describe “collaboration as a continuum” starting with “contact” and progressing to “cooperation”, “coordination”, “collaboration” and finally “convergence”, with increased levels of investment, risk and benefit at each step along the way. Distinct themes emerge in the literature on both the benefits and the challenges of collaborative digitization projects and library–community collaborations in general.

Benefits

Benefits of collaboration may stem from financial incentives, outreach and visibility considerations, collection development goals and the strong relationships that can result from collaboration. A case for collaboration published by Northern Illinois University's (2013) Sponsored Programs Administration stresses that the trend among grant funders is to favor collaborative projects “assuming that such collaboration is justified” (emphasis in original) and that collaboration may:

- add new disciplinary perspectives;
- introduce new skills and resources;
- introduce viewpoints from outside the academy; and
- increase insight into other perspectives that may strengthen the project.

Controlling expenses and maximizing efficiency are always significant concerns. Buchanan et al. (2012) cite reduced costs and increased return on investment, along with enhanced access to services and the improved quality of those services, as significant benefits of collaboration. Collaboration on grant applications is also an important factor; as noted, many grant programs favor collaborative projects either unofficially by treating them more favorably in the review process or officially by explicitly providing financial incentives. The North Carolina State Library, for example, has in past years offered larger grants and reduced match requirements for collaborative projects with the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) grants it administers.

Buchanan et al. also note the potential for increased visibility of the library and its services as a benefit, as do case studies by McKinstry and Garrison (2001) and by Steman and Post (2013) involving outreach specifically to high school and secondary school students. Increased visibility through collaboration can also open collections to new audiences, outside the traditional academic realm (Shepard, 2014) and this has certainly been the case with collections at UNCG. McKinstry and Garrison further suggest that this outreach by academic libraries can also be beneficial in the area of student recruitment.

Noting the benefits of library consortia in other areas, Prasad (2011) advocates for consortia among libraries, archives and museums, particularly in the areas of collection development and digitization, and cites the need for cooperation in acquiring digital resources and in the development of metadata interoperability standards for digitization. A group of eight academic libraries in Minnesota in fact embarked on a consortial strategy for digital asset management (DAM), sharing an installation of the CONTENTdm DAM software platform as a means of sharing costs and using resources efficiently. This partnership has led to increased cooperation on areas such as metadata standards and the possibility of collaborative joint collections. Also significant is the attention paid to customization and branding of the end-user interface for each partner (Wagner and Gerber, 2011).

An obvious additional benefit is the relationships that can develop between cultural heritage institutions through collaboration. Spang and Yee (2009, p. 114) refer to the relationships and synergies of library–community partnerships as “a win-win situation for all participants” because of expanded access to materials and also because of the fact that libraries when working with community partners can act as “laboratories” for innovative new programs that can be replicated among the partners and elsewhere.

Challenges

Collaborative projects are, of course, not without their challenges; finding effective communication tools and strategies is a nearly universal one. Buchanan et al. suggest that challenges fall into two main categories: strategic and operational.

Strategic challenges are, according to Buchanan et al., often difficult to overcome and center on the understanding of partner goals, strengths and weaknesses, as well as on not addressing perceived inequalities. An emphasis on joint planning to arrive at a comfort zone and a set of ground rules should be combined with ongoing evaluation of the project to increase the

possibility of success. This period of negotiation corresponds roughly with the earlier stages of Waibel and Erway's continuum, in which the partners (ideally) work together on increasingly complex projects until they arrive at a state where collaboration is completely engrained and has become the default modus operandi. Such strategic challenges can also play into decisions about equal credit for all contributors – the attention paid to individual site customization in the Minnesota DAM project (Wagner and Gerber, 2011) is a good example – and assessing the level of contribution each partner will make.

A major operational challenge cited by Buchanan et al. is the issue of staff and resource capacity – specifically that collaboration can be seen as an extra duty for which staff members are not trained and do not have time. For example, metadata standardization is mentioned by Wagner and Gerber and by Shepard as an essential step, but it is also a step that comes with a learning curve for archivists who are familiar with Encoded Archival Description but not MARC or Library of Congress subject headings, or for catalogers who are uncomfortable with the less granular environment of Dublin Core. Shepard further stresses the need to streamline imaging and digitization policies to simplify the collaborative process.

