

Learning Resources Cooperation: It Can Be Successful

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LIBRARY COOPERATION IS far from a new development. Library networks, union lists, interlibrary loan, resource sharing, accessing national databases are all terms that are part of every library professional's vocabulary and working environment. Books and articles have been written about library cooperation detailing the benefits and pitfalls as well as describing some of the successful and not-so-successful efforts. Being a subject of primary concern to the profession, a number of bibliographies have been compiled in order to provide quick access to the literature.

Yet one aspect of library cooperation that seems to be little chronicled is that of cooperation among community college libraries, or more accurately, community college learning resources centers (LRCs). The aim of this article, therefore, is to share some much-needed information on the subject which will be useful to fellow professionals. This paper traces the development of learning resources cooperation in northern Illinois with an analysis of why and how it has been successful.

The Community College Philosophy and the Learning Resources Concept

The comprehensive community college movement is a comparatively recent phenomenon in American educational history. Although

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two-year institutions of higher learning were established earlier, it was not until the 1960s that community colleges enjoyed a period of rapid growth—in numbers and in size. The mission of these new colleges was to offer educational programs to those Americans previously underserved or unserved. One major program was developed to provide the first two years of a baccalaureate degree to students who could not afford to leave home and attend a senior institution for the full four years. Another program was directed toward those who needed training to enter vocational-technical occupations. A third component was created to enable individuals to acquire basic educational skills thereby permitting them to attain more rapidly their educational and occupational goals. The last component furnished a wide variety of short courses, workshops, seminars, and general interest presentations to citizens of the community served by the college.

Because of the community colleges' wide program scope, the academic or educational support unit had to be comprehensive as well. The result was the origin of the learning resources center, a conceptualization that encouraged the gathering together of differently formatted materials (print and nonprint) into one center. To facilitate use of nonprint material, the hardware necessary to project it also became the responsibility of the learning resources center. The LRC, therefore, encompassed both the traditional library with its predominantly print materials and the audiovisual department with its nonprint software and hardware.

The LRC and the Need for Cooperation

The merging of library and audiovisual areas, even though it occurred under a bewildering array of organizational structures throughout the community college sector—to a greater extreme at some institutions and to a lesser one at others—most frequently brought both units under a common administration. This forced LRC staff from the top down—and whatever their educational background—to become at least familiar with (if not comfortable with) a variety of media and equipment.

In addition, higher administration came to rely upon learning resources administration for budgetary and technical advice on technological questions. Particularly in medium-to-small community colleges, alternative education programs were often placed under the jurisdiction of learning resources because audio and visual equipment were used in self-paced programs.

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Most affected by these developments were learning resources administrators whose educational backgrounds were originally either in library science or instructional media, but seldom in both. It was natural for them to look to fellow professionals, both within and outside their colleges, for advice in matters for which they had not been trained, but for which they were called upon to make intelligent decisions. Furthermore, learning resources staff were aware that expensive equipment, facilities and materials could be more effectively utilized in a cost-sharing arrangement that would avoid duplication. Turning to counterparts at neighboring community colleges fostered cooperative efforts, formal and informal. In northern Illinois, this cooperation led to the formation of a learning resources cooperative that has grown to major magnitude, and it serves here as a model.

The Background of the Northern Illinois Learning Resources Cooperative

In October 1973, eight suburban Chicago community colleges submitted a grant proposal to the Illinois Board of Higher Education requesting funds to plan and evaluate the formation of a community college learning resources center cooperative. The justification of the proposal was to facilitate the cooperative exchange of locally produced instructional materials and, therefore, to prevent duplication of effort. Program objectives were established to identify the available materials and determine the legal ramifications of duplicating and distributing them. An additional objective was to determine the most effective type of organization needed in order to operate the proposed cooperative. One month later the colleges were notified that the grant proposal was approved and \$8000 was awarded for the initial planning and development of the cooperative.

From that early beginning, interests quickly broadened to include cooperative purchasing, information and resource sharing, and staff development. Once the decision was made to form a nonprofit corporation, bylaws and membership agreements were drafted, and in May 1975 the Northern Illinois Learning Resources Cooperative (NILRC—pronounced nil-rock) was granted not-for-profit corporate status by the State of Illinois. Since then NILRC has grown from its original membership of eight institutions to its current one of thirty-nine—fourteen full members and twenty-five associates (see fig. 1). A number of other membership applications are pending.

