

Introduction

Could your library do more if you had more money, more staff time and expanded marketing? If you answered yes, not surprisingly, you're not alone. Organizations, businesses and projects all around your community would likely say the same thing, so why not work together? With funding and staffing shrinking for most organizations while demands for services grows, collaborating to reach shared goals just makes sense, but it isn't always easy to develop a successful partnership. This course will demonstrate how to identify,

nurture and grow partnerships that will expand your impact, enhance your value, and establish important community connections. Learners will also be empowered to extend the reach and impact of their services to add new ones as a result of the additional partnership support they will enjoy.



Why Partnerships?

Organizations of all types, sizes, and interests are struggling to succeed in today's "new normal." Membership, financial support, and volunteer hours have dwindled, for groups from the American Medical Association to the PTA, while, as is the case with libraries, the need for services continues to increase.

What's the answer? We need to work together, but in order to get this type of initiative off the ground, everyone needs to get on board.

Partnerships are no different than other types of human relationships. They take dedication, time, and shared energy. In library terms, that means support and encouragement from everyone from the director to each frontline staff member.

Libraries across the country have achieved huge success by partnering with community groups to work together to meet today's needs. This week we'll examine these realities by considering:

- How library resources (staff, funding, etc.) have shrunk
- What strategic gaps have been created
- Which library/community projects have turned into success stories, and why
- How to remove hurdles to collaboration and get to work

After finishing this first week's readings and completing one (or more) of the assignments, you will be able to convince colleagues and library leaders that developing partnerships will move them closer to achieving their mission.



What Happened to Our Resources?

What happened to libraries? Thirty years ago we all had more staff, less demands, and more focused programs and services. Now it would seem our services and programs need to be a lot broader, and we've got fewer dollars and people to accomplish anything. A lot has happened. In fact, since 1984 the landscape of public libraries has drastically changed.

- **Budgets** – It's no secret that, across the country, both government funding (if you're lucky enough to have any) and tax support (if your library has that benefit) have shrunk. Voters have become much more tax shy, resource costs have skyrocketed, and personnel costs (health care, for just one) have gone through the roof. Plus, at the same time we've been expected to pay to establish, maintain, and update technology connections, hardware, and databases.
- **Facilities** – With many of our libraries operating out of outdated buildings, finding ways to be ergonomically correct, ADA compliant, and generally user-friendly have gotten pretty complicated. Libraries are striving to add elevators, create wireless environments, and keep the roof from leaking on customers' heads.
- **Demographics** – Drive down most main streets and the variety of specialty grocers will tell you just how many new languages are being spoken in town. Older generations are seeking the most basic technology support, while the younger ones are expecting cutting-edge devices and information at their fingertips. In between are Baby Boomers, who are avoiding tax growth like crazy, as they just hope to hang onto their meager retirement. People are moving out and people are moving in faster than libraries can update foreign language collections. While exciting, these social shifts have redefined library missions and goals as moving targets.
- **Competition** – As library futurist Joan Frye Williams has been quoted as saying, “We used to be in the information business. But we lost.” No longer left to puzzle simply over how many copies of a bestseller to buy—because that's all our public expected of us—libraries today are offering classes, teaching languages, and even opening daycare centers in order to keep up with the changing needs of their community.
- **Staffing** – And who is left to accomplish all of this? Often it is a limited number of staff members (typically managers) who are still in shock because this isn't the type of work they originally signed up for. Although these managers may be well intentioned and able to manage staff, they are unprepared to build teams or support multigenerational personnel lists.

Still, far from all being lost, this is perhaps the most exciting time libraries have ever known because our communities *need* us! In all the literature, example after example of service and operational success is lifted up to both assure and inspire the rest of us to face all of these challenges—and win.

One way to do that is to understand our weaknesses in the face of today's new library challenges and to overcome them with the same grit and dedication we've always shown. We can start by taking an honest look at what we're missing.

Goals and Gaps

If your library has a strategic plan, you are already working way ahead of the curve. If not, some serious analysis would be a great way to start.

For the purpose of this course, we're going to look at Everytown Public Library, our imaginary example of a well functioning library that does have specific goals outlined but has had a lot of trouble lately reaching them.



The best question to ask is why? What's missing? With all the best intentions in the world of serving the real needs of your community, what's stopping your library from succeeding? In many cases, it's time and money.

Time can mean a lot of things. It can mean volunteers to staff programs, offer tutoring, write grants, or even work the desk, so other important work of the library can get done. Time can also mean the time to even examine current issues and determine solutions, then plan them out and collect all of the needed resources.

Money, believe it or not, can also be a multifaceted concept. Money can support additional staff members; it can buy much needed equipment and computers; it can pay for advertising or program supplies; and it can even help get critical ballot issues passed.

Together, time and money represent the largest portion of "gaps" that today are causing many libraries to stumble in their attempts to fulfill mission. However, again, the good news here is that libraries are not alone.

The potential partners you'll be reaching in your community are having the same problems as libraries—and their missions are just as important. Consider the parenting non-profit that desperately wanted to help improve their children's kindergarten readiness, but they just didn't have the resources to make an impact. Partnered with their local library (that did have the trained reading specialists, books, and space), their joint Pre-literacy Playroom was a huge success.