Illustrative projects

Early collaborative digitization projects such as Historic Pittsburgh and the Colorado Digitization Project (CDP) are well documented, both with respect to technology and collaboration. More recently, the North Carolina Digital Heritage Center has provided evolving leadership and collaboration on a statewide level.

Originally an initiative led by the University of Pittsburgh with a few institutional partners, Historic Pittsburgh (<http://digital.library.pitt.edu/pittsburgh/>), has become a portal site for numerous projects from multiple partners using a variety of funding sources, and has been a model for community history projects at UNCG and presumably at other institutions. Shaw (2000) details the technical learning curve of the initial Historic Pittsburgh pilot project, which led to the current portal site. New partners and collections continue to be added to the project, which maintains active news updates page (http://digital.library.pitt.edu/cgi-bin/news/historic_pittsburgh/), and there are currently 14 community partners in addition to the University of Pittsburgh.

The CDP, now absorbed into LYRASIS, provided digitization services and consultation for institutions in Colorado, was committed to a collaborative management and governance structure that involved participants from libraries, archives and museums. CDP also reflected the geographic and size diversity of its partners to devise strategies to increase “buy-in” from a broad array of institutions (Allen, 2000). A good example is the Durango High School Library; participating in this collaborative initiative helped this small library with minimal technology and human resources develop a broad online presence for its history resources. Joining the project also benefited curriculum development and the increased networking opportunities for project partners (Lutz, 2000). Four years later, the collaborative nature of the project was deemed a success because of its consolidation of geographically disparate collections, its promotion of interest in further digitization activities and its flexibility and scalability; challenges includes

priorities that were not always aligned, training and metadata compatibility. And, as most who have worked on such projects have learned:

One of the real challenges of collaborative work among different cultural heritage institutions is that it is time consuming. There are no shortcuts for building a common understanding of terminology, project priorities, and trust. CDP spent the better part of a year meeting with representatives from different cultural heritage institutions to gather information about each type's practices and to build a collaborative – rather than just a cooperative – environment (Bailey-Hainer and Urban, 2004, 261).

The North Carolina Digital Heritage Center (<http://digitalnc.org/>) is housed in the North Carolina Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Funded through the Library Services Technology Act (LSTA) and the University Library, the Digital Heritage Center provides mass digitization and hosting to libraries throughout North Carolina, and has worked extensively in the past with the Internet Archive. The center grew out of earlier initiatives in North Carolina, including the NC ECHO (North Carolina Exploring Cultural Heritage Online) advisory group that has worked with libraries and archives on a range of issues, and has performed significant outreach activities throughout North Carolina to uncover content and make over a quarter million items from nearly 200 partners available online. More recently, the North Carolina Digital Heritage Center has also begun to serve as North Carolina's service hub for the Digital Public Library of America (DPLA). UNCG and other cultural heritage organizations in the state have benefited tremendously from their relationship with the center, and UNCG has been an enthusiastic contributor to DPLA.

Collaboration at UNCG

Digitization efforts at the UNCG University Libraries have traditionally involved participation by one or more of three departments:

1. **Electronic Resources and Information Technology (ERIT):** The digital projects unit is housed within this department and the digital projects coordinator/librarian reports to the assistant dean and department head of ERIT. Both are members of the unit's steering committee, the Digital Projects Priorities Team, which is chaired by the assistant dean. Two full-time technicians are also employed by the digital projects unit, along with several student employees often drawn from UNCG's Department of Library and Information Studies. The primary interface to UNCG's digital collections is available at <http://libcdm1.uncg.edu> (Figure 1).
2. **Martha Blakeney Hodges Special Collections and University Archives (SCUA):** This department houses UNCG's university archives and the University Libraries' extensive special collections, rare books and manuscripts collections. The department head is also a member of the Digital Projects Priorities Team.
3. **Cataloging Department:** This department is represented on the Digital Projects Priorities Team by the metadata cataloger, who consults with the digital projects coordinator on a regular basis. The digital projects unit also claims one quarter of the time of a technician within the department.



