Documenting New Paltz History: A Case Study in Library-Museum Cooperation

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ABSTRACT. Throughout 1998 - 2001, the Sojourner Truth Library at SUNY New Paltz and the Department of Library and Archives at the Huguenot Historical Society of New Paltz collaborated on several projects involving the archival collections housed at both institutions. These projects have allowed both organizations to provide enhanced library services to patrons while simultaneously stretching limited budgetary resources. Such cooperative efforts have provided beneficial results in four areas of operations: increased external financial support, increased internal support, improved public and community relations, and better documentation and management of collections. This article will discuss the origins, processes, and results of the specific cooperative projects undertaken by the two libraries, as well as present ideas for identifying cooperative opportunities among other institutions.

KEYWORDS. Archives, libraries, museums, cooperation, partnering, case study, grants

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout 1998 - 2001, the Sojourner Truth Library at SUNY New Paltz and the Department of Library and Archives at the Huguenot Historical Society of New Paltz collaborated on several projects involving the archival collections housed at both institutions. These projects have allowed both organizations to provide enhanced library services to patrons while simultaneously stretching limited budgetary resources. Within a three-year period, the libraries have prepared a joint grant proposal and presentation, formed an inter-organizational committee, and shared information regarding the documentation and management of collections. Such cooperative efforts have provided beneficial results in four areas of operations: increased external financial support, increased internal support, improved public and community relations, and better documentation and management of collections. In addition, these initial efforts have opened channels for other departments, creating a more close-knit relationship between the two institutions than had previously existed. The authors argue that this relationship, which began with cooperation between two librarians, is one that has been successful in New Paltz and may prove successful for universities and non-profit organizations in other communities. In short, this article will discuss the origins, processes, and results of the specific cooperative projects undertaken by the two libraries, as well as present ideas for identifying cooperative opportunities among other institutions.

BACKGROUND

SUNY New Paltz traces its beginnings to the year 1828, when a group of leading citizens founded the New Paltz Classical School on the second floor of the local common school. Within five years, the school was officially renamed the New Paltz Academy,
and moved to a new building on the southern end of Huguenot Street. Some 170 years later, SUNY New Paltz serves over 7,500 undergraduate and graduate students in over 40 majors. Located within the library's Special Collections, the College History Collection acts as the repository for official and unofficial college records documenting the history of the institution. The collections consist of official records and personal papers generated by academic departments, administrative offices, and campus organizations.

The Huguenot Historical Society, originally founded in 1894, is an organization of 3,500 members devoted to the preservation and interpretation of Huguenot Street, an historic site which includes a collection of historic house museums with construction dates ranging from 1692 to 1894. The Society’s research library collects and maintains primary and secondary source materials documenting the history of the French and Dutch families who settled New Paltz and the surrounding communities. The library’s manuscript collections chiefly consist of family papers and memorabilia; institutional records of local churches, schools, and other organizations; photographs; rare books and historic Bibles; genealogical research materials; and maps and architectural drawings.

The two librarians first met in the early months of 1998, through a series of shared professional and personal contacts at the Huguenot Historical Society. Having both received archival training in graduate school, a working friendship quickly developed. It must be noted that the close geographic proximity of both institutions also facilitated the initial exchange of cooperative ideas.

**CLIENTELE**

In the past, the Sojourner Truth Library (STL) and the Huguenot Historical Society (HHS) have generally avoided cooperation with local organizations, despite
significant overlapping of collections and patronage. One of the main reasons for this lack of cooperation was due to the central focus of each organization on their primary user groups. In the case of STL, it meant focusing on SUNY students and faculty. For HHS, it meant focusing on staff, board, and society members.

Both institutions, however, also serve important secondary user groups. For academic and private libraries such as STL and HHS, these secondary groups typically include local historians, genealogists, elementary and secondary school students, and local government officials. Through a series of discussions and ongoing observations, it became obvious that both organizations' primary and secondary user groups were interchangeable: SUNY students and faculty regularly conducted research at HHS, and HHS affiliates routinely took advantage of services offered by STL. It was easily concluded that increased cooperation between the two organizations could provide a unique opportunity to expand user services. This notion was supported by a recent Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) study, which surveyed library-museum cooperation throughout the United States. Among the findings, the report concluded that "partnerships are most frequently instituted to attract and sustain under-served audience segments" (IMLS, 1). The 1998 study, which surveyed 250 academic and public libraries, also noted that "many library/museum partnerships require only one staff member at each institution, devoting 50% or less of their time to the project" (IMLS, 1).