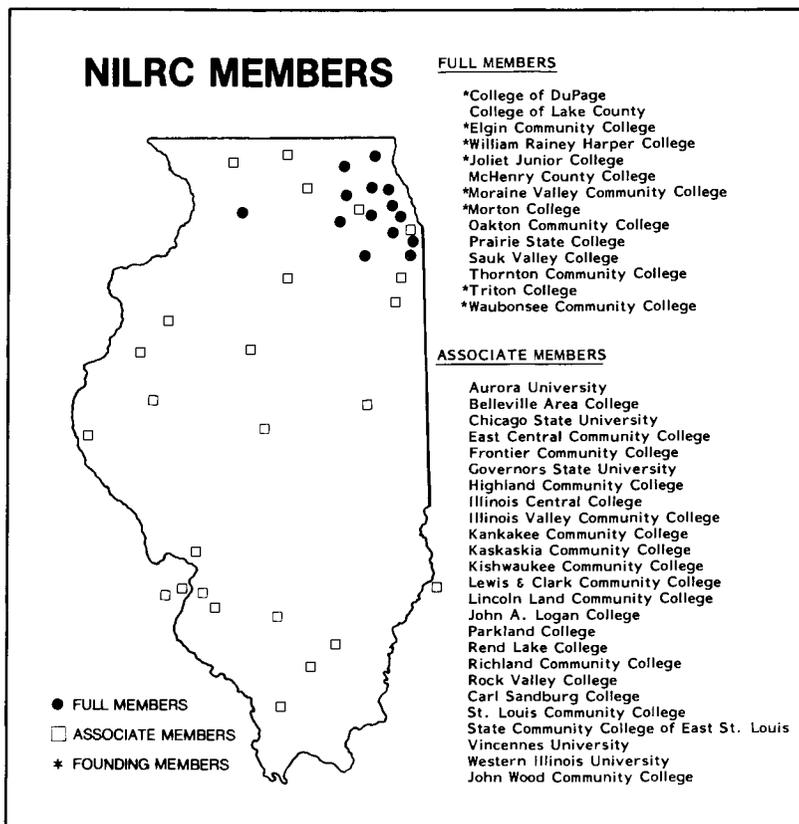


Fig. 1. NILRC Members

The Success Factors of a Learning Resources Cooperative

“The overriding problem in library cooperation is in getting people to work together productively.”¹ NILRC has been able to overcome this problem and become successful for a variety of reasons. Because it is a community college cooperative, representatives from the different institutions are like-minded in their sharing of a common philosophy which includes the learning resources concept. All members believe in comprehensive, integrated learning resources programs that extend to the educational community as well as the community at large. This does not mean that all members think identically. Indeed, there are healthy

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differences of opinion created by diverse educational backgrounds and professional areas of expertise. At meetings of the cooperative, those seated at the table may include persons versed in cable television; ITFS (Instructional Television Fixed Service); satellite transmission; micro-computer hardware and software; automated library and audiovisual systems; online searching; radio and television production; and library reference, circulation, or technical processing. What often results are discussions characterized by a spontaneity and openness to new ideas. The cooperative, therefore, becomes a macrocosm of the personalities of individual members, and the board meetings become information sharing and staff development activities in and of themselves. The end product is the fostering of a cooperative spirit whereby delegates are able to draw upon and share interests and contribute strengths while developing bonds of trust and respect for each other.

From a different human perspective, the success of the cooperative can be explained through its formation at the grassroots operational level by learning resources people. What has developed, therefore, has been a bottom-to-top-line communication model rather than the more common top-to-bottom one. Because of this, NILRC's agenda focuses on practical issues and problems experienced by learning resources staff.

The cooperative's bylaws and membership agreements heavily contribute to its success in that they (1) buttress the community college learning resources concept, (2) provide an important umbrella of legal protection necessary for dealing with NILRC internal and external affairs, and (3) establish a unique framework for governance. The bylaws and membership agreements insure community college control by permitting only public community colleges in northern Illinois to become "full" members. Full membership includes certain rights and responsibilities among which are the right to vote and the right to hold office. Associate membership is open to any public or private Illinois post-secondary educational institution which is not a full member. Associates enjoy all the rights and privileges of membership *except* the right to vote and the right to hold office.