Figure 1. Landing page for UNCG’s digital collections links to internal and community-based collections

Early internal projects

The earliest digitization efforts at UNCG were very internally focused and initiated by SCUA. A grant-funded project entitled *Beyond Books and Buildings* made its debut around 2003 and featured a variety of documents and images related to the founding of UNCG as the State Normal and Industrial School in 1892. This project was completed prior to the creation of the digital projects unit, and ERIT was only involved to the point of assisting with the creation of a website using static HTML. Cataloging apparently was not involved in any way; all in all, this project did not involve meaningful interdepartmental collaboration.

Another early pilot project involved the digitization of a large collection of photographs held by the university archives. Unlike *Beyond Books and Buildings*, however, this project was initiated through ERIT without significant input from or coordination with SCUA, an oversight that would later prove problematic and create some tension between the two departments. This tension was not fully resolved until new staff members in both departments began collaborating to “fix” the photo project in a process that eventually involved reprocessing the physical collection and significantly rethinking the digital collection with input from all parties, including catalogers (Gwynn et al., 2015). While challenging and frustrating at the outset, the newly cooperative environment between information technology (IT) librarians and archivists ultimately enhanced collaborative opportunities, resulting in a much more successful digital initiative the following year involving over 200 scrapbooks. The scrapbook project proved to be very instructive with respect to interdepartmental collaboration and communication not only

between ERIT and SCUA but also among these departments and catalogers, who have since become much more involved in digitization projects.

Civil Rights Greensboro

In 2008, UNCG embarked on a large LSTA-funded project focusing on the civil rights movement in Greensboro, the site of the first lunch counter sit-ins in 1960. Civil Rights Greensboro (<http://libcdm1.uncg.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/CivilRights>) was UNCG's first digitization initiative involving inter-institutional collaboration and partners included Duke University, the Greensboro Public Library and several private colleges in the Greensboro area. Content included over 1,500 primary source documents and over 200 oral histories conducted with significant individuals from the 1970s through the 1990s.

Conspicuously absent from the project, however – particularly given the subject matter – were the two historically black college and university (HBCU) campuses located in Greensboro. Although the two HBCU institutions were invited to participate, both declined because of the requirements of the project (e.g. that all archival collections be fully processed prior to the start of the project) and also because of the resources that would be required. The lack of these two community partners no doubt called the credibility of the project into question among some users despite the very significant content that actually was created and made available. The Greensboro Historical Museum had similar reservations about participating, primarily because of workflow priorities, but was ultimately able to contribute some material anyway through an informal arrangement, albeit not as an “official” partner.

The project website featured landing pages for each participating partner with links to that partner's contributions to the project (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Partner landing page features collection contributed by Duke University

North Carolina Runaway Slave Ads

UNCG's next major grant project was the North Carolina Runaway Slave Ads digital collection (<http://libcdm1.uncg.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/RAS>), also funded through an LSTA grant, which provided over 2,200 digitized and transcribed runaway slave ads that appeared in North Carolina newspapers between 1730 and 1840. This initiative was significant in that it provided access to additional material that was of particular interest to African American genealogists above and beyond UNCG's extensive online database of race and slavery petitions based on the work of retired UNCG faculty member Dr Loren Schwening.

The project was also significant because librarians at UNCG were able to arrange a collaboration with librarians at nearby North Carolina A&T State University, an HBCU campus that had opted out of previous projects. This collaboration was seen as essential to the success of the project, both in terms of credibility and funding. Although UNCG proposed the project and served as the lead, every effort was made to include the partner institution in the planning and execution of the project and this process involved a very definite learning curve. There were, of course, the requisite cultural differences that always present themselves when two libraries work together (e.g. level of formality and hierarchy within the library) but the financial and bureaucratic hurdles proved to be the real challenges. Even though both schools were part of the same state university system, things like equipment transfers and student wage reimbursements proved incredibly complicated. The benefits, however, outweighed any difficulties, as the process built new relationships among colleagues who had not been communicating very much prior to the project and served as a bridge between the two university libraries, encouraging future collaboration.

