

Introduction

Just like public schools, colleges, and universities, public libraries are a key component of the education enterprise. Their overall program is designed to benefit people of all ages—including K-12 students, faculty, and staff. Public libraries deliver equal opportunity in education for everyone, advancing the economy and quality of life in their communities and beyond. In a nutshell, this describes the vision and mission of public libraries. What about school libraries?



Similarly, school libraries are also a key component of the education enterprise. A critical component of their schools, school libraries design their program to benefit K-12 students, faculty, and staff, and also to align with their school's overall curriculum. In concert with other school departments, school libraries deliver equal opportunity in education for K-12 students, advancing the economy and quality of life in their communities and beyond.

You no doubt expected the slight variations between public and school libraries. What may have surprised you is the precise match: Both are indispensable to the education enterprise. Similarly, you may not have realized that public libraries and schools—which include a school library—share a common mission: to deliver equal opportunity in quality education for K-12 students. With so much in common, it makes sense for public libraries and schools to join forces, capitalizing on the many benefits a successful partnership can achieve.

However, before we focus in on why public libraries partnering specifically with schools is such a great idea (which we'll do in Weeks 2-4), let's spend some time looking in general at partnerships as a wise endeavor. In this week's reading, we'll look specifically at the definition of a partnership, the various types of partnerships, the benefits of partnering, and why some partnerships might not work.

What Is a Partnership?

It's very likely that you have your own interpretation of what a partnership is that includes the notion of sharing, working together, and some sort of an arrangement and/or agreement. However, the definition is probably more comprehensive than what may come to mind for most of us. Here is how various dictionaries define partnership:



part·ner·ship noun

Definition:

1. **Relationship:** a relationship between partners (Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary, 11th Edition)
2. **Cooperation and responsibility:** Mutual cooperation and responsibility, as for the achievement of a specified goal: *Neighborhood groups formed a partnership to fight crime.* (American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language)
3. **Group of people working together:** two or more people or groups involved in an activity together (Macmillan Dictionary) : a business that is owned by partners (Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary, 11th Edition)
4. **Partners:** the persons joined together in a partnership. (Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary, 11th Edition)

Now let's look at how these can be applied to library partnerships, particularly in the context of our course.

Relationship

As we form a library partnership our goal should be to create, strengthen, or augment the relationship with our partner. Building strong relations involves ongoing communication. While email and phone calls work well, there's nothing quite like face-to-face meetings to foster optimal working relations. Skype can substitute reasonably well when in-person connections are impractical (such as when you are partnering with a library in Denmark).

Cooperation and Responsibility

Although cooperation pertains to library partnerships, I suggest using the term "collaboration" instead, as you define and describe your partnerships. Collaboration is more positive, friendly, and team-oriented, and tends to inspire participants. Recognizing the importance of mutual collaboration and responsibility at the outset of a library partnership increases a partnership's chances of success.

Group of People Working Together

The dictionary definition of partnership includes "two or more people," in addition to the typical groups we generally recognize as partners. This means that even a seemingly small, simple endeavor, such as a collector of rare books regularly contributing his talents in various ways to the library, can be called a

partnership.

Ownership

The fourth definition, a business owned by partners, initially appears to belong in the corporate world. However, individuals, organizations, and businesses involved in partnerships with a library are certainly invested in the partnership—just as we are invested with them. To be successful, all parties must take ownership of the partnership and assume the potential risks associated with anything new. An example would be a financial education fair hosted in partnership with finance-related entities. Both partners in this endeavor take on the potential risk of whether the event will attract a large enough crowd to justify the time, effort, and expense to implement.

Partners

As the dictionary definition states, the people who make up a partnership are "partners." It may seem obvious, but using the word partner is a great way to imply equal and collegial working relations with those involved in a partnership with us.

Types of Partnerships

Now that we have defined what a partnership is, let's look at two specific types of partnerships we can consider in our libraries: *short-term* and *long-term*.



Short-term Partnerships (Like a Date)

Short-term partnerships with individuals, businesses, or organizations work well for one-shot or occasional collaborations. Because this type of partnership generally involves no long-term commitment, planning is more straightforward and the partnership (usually a project or activity) can be implemented relatively quickly.