The unique governance framework described in the bylaws encourages a rotation of elected officers, thereby maximizing the growth of leadership qualities among delegates. An effect of shared governance is that the large majority of delegates have come to approach matters from a group perspective rather than from a singular, institutional view. Rotation of leadership, furthermore, prevents an institution or individual from dominating the activities and decisions of the cooperative.

Consequently, the rotated leadership contributes to the open forum in which delegates freely and candidly discuss and take action upon the issues.

The bylaws and membership agreements also contain minimum requirements. All that is actually mandated of a full member institution is regular attendance of its delegate at meetings and the payment of annual dues. Associate members need only pay dues. Out of such an arrangement comes what can best be termed as "organizational fluidity." Operational goals are annually formulated, reviewed and modified. Delegates and member institutions can volunteer and participate in cooperative projects of their own choosing. Each institution is easily able to maintain its autonomy.

The dues structure and voting method further contribute to cooperative flexibility. Annual dues of \$300 per institution were established in 1975 and they have not increased since for full members. The low fee has made it possible for even the smallest college with a limited budget to join and enjoy the cost benefits that group contracts have provided. In combination with the one vote per institution, as stipulated in the bylaws, the dues structure has mitigated against bloc development. No large college *v.* small college or "have" *v.* "have not" phenomenon has occurred. In fact, membership privileges and responsibilities have equated well. Smaller colleges, often more flexible organizationally because of their size, have been able to meet more immediate needs such as furnishing logistical support services on short notice. On the other hand, the larger institutions frequently have made contributions in sharing special facilities, material and human resources when the occasion has demanded it.

A geographical factor has also played a role in NILRC's success. Full-member colleges are situated within easy travel distance of each other and they take turns in hosting regular board meetings or other cooperative activities. The practical outcome is one of saving delegates' travel time and expense since they can easily drive or carpool to the regular meetings.

The Activities of a Learning Resources Cooperative

Because of its comprehensive nature, the Northern Illinois Learning Resources Cooperative has engaged in a wide range of activities over the last ten years. All of these efforts have revolved around three major interests: cooperative purchasing, information and resource sharing, and staff development.

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Cooperative Purchasing

Cooperative purchasing has evolved to include agreements with book vendors, library supply companies, 16mm film and videotape producers and distributors, audiovisual suppliers, off-air television licensing agents, a video duplicating house, and instructional telecourse producers and distributors.

The cooperative has achieved its most dramatic financial success in the negotiation of instructional telecourses:

A telecourse is a complete instructional system that presents a body of knowledge through the use of sight, sound, color, movement, and print. Basic components of a telecourse, in addition to the television programs themselves, usually include a main textbook, a student study guide, tests, a faculty manual, and arrangements for interaction between students enrolled in the telecourse and the faculty supervising the course.²

The obvious cost advantages to cooperative telecourse leasing or purchasing are significant reasons many Illinois institutions have applied for cooperative membership. Equally important, cooperative telecourse leasing/purchasing has influenced how NILRC conducts its business affairs.

Shortly after the cooperative was incorporated in 1975, a group purchase of the "Ascent of Man" series was negotiated. Two noteworthy practices evolved from this. The first of these was the development of an internal billing system necessitated by the purchase. Contract terms required NILRC to buy one set of "Ascent of Man" for the list price, in return for which the vendor would provide twenty-five duplicate sets at a package price. The list price of the first set and the package price of the duplicates were then totaled and divided twenty-six ways. As institutions elected to purchase, the NILRC treasurer billed them one-twenty-sixth of the total cost for each purchased set. Each college then paid its share of the cost into the NILRC treasury, and the NILRC treasurer transacted the entire purchase with the vendor. Such an internal billing system currently exists, although it has become much more sophisticated procedurally.

A second practice begun at this time was the negotiation of unlimited duplication rights to telecourse materials because the predominant means of delivery was and remains nonbroadcast. The right to duplicate was determined primarily by the limitation of delivery options available to the suburban Chicago colleges. The myriad of cable companies between and within college districts created situations of such complexity that each institution had to decide whether it would or could use

cable delivery effectively. Open-air telecasting proved discouraging for a different reason. Few commercial or PBS (Public Broadcasting System) channels showed much enthusiasm in cooperating in an educational venture regarded of low potential in profits or viewer interest. The only other delivery method that appeared practical was that of nonbroadcast videocassette, with equipment and materials to be placed in on-campus and off-campus learning centers. Since nonbroadcast delivery required multiple sets for each college, the negotiation of duplication rights in television contracts was essential.