**EXAMPLES OF COOPERATIVE PROJECTS**

The largest cooperative project undertaken by STL and HHS to date involved a 1998 grant proposal to the New York State Program for the Conservation and Preservation of Library Research Materials. As a result of the grant award, the two
organizations received $12,688 to reprint and preserve a total of 430 historic photographs from their combined collections. The photographs were selected for their unique ability to document fundamental changes in Huguenot Street architecture and New Paltz higher education from the mid-19th century to the present day. As a result of the award, photographic reference prints will be cataloged and made accessible to the public at both institutional libraries, providing a service that would otherwise have been impossible.

The idea to pursue a joint grant application was first proposed by STL when initial grant literature indicated a preference for cooperative, community based projects. When HHS was contacted and apprised of the available funding, both institutions enthusiastically agreed to pursue the grant. Work on the written application was divided equally, with STL submitting the final proposal. When the libraries received written notice of the award several months later, SUNY New Paltz took the lead in administering the grant through the college's Office of Sponsored Funds. Project direction, accounting, and final reporting became the official responsibility of STL for the remainder of the project.

From the perspective of the Huguenot Historical Society, which was looking to reverse a long period of isolation, the cooperation between the two libraries opened up new opportunities for inter-organizational involvement. Of particular importance to HHS has been the development of a number of projects involving the Tours and Education Department and the School of Education at SUNY New Paltz. One successful program consisted of SUNY New Paltz education majors providing historic house tours to local elementary school students. Still other education majors learned how to develop classroom curricula using local primary source materials.
Cooperative projects between HHS and SUNY New Paltz have also extended to other academic departments. In 1999, undergraduate students from the history department gained valuable experience interpreting primary source documents from the society’s collections. Their findings were published in a university-sponsored journal entitled *The New Paltz Historical Review*. HHS library staff worked directly with the students and their professors to select appropriate topics that would satisfy both the students’ educational requirements and the historical society's research agenda. In many cases, this project marked the first time that certain archival documents had ever been utilized in serious academic research.

In another successful project, HHS invited the SUNY New Paltz archeology department to undertake excavations in the historic district. Found artifacts have aided HHS in interpreting its history and collections, while the students gained invaluable field experience. Copies of reports and findings from all projects have been made available to the public through both the HHS and SUNY New Paltz libraries.

The Sojourner Truth Library and the Huguenot Historical Society are not alone in the region in their development of collaborative ventures. The James A. Cannavino Library at Marist College in Poughkeepsie, NY has developed a collaborative partnership with both the Franklin Delanor Roosevelt Presidential Library in Hyde Park, NY and the Hudson River Environmental Society, also based in Poughkeepsie. These relationships have enabled the Marist College library to digitize hundreds of manuscript images from both the FDR Presidential Subject Files, and the Hudson River Environmental Society. The digitized correspondence, reports, and diagrams are housed on the Marist College library web site for use by students, faculty, and the general public (Marist College, 1).
Examples of successful cooperative projects can also be found in other New England states. In a cooperative Massachusetts project, the Worcester Art Museum collaborated with the College of the Holy Cross to develop V-WAM, a series of shared databases within the college's library system that deliver online art information. In the first phase of the project, a shared online book catalog was created in 1999. With financial support from the Davis Educational Foundation, the current multi-year project seeks to implement a shared image catalog by the year 2001 (Worcester Art Museum, 2).

**IDENTIFYING OPPORTUNITIES FOR COOPERATION**

For STL and HHS, the possibilities for creative collaboration were easy to identify, given the overlapping history of both organizations. For example, the first New Paltz Academy, built in 1833 on Huguenot Street, stood directly adjacent to the stone house museums. Also, the local common school’s cornerstone came from the original church on Huguenot Street. Descendants of the founding families attended the New Paltz Academy as students, taught classes as faculty members, and determined the direction of the school by serving on its Board of Trustees. This shared history has resulted in a significant overlap between the two collections, specifically in relation to photographs and collections of personal and family papers. These collections often contained letters, report cards, financial records, yearbooks, and other materials providing a rich chronicle of community and student life. Given this deep intermingling of history, it was easy to identify similar photograph and document collections appropriate for collaborative project development.

However, recognizing similar collections and clientele are just two of many ways in which organizations can think creatively about pursuing cooperative ventures. As an
example, universities and colleges with strong programs in fine arts may want to approach local museums and galleries, since such institutions often have archival and object collections in need of research and collection maintenance. Religious, political, and historical affiliations can also present unique opportunities. Students studying comparative religion would certainly benefit from working in church or seminary archives. Students studying environmental issues could benefit from working with a nature preserve or local park service and items from their collections. Other contacts could include women’s organizations, political parties, lobbying groups, public school systems, and government agencies. In short, one should analyze their institution’s strengths and collections, then identify and contact other institutions with related or opposing collections to discuss potential collaborative efforts. As noted in the IMLS report, "many of the barriers to initiating library/museum partnerships can be ameliorated by library and museum staff simply interacting with each other and establishing a dialogue" (IMLS, 2). Figure 1 presents two simple alliterative devices for identifying potential cooperative ventures.