Most short-term partnerships are made with a verbal agreement. Although a formal agreement is not typically necessary to capture the details, it's always a good idea, at a minimum, to document your understanding of each party's commitment in an email.

For example, a library might wish to partner with a local orchestra to bring a concert to a library venue on a Sunday afternoon. Even if this one-time event were to lead to future occasional concerts, this type of partnership falls under the short-term category because it is a fairly straightforward undertaking.

Long-term Partnerships

By contrast, long-term partnerships require extensive planning and often involve committees and numerous representatives from each business/organization. Usually broad and more complex, this kind of partnership involves a high degree of commitment from all parties involved. For this type of partnership, it is important to sign a formal agreement.

An example of a long-term partnership is DEAR (Dogs Educating & Assisting Readers—which some libraries call "Paws to Read" or "Puppy Dog Tales"). A partnership between and among the library, the schools, and an organization that provides therapy dogs (e.g., Fidos for Freedom), DEAR brings third graders who read below grade level into the library to read to therapy dogs and improve their reading skills. All parties must be committed to ongoing fall and spring sessions and to ensuring that all details are handled in a timely fashion (e.g., identifying students, bathing the dogs prior to their Saturday morning rendezvous, enrolling students, arranging schedules, selecting books, and organizing a graduation ceremony). All of these particulars, along with the ongoing nature of the initiative, make DEAR a long-term partnership.

Benefits of Partnering for a Library

Two Key Questions

No matter what type of partnership you are contemplating the two most important questions to ask are:



1. What's in it for *us*?
2. What's in it for *them*?

As publicly funded entities, we first need to consider what is best for ourselves, and thus our customers, so you should always start with “What's in it for *us*?”

If you have been approached by another organization for a partnership and the benefits for your library are minimal at best, it might be good to diplomatically decline to partner or steer in a different direction, particularly if your library is already pursuing the effort. If, however, the library will benefit in some way from the ideas under discussion, then pursuing the partnership may be worthwhile. If so, continue to question #2, speculating on how the other partner might benefit (this saves time, since only if there's enough in it for them will they desire to commit).

As an aside: although it may sound selfish, another good question that some of you may have already thought to ask is:

What's in it for *me*?

With many libraries operating with reduced staff and time, why would you want to invest time and energy in developing and maintaining a partnership—in addition to all you already do?

You may be pleasantly surprised to learn that partnerships will actually save you time in many ways. In addition, consider this: the more visible your library becomes as a major player in the community, the more job security you will enjoy. You may also find an increased level of pride in your work and in your community, which leads to higher job satisfaction. In addition, partnerships tend to increase the perceived value of libraries, which can mean a greater willingness on the part of taxpayers (as well as school libraries, the superintendent/Board of Education) to invest in your library. This can translate into more funding for everything—including salaries.

What Does Partnering Gain for a Library?

So, what are the benefits that a library can experience as part of a successful partnership? As a whole, partnerships have the potential to achieve the following for a library. They can:

- **Strengthen customer loyalty** — Our customers like partnerships. They appreciate our willingness to collaborate with others to offer them the best overall collection, research assistance, classes, and events.