Today the nonbroadcast videocassette method accounts for more than 90 percent of the telecourse enrollment at NILRC colleges, and even though recent developments regarding cable and open-air broadcast hold some promise for significant enrollment increases, nonbroadcast delivery still continues as a major way to serve students. Out of 9683 telecourse enrollments in 1983-84, nonbroadcast accounted for 9105. The primary reason for this is the flexibility nonbroadcast provides. It easily lends itself to an open enrollment system whereby students can enroll and complete a course any time during the year. Additionally, the availability of videotapes at convenient locations which are open long hours throughout a college district permits students to view one or more lessons at a time and rate of speed convenient to them. The recent boom in the sale of videocassette recorders (VCRs) has further added to the convenience factor, and many NILRC colleges are now circulating lessons for home use. A self-paced learning environment through use of the VCR offers few restrictions.

Cooperative agreements other than those concerning television may or may not take advantage of the internal billing system. Under the agreement negotiated with a large book vendor, an additional discount is given each NILRC college in return for an annual minimum dollar amount guaranteed by the cooperative. Each college orders and is billed separately, and books are shipped directly to each college. This arrangement has also been used for reference and subscription book orders.

Agreements to purchase commercially-produced 16mm films or videotapes (nontelecourse) differ from one company to another, but generally they are channeled through the NILRC treasury because it is financially advantageous to do so. Major cooperative purchases made of items in the National Geographic film-tape collection and Time-Life holdings were examples of this. Rights to off-air tape television programs are usually negotiated by the cooperative with individual colleges making the commitment, and then making payment to the NILRC treasurer who in turn pays the licensing center.

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These discussions are also underway with periodical subscription agencies and computer software vendors to determine if cooperative purchasing might produce cost savings in regard to their products.

Information and Resources Sharing

From its inception, the Northern Illinois Learning Resources Cooperative has been interested in information and resource sharing. One of its original objectives, as stated earlier, was to facilitate the exchange of locally produced instructional materials. Although this exchange did not develop in the way envisioned, the strong commitment of the NILRC membership led to other information and resource-sharing projects.

A prime example of such a project is the development of a computerized software package for learning resources centers. A team of NILRC personnel composed of librarians, audiovisual specialists, and computer experts developed a plan for the implementation of an automated LRC management package. With the aid of an approximately \$200,000 award to the cooperative by the U.S. Department of Education, further research and development as well as initial installation was carried out at Elgin Community College, the host site. The computer package, referred to by the acronym CALS (Comprehensive Automated Learning Resources System), is a flexible LRC management system, designed to operate in an IBM computer environment. It accommodates all media formats and satisfies a variety of LRC service needs, including online circulation control, audiovisual equipment scheduling, art department slide collection retrieval, and records management. A wide variety of reports are generated, either automatically or on request. Future plans include the development and testing of an online catalog with patron-access modules.

Unlike turnkey systems which require the purchase of separate equipment, CALS uses the college's own computer equipment with the data processing staff handling routine maintenance. This conceptual design helps to keep the costs of automation down. The high degree of integration on CALS also greatly enhances LRC services without requiring additional staff, another cost issue. CALS software is marketed through CALS Services Group, Ltd., a team of community college people with a unique combination of skills and interests in media services, librarianship, and computer technology.

As the cooperative spirit of NILRC members has increased, the level of information sharing among them correspondingly has risen. Formally, the sharing process takes place at regular monthly meetings

where delegates are able to draw upon and benefit from the diverse areas of expertise of other delegates. Informally, delegates often share ideas while carpooling to regular board or committee meetings. With increasing frequency much informal sharing occurs by telephone. The development of the informal telephone network spawned an annual NILRC activity: the publication of the *Illinois Learning Resources Personnel Directory*, which contains the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of all Illinois public community colleges and the names, titles, and telephone numbers of all LRC staff members.

To provide for even more efficient information sharing, the cooperative currently has under study the development of its own electronic mail system. Such a system would not only be used by learning resources personnel, but it would be offered to other administrators in order to expand cost- and time-saving benefits to each college. Additionally, it would serve to raise the visibility of learning resources in a positive sense before higher administration.