To reflect the collaborative nature of the project, the CONTENTdm web template was specifically modified, with no UNCG logos and with links back to each partner's site (Figure 3).

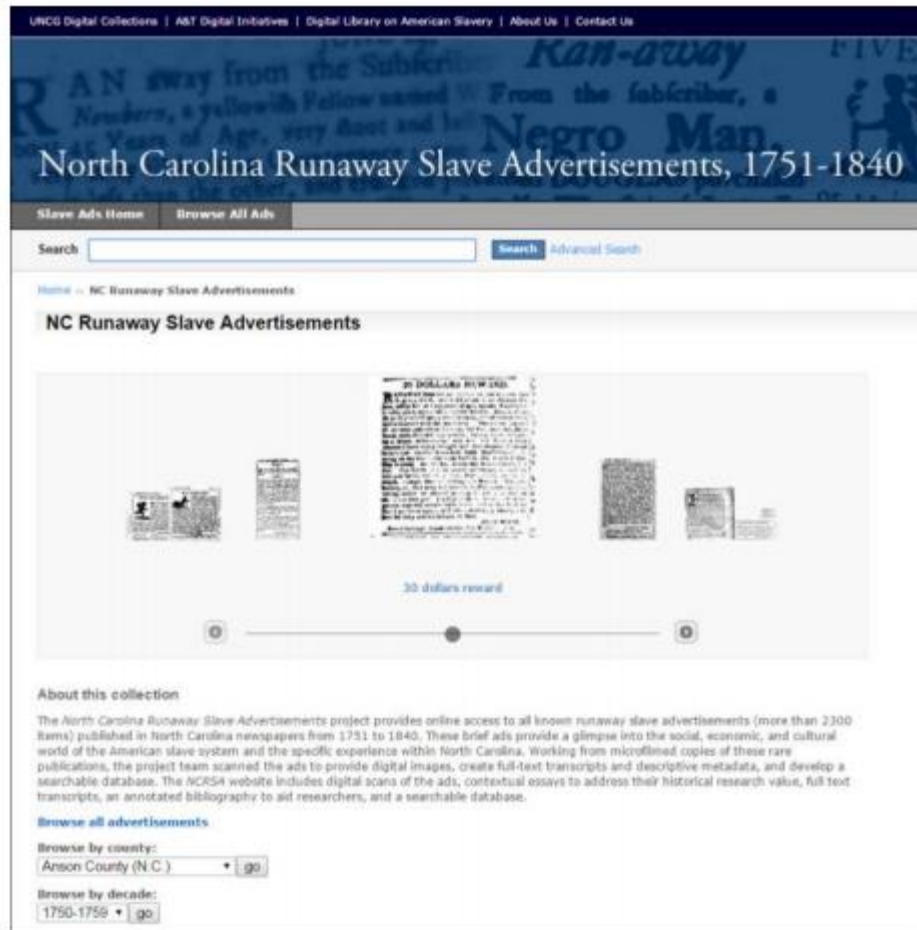


Figure 3. Customized landing page with UNCG “branding” removed for a collaborative project Textiles, Teachers and Troops

On a much larger scale, the two-year LSTA-funded Textiles, Teachers and Troops project of 2012-2014 (<http://digitalgreensboro.org/>) built on previous collaborative efforts to further the goal of creating a collaborative local history portal for Greensboro. For the first time, all five universities and colleges in Greensboro participated, as did the Greensboro Historical Museum and the Greensboro Public Library, a fact that was not lost of the funding agency. This large-scale collaboration required new attention to communication and workflow management but was ultimately successful because the project stressed flexibility and reliance on the strengths of each individual partner. The partners were encouraged to participate at whatever level their interest and resources allowed. Three of the libraries, lacking the resources of even an archivist or librarian who could serve as a regular contact on the project, committed only content materials. One contributed materials and some assistance with metadata but could only commit to one year’s involvement. Another was not involved in digitization activities, but used grant funds to create undergraduate internships for metadata creation and the writing of contextual materials. The museum, which provided a significant proportion of the content and also had the infrastructure to house a temporary project worker in a secondary “hub”, was also involved in both digitization and metadata creation.