- **Gain visibility** — By their very nature partnerships provide increased visibility through involvement outside our usual spheres. The more people know about us, the more they will tell others, who will tell others, and so forth.
- **Leverage expertise** — In partnerships the concept of "the power of us" is exemplified best by combining collective expertise to improve what we are attempting to do together. Partnerships demonstrate that all of us combined are smarter than any one of us alone.
- **Leverage funding** — Leveraging the funding we receive through partnerships is prudent business practice. It also enhances our credibility with those who make decisions about our budgets, which could lead to increased library funding. Imagine you are the one determining your own budget. If you are assured that investments are spent wisely, wouldn't you increase funding?
- **Attract more outside funding** — People like to be part of success. This desire to partner with success includes a willingness to invest money. For instance, a bank might decide to sponsor a partnership initiative to enable the "extras" that make us shine brighter, such as Summer Reading prizes, trophies for the winners of Battle of the Books, or a \$1,000 college scholarship for the winner of a library-sponsored regional spelling bee.
- **Establish new or expand existing initiatives** — Partnerships are a great way to establish new program components. For instance, you might partner with your local master gardeners and organic food stores to develop a teaching garden at your library. Partnering can also strengthen an already strong program component. For example, a health education center you may have already established could benefit from a partnership with your local hospital.
- **Gain new customers** — Let's say you hold an author event in partnership with your area's historical societies. In addition to *your* library customer base, it's very likely that *theirs* will attend, as well. Event partnerships like this provide an opportunity to gain library fans and new customers.
- **Double the marketing punch** — All partners involved in a partnership benefit from the publicity the other partner organizations push out. For example, if a library partners with a local farmer's market to host a market on Saturday mornings in the library's parking lot during the growing season, both parties will benefit from the other's marketing efforts. Each will be highlighted in the other's newsletters, press releases, online communications, annual reports, etc. It's win-win!
- **Attract other partners** — Partners who have had a successful experience with you will tell others, who will then approach you with even more partnership ideas.

Five Factors of Success

Once you have determined that a partnership is worth pursuing, you naturally want it to be a success. Consider each of the following "Five Factors" prior to committing to either a short- or long-term partnership, and you will greatly increase your chances of success.



Successful partnerships:

1. Supplement—as opposed to replace—an initiative.

In other words, neither party should be relying on the other to fulfill something that it should be doing. The best example is a public library/school partnership. The public library's involvement needs to supplement and complement the school library's program and the school's overall curriculum.

2. Advance the vision and mission of all partners.

This is a broader way of looking at "What's in it for us and what's in it for them?" There's no point in investing time and effort in a partnership that does not advance each participant's vision and mission, as the partnership will be off balance from the start. On the other hand, when visions and missions align, partnerships set sail!

3. Clearly outline obligations and expectations.

Setting forth what each partner will contribute to the partnership establishes a shared understanding and a firm partnership foundation. The clarity also serves as a pledge for the parties to keep their respective commitments. For example, a partnership between a library and the Girl or Boy Scouts could include the library's commitment to adding Scout badge completion stations at its STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) expo, and the partnership would also include the Scout leaders' commitment to publicizing the event and encouraging attendance.

4. Benefit all partners equitably.

Partnership benefits must be equitable for all parties involved. To illustrate, if a library were to partner with a hospital to advance health education, both parties would benefit from being associated with the other (assuming both enjoy a solid standing in their community). Even if the hospital were to contribute a substantial cash sponsorship to a partnership endeavor, while the library were to contribute only in-kind (e.g., staffing, venue, publicity), this arrangement would still be equitable because the hospital would profit from the community recognizing its benevolence and wisdom in supporting the library. In other words, the sponsorship would engender goodwill, a valuable gain for the hospital (this assumes the library would trumpet the sponsorship at every opportunity, which is always a great idea!).

5. Include ongoing evaluation.

Most things change over time, including partnership agreements. An annual assessment of a partnership can determine where new ideas can be included and where modifications need to be made, or such an assessment can also make it evident that more funding is required for an element to succeed.

Two additional factors contribute to a partnership's success once it is ready to launch:

- Publicize the partnership, and
- Celebrate!

If you make a big deal out of it, others will view you and your library as a big deal, too, so we want as much visibility as possible!

Why Some Partnerships May Not Work

At each stage in the planning of a short- or long-term partnership, it may become apparent that the initial idea is falling short of expectations. Here are some warning signs to look for along the way.

- As you explore the partnership continue to ask the two key questions: "What's in it for *us*?" and "What's in it for *them*?" If the answers do not meet your initial expectations then it may be best to slow down and regroup.
- If concerns relating to the Five Factors of Success surface, you may wish to table the idea until adjustments can be made.



Depending on the partnership's vision, other questions to ask during the planning stage that may determine success include:

- Will the partnership draw an audience?
- Will it accomplish what we expect?
- What are our chances of receiving the necessary commitment from all parties, and, if applicable, the required funding? Do keep in mind, however, that sometimes big ideas require bold efforts!