In this class, once you've identified a viable project, we'll look at how to find those matching missions and put the partners together whose efforts are parallel in nature.

Great Success Stories

Library staff need only do a bit of industry research to find multiple examples of libraries that have found increased success by working with their community partners. Here are just a few examples of success stories.



- Schools, of course, our long-standing partners, have doubled their efforts in many communities to strengthen ties with public libraries, as they've seen their own libraries shuttered and empty.
- Parent groups, dedicated to helping children from all backgrounds succeed in a highly technological world, have turned to libraries for reading readiness initiatives that have turned the statistics around.
- More local fraternal and social groups, such as Lions, Elks, and veterans' clubs, have helped themselves and libraries better serve those in need, those under-served or those on the outside due to illiteracy, poverty, or abuse.
- Even government agencies have teamed with libraries to give minor offenders a chance to see government service in action through intern and community service connections with local libraries.
- In one community (Cleveland Heights-University Heights, OH), where the poverty level was so high that a majority of the students qualified for and depended on school lunches for their sustenance, the library partnered with the local food bank to provide free summer lunches for the kids and their siblings. What was in it for the library? They enjoyed hundreds of students in their buildings each day, boosting summer reading counts, filling programs to overflow and circulating, circulating, circulating those many children's books that would have otherwise sat unused and unread.
- Other libraries have partnered with local banks, finance institutions, and local government to offer classes on home refinancing, personal finance, and home improvement. What was in it for the libraries? They enjoyed welcoming adults who had never before visited their facilities and helping them to get the information they needed to literally change their lives—and keep their houses. Future "yes" votes at the ballot box? Perhaps. More real estate tax money in the coffers right then? Definitely.

We may have lost in the information business back when that's all we were about, but today, with the help of other like-minded community groups and individuals, we're back helping provide the new information—food, computers, and education—that today's communities really need.

Your library can be the next success story on that list, and it won't be as difficult to achieve as you might think.

Recognize and Remove All Hurdles!

First, let's get the speed bumps out of the way. Often the first hurdle to building truly effective partnerships is buy-in, and ironically, that concept is the most critical of building blocks. One successful approach is to create a "partnership team" within your library. With a group in place dedicated to the nuts and bolts of sustaining partnerships (such as communication, marketing, and training), your chances of success are much greater.



1. **Library Director** - The first member of that team should be the director. With the support of the library director, all staff—including other managers—will realize that the full weight of the organization is behind these efforts. Issues such as getting off the desk for partnership work or meetings will be supported and not challenged. Further, future partners, when approached, will feel the validity and credibility of the effort, when it's supported and championed by the director.
2. **Strong Partnership Team Leader** - The next member of the team should be a strong partnership team leader. Soft skills are priorities in this appointment, since your library will need someone who can build consensus, manage projects, advocate effectively, and motivate others to do the same. If a variety of hard skills can be represented as well, all the better. Find someone who is good with numbers, someone who excels at communication and marketing, and most importantly, someone who is passionately involved in the project's work. And, of course, don't ever forget to have some representatives from your new partner organization on board—and in the loop—as well.
3. **Fluid Membership** - It's fine—and actually preferred—that membership in this team be kept fluid. When the project involves children, you need a strong, experienced, child advocate aboard. When it involves technology, get one of your I.T. people to join in. Refreshing your group with each major partnership will also help to spread the appreciation for partnering eventually through your entire staff, and while that is happening, you'll be helping others to build stronger skills, as well, that can benefit them in all areas of their career.

Many a well-intentioned project has gone awry due to unexpected and unmet challenges from areas other than personnel. Watch out for these and other hurdles as you build your first great partnership team:

- **Inaccurate information** – Projects based on demographic statistics or economic realities can easily fall apart when those facts are incorrect. Make use of the expert reference staff at your library to thoroughly examine and investigate an issue before building an entire project around it.
- **Poor relationships** – Partnerships are built around people first and issues second. Make sure everyone involved is open to dealing with different—or even difficult—people and has the confidence of adequate training to pull this off.

- **Lack of trust** – When your library commits to do something with a partner, follow-through is essential. The surest way to damage a fledgling relationship is to not follow through how and when promised. Partners must depend on each other to support the overall success of the plan.
- **Inability to learn from past mistakes** – Start your team off right by taking the time to examine previous attempts at partnering with the community. Carefully consider why some partnerships worked and why some didn't. Talk to those involved, and clearly face any library-related shortfalls. Mistakes can always be corrected and should never be repeated.
- **Mission creep** – The reason you work with a team, have meetings, and create and maintain effective communication at each step is to make sure everyone involved stays focused. Veering the project off in a different, albeit seemingly legitimate, direction can drain resources and severely damage credibility. Start your project out with a clearly identified need, plan, and actions—then stick to them. We'll learn more about exactly how to do this next week.

By now you're hopefully convinced that libraries do need partners and that we can make collaborative efforts work. We'll proceed along the assumption that you can work with a partnership team, and next week we'll talk about how to determine which projects work in this environment and which partners are the best fit.

To reinforce what you've read today, select one (or more) of this week's assignment options to complete. If you have any questions or comments about them or anything else you've read, please don't hesitate to post them.

What to Do Next: Proceed to the Week 1 Assignment Options.