UNCG again served as the project lead, suggesting general topics for the project while allowing each partner to decide which of its specific materials would be included. Although UNCG also contributed significant content, much of its participation was in its own areas of strength – project management and oversight, website design and hosting. UNCG upgraded to a Level 3 CONTENTdm license – the highest level, allowing unlimited content – as part of its grant match so that the enormous amount of new material could be included. Additionally, developers at UNCG built a new “overlay” interface using the CONTENTdm application programming interface (API) to create a unified look and feel for the project that would suggest a community project rather than a UNCG collection, displaying all partner logos at the bottom, providing individual landing pages for each partner, and pulling together several existing CONTENTdm collections (Figure 4). This interface was seen as a key factor in emphasizing the collaborative nature of the project and minimizing the perception of UNCG as the large, institutional “owner” of the project; it was also implemented as a way of making the local history portal scalable to accommodate future projects.

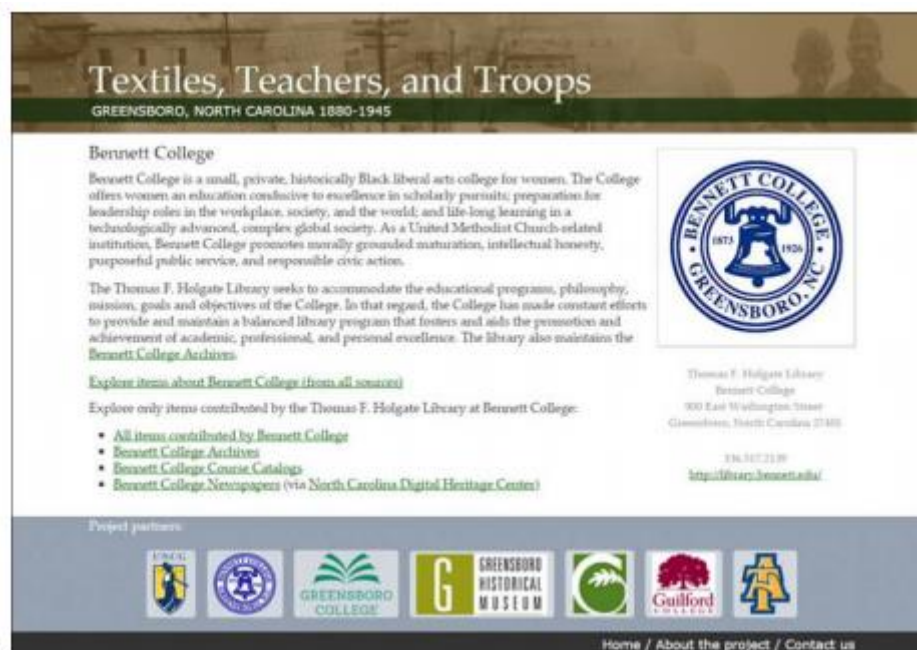


Figure 4. Partner landing page built outside the CONTENTdm platform

One final key to the success of the project was the choice of the project manager at UNCG. The individual chosen had worked as an archivist at the local history museum for more than 20 years and had recently retired. He brought tremendous community contacts and an encyclopedic knowledge of local history to the position, and was instrumental in building community support through press coverage and a major public launch event at the conclusion of the project. The teamwork of the project manager and UNCG’s digital projects coordinator whose strength was in the “back end” aspects of the project (e.g. imaging and metadata management) proved essential to the project’s success.