**Figure 1**

**BENEFITS OF COOPERATION**

Although it is still too early to accurately document the long-term benefits of the cooperation between STL and HHS, tangible results have been identified in four areas: external support, internal support, public and community relations, and collection development and management. Increased external financial support has mainly come in the form of alumni and member donations, volunteer support, and external grant awards.

A second external grant was awarded to STL in the summer of 2000 to fund a
graduate student archival intern to process the SUNY New Paltz historic photograph collection. The $1,000 grant was sponsored by the New York Library Association's Academic and Special Libraries Section in conjunction with Ridley's Book Bindery, Inc., Ithaca, NY. The intern selected for the project was a HHS library assistant seeking to gain additional archives experience, and build upon a part-time work schedule. With this arrangement, STL gained a valuable intern with an established knowledge of New Paltz history, while HHS was able to relate an attractive internship opportunity to one of its talented part-time employees.

Additionally, the libraries have enjoyed a significant amount of increased internal support as a result of their recent cooperative projects. This support is chiefly due to the increase in perception of departmental value by top management, resulting in increased staff hours and salaries, budget allotments, supplies, and project support. In particular, the HHS Library and Archives has seen significant increases in operating and human resources budgets, while STL has received internal funding for document re-housing and conservation efforts.

In a recent interview with the authors, HHS Director John H. Braunlein noted some of the recent cooperative benefits to both institutions:

The collaborative projects between the HHS Library and Archives and the Sojourner Truth Library have established a most fruitful and beneficial relationship. The partnership has enabled the Society to combine its limited but highly specialized resources with the extraordinary assets of the SUNY library, and has resulted in the improved care and management of our collections and in significant increases in the services we offer to the public (Braunlein, interview).

Cooperative activities have also provided the means for improvements in public and community relations through expanded media coverage, and have attracted the notice of academic and local community members looking to take a more active role in the
libraries through internships, volunteer work, and alumni contributions. In addition, HHS documentation reveals increases in membership, visitation, and monetary donations. And lastly, such cooperation has led to better collection development through efforts of materials exchange and shared institutional policies.

**CHALLENGES RESULTING FROM COOPERATION**

All of these cooperative benefits, however, have not come without unique challenges. Numerous cooperative projects have only added to already busy schedules at both institutions. At times, project momentum has been difficult to sustain, and questions of institutional loyalty also arose. After the initial benefits of cooperation had been realized, how were new cooperative opportunities to be explored with other organizations? Would feelings of jealousy or resentment form?

In the face of all these changes, it has been tempting to for the two librarians to look back on the cooperative grant as a project well done, and move on to additional responsibilities - citing each library’s individual needs and goals as reasons for limiting future cooperation. At the same time, however, it is difficult to turn one’s back on success and ignore the fact that future cooperation may again enhance institutional, financial, and public support. Towards this end, HHS and STL have maintained strong ties, and continue to explore the possibility of future cooperative ventures.

**CONCLUSION**

Cooperation between the Sojourner Truth Library at SUNY New Paltz and the Department of Library and Archives at the Huguenot Historical Society of New Paltz has proven beneficial for both organizations. It has opened new and exciting research opportunities for both primary and secondary clientele, attracted positive media attention,
fostered information sharing and collective problem solving, increased support from management, and helped expand limited budgets. Within a three year period, the libraries have worked together on a number of cooperative projects such as the preparation of a joint grant proposal and presentation, formed a local inter-organizational committee, and shared numerous electronic finding aids. The successes of these initial efforts have also created opportunities for cooperative projects between other inter-organizational departments. Overall, these ventures have resulted in the creation of a more close-knit relationship between the two institutions. Furthermore, the libraries themselves, now experienced in developing and maintaining cooperative projects, have broadened their sights to local schools, governments, and other organizations in the hopes of developing additional productive relationships. This successful model of communication, relationship-building, and teamwork began with two local libraries who happened to share similar histories and collections, but who had never before thought to work together to achieve a common goal.

QUICK BIB


REFERENCES


Identifying Opportunities for Cooperation

The 3 C's
Collections - 
Examine your institution's collection development policy. Identify institutions with similar/complementary/opposing collections. Consider all viewpoints.

Clientele - 
Consider your institution's primary and secondary clientele. Identify the clientele of similar institutions. Are they complementary?

Community - 
Consider your institution's proximity to others in the following ways: Geographical, Historical, Political, Educational, Cultural, Religious

The 3 S's
Services - 
Consider your institution's primary and secondary services. Identify the services of similar institutions. Are they complementary?

Staff - 
Consider your staff and their various areas of expertise. Do these present new or varying opportunities for cooperation?

Structures - 
Consider your institution's plans for present and future structures. Do these projects represent new or varying opportunities for cooperation?