Community Collections

In the second year of Textiles, Teachers and Troops, the project manager applied for (and was awarded) an internal Community-Based Research (CBR) grant through UNCG's Office of Leadership and Service-Learning. The grant proposed to increase community engagement by involving local community groups – in this case, three churches and an elementary school – with a research project. The Digital Projects Unit proposed that history students, one undergraduate and one graduate, work with these community groups to determine what historical materials they might hold, to gauge interest in digitizing these materials and to develop innovative means of performing digitization in the field with limited resources. The final products of the project were a best practices manual that could be distributed to community groups who wished to start digitizing their materials and a website that displayed the materials that had been digitized (Catlett et al., 2014). Again, the idea was that community partners would provide content and then UNCG would use its infrastructure to host and display that content, providing guidance on selection and metadata when needed. The partners were also provided with contacts from the local archival community who were willing to assist them with ways to care for the physical collections.

The Community Collections website

(<http://libcdm1.uncg.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/Community>) was designed so that material from other community projects could be included there when and if the opportunity arose (Figure 5).

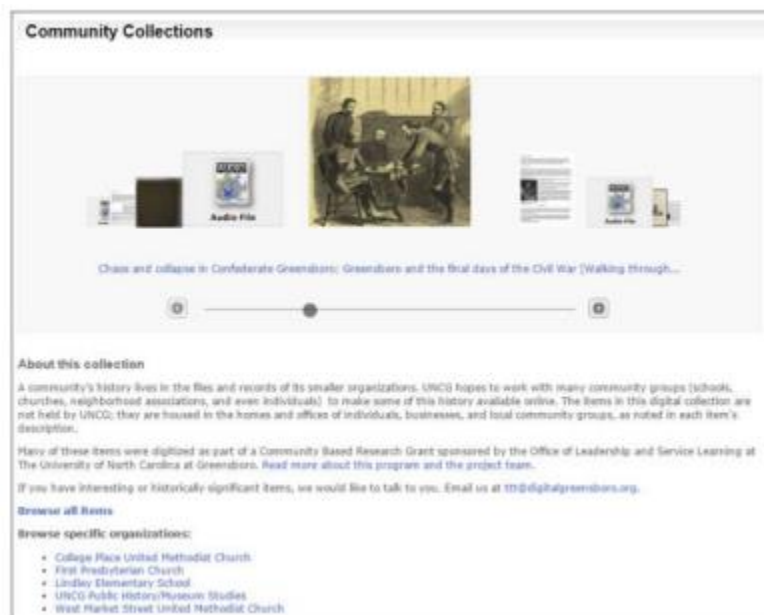


Figure 5. Landing page lists all contributing institutions and allows browsing of

Digital Explorers

That opportunity came quickly in the form of a successful application for an Institute of Museum and Library Services Sparks! Ignition grant late in 2014. Again, the digital projects coordinator and the Textiles, Teachers and Troops project manager worked together to devise a proposal that would create community engagement through a program that simultaneously involved service learning and digitization of historical materials. In partnership with a YMCA branch that had

been formed during segregation to serve Greensboro's African American community, UNCG worked with middle and high school students in the YMCA's youth achiever program to foster an interest in the history of their community by digitizing community history materials. The partners hoped that the project would uncover materials that might be "hidden" in an underserved community where traditional cultural heritage approaches might not have successfully identified (nor even searched for) them. By working with community mentors, the students met with family members and business people in the community to hear their stories and digitize relevant historical materials using some of the techniques that had been developed in the CBR grant project of the previous year (Plate 1). The students also participated in classes and field trips to local archival repositories. The project's "grand finale" was a community scanning day held in the YMCA branch, which had recently relocated to a new facility. Community members were given some broad guidance on material types (e.g. to avoid copyright issues and to encourage unique and family items rather than mass-produced publications) but were encouraged to bring in materials they thought were significant. It was important to let the community frame its own narrative and control its own curation, particularly given the historical context of race relations in the South.

UNCG benefited by uncovering significant new content from within an underserved community and building new community relationships, while the YMCA benefited from an additional track within the achievers program and from publicity about its new facility. Local media covered the project extensively, particularly the community scanning day, and this good publicity was a major benefit to the university at this point in time. One unique aspect of this project was that this type of outreach is more commonly associated with public libraries than with academic libraries; the project was well received by a supportive UNCG administration, as community engagement is a major strategic goal (Hines, 2015). This project also demonstrated how a relatively modest grant can result in significant public relations dividends, not just for the grant recipient but for the whole institution.



Figure 5. Student participants work with a professional archivist to photograph community content

Lessons and recommendations

Several themes have emerged in the literature and in UNCG's own experience with community collaboration:

1. Play to everyone's strengths and understand everyone's comfort level

Much of the success of the Textiles, Teachers and Troops project at UNCG can be traced to flexibility and the provision for a relatively low bar to entry; in many cases, partners with fewer resources chose only to be involved up to the point of item selection. It is essential to recognize that while not every potential partner has equal resources, each presumably does have some significant contribution to make. In some cases, this contribution will be in the form of important content held by understaffed archives, while in others, it may be a strong volunteer base or a very advanced technological infrastructure. Successful collaborations will recognize the value of all contributions and will permit partners to contribute at whatever level they are able.

2. Collaborate. Do not dictate

Although it may be essential to have a "lead" partner to coordinate project activities and even to suggest themes, it is not the job of this partner to make unilateral decisions about all aspects of the project. All partners need to have their say, even (especially?) in the earliest brainstorming sessions. This approach would have saved countless hours of wasted effort on a project like the earlier university archives photograph project at UNCG; initial interdepartmental conversations about the goals and structure of the project would no doubt have resulted in a different structural approach and might have alleviated tensions that impeded collaboration in other areas as well.

3. Listen to what your partners and your community think is important

Collaboration also means recognizing that partners may have different priorities and different views of what is significant. Good examples include UNCG's Community Connections and Digital Explorers project, which allowed community members to frame their own narrative and determine which aspects of their history were important and worthy of digital presentation. Guidelines and broad themes are important but should not be so rigid that they stifle partner priorities.

4. Understand the importance of internal and external relationships

In many cases, successful internal collaboration (within departments of the same institution) can often be harder to achieve than partnerships with external entities. There is a learning curve; special collections librarians, for example, must sometimes learn more than they may want about technology issues, while IT librarians must make sure they are "speaking the same language" as catalogers or archivists, even with such basic terminology as "file", "record" or "collection". And each group must learn to compromise (but not dismiss entirely)

its own priorities. Recognizing these cultural and structural differences (and similarities) is also key to successful external collaborations.

5. Communicate

This may seem something of a cliché, but differing styles of communication should never be ignored. Some people work better with phone calls rather than email or online chat. Shared spreadsheets can be intimidating for some who can complete their work just as efficiently with paper and pencil. It is not enough simply to communicate; the communication must be effective and in a medium appropriate to the individuals involved and this is sometimes hard to determine. Understanding how a person or organization communicates means understanding their priorities and culture. It is not always easy, but it is always necessary.

6. Give credit to everyone

It is understandable for a lead partner to want to take as much credit as possible, but doing so minimizes partner contributions and therefore puts the whole collaboration at risk. With the Textiles, Teachers and Troops project, UNCG went to the effort of designing an entire new interface based on the CONTENTdm API just so the collection would not be seen as a UNCG project but as a community project. All logos are equally prominent on the site and on promotional materials and each partner has its own “landing page”, and similar policies are used on other collaborative projects to “minimize the UNCG”. Similar steps were taken with the North Carolina Runaway Slave Ads and Civil Rights Greensboro projects.

Conclusion

Collaboration and community engagement are not easy, but they are very much worth the effort. As a result of community collaborations and of projects that are seen by funders as building on previous work, UNCG has had very good luck attracting external grant funding and internal support. These community projects, particularly the YMCA Digital Achievers project, have resulted in significant positive publicity for UNCG and the University Libraries, and fit nicely into the institution’s goal of building community engagement.

Even more important, though, are the relationships built in the process. These community-based digitization initiatives, along with simultaneous community outreach by archives staff, have resulted in a greater appreciation for local history initiatives in general and have opened up lines of communication among institutions that had often not taken the time to nurture these sorts of relationships in the past. A greater familiarity with the collections and cultures of our sister institutions has helped each institution to serve its own users more effectively and has led to more general conversations about cooperative collection development and other collaborative.

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