Staff Development

The last, albeit an equally important area of NILRC activity, is staff development. Staff development activities usually occur as the result of two processes. The first is evolutionary whereby an item consumes more and more time at regular board meetings or among discussions of LRC staff in the cooperative. Once the staff development need is identified a subgroup is formed to plan and implement staff development activities. Someone from the subgroup is designated to report at board meetings the actions consequently taken. Subgroups focus on special topics of interest or concern and assess their potential for workshops or training activities for NILRC members.

Instructional television is one example. Television matters began to occupy an increasing amount of regularly scheduled meeting time. Not only were more colleges participating in televised instruction, but the cooperative's annual telecourse preview day (launched in 1977) had grown to such proportions that planning it took considerable time and effort. Recent preview days have had eighty to ninety preview packets on display, and approximately 150 faculty and staff from Illinois colleges have attended.

The Telecommunications Advisory Group (TAG), a standing committee consisting of telecourse coordinators from NILRC colleges was formed in April 1981 to cope with this growing activity. The committee now meets on a regular basis to discuss and act on television matters. Institutional telecourse commitments, whether lease or pur-

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chase, are made at TAG meetings; and the TAG contracts manager negotiates with producers or distributors. The status of television affairs is reported at regular NILRC meetings by the TAG chairperson. In this way NILRC delegates are kept informed without television matters monopolizing the agenda. Beyond that, TAG has explored more cost-effective ways to use instructional television and radio. The outcome has been coproduction and other efforts that convert NILRC from a passive consumer organization to an active participant in telecourse planning and delivery. The cooperative joined with the Southern California Consortium for Community College Television, the lead producer, in providing support for the computer telecourse, "The New Literacy." NILRC has also linked up with Dallas County Community College District in the production of a new introductory business telecourse, "The Business File," due for a fall 1985 distribution.

Alongside the coproduction effort, renewed interest and action has occurred in the production area. Three new telecourses have been produced by NILRC colleges and are now being marketed. Instructional radio courses have also been developed, and the marketing structure is now being prepared to make them available outside NILRC.

Rapid Growth and the Future

Within the last few years the NILRC ranks have grown rapidly in number. Such sudden growth often indicates an organization's success, but just as frequently can bring problems that need to be confronted in order to insure present and future stability. In the case of NILRC, it is among the associate member ranks where growth is most dramatically increasing. Many of these new associates are four-year colleges, which raised certain timely questions in the minds of many NILRC community college delegates. For example: Should full membership status be opened to institutions other than community colleges? Was it fair to permit a college to join as an associate member and reap all of the cooperative benefits while full members, as office-holders, had to shoulder an ever-increasing workload because of the additional numbers? Should there be an annual dues differential in recognition of this? Was it time to compensate certain officers because of the extremely heavy and time-consuming duties they now had to assume?

The rapid growth and subsequent questions raised were considered significant enough by the delegates that it was decided to form a temporary committee to investigate the issue and bring back specific recommendations to the NILRC full board. This membership committee,

composed of full and associate members, concerned itself with these questions. Immediately, it was realized that the questions involved NILRC's organizational structure as well as membership status. Some hard decisions were going to have to be made. The committee was faced with questions directed at the very purpose and philosophy of the cooperative. At the same time, the answers to other structurally related questions could have significant impact on the cooperative's organizational style.

In addressing the membership question, the committee decided that NILRC should remain true to its original intent, that of a comprehensive community college learning resources cooperative. It was reaffirmed that its philosophy was a primary reason for its success and should remain intact. Additional membership categories were created and language concerning existing ones was clarified.

The examination of the organizational structure was more difficult in terms of possible pitfalls. Committee members were sensitive to the fact that the cooperative had thrived with an informal, flexible framework. In addition, they were aware that for some delegates, talk of reorganization raised "fears of an impending bureaucracy."³ Yet the committee recognized that future problems would surface if the more informal, haphazard business and communication procedures were not rationalized. Therefore, members were most deliberate in evaluating the alternatives.

As is so often the case, the result was a compromise. Certain officers, such as treasurer and secretary, were to receive annual stipends because their responsibilities had increased far beyond what could be expected freely and voluntarily. At least as important was the committee's decision to recommend the formation of a "planning group." Led by NILRC's president-elect, the group would look ahead to the future. In that way, the cooperative would become more proactive rather than reactive and be better prepared to act upon issues and events at the most opportune times. Once the committee had finished its study, a full report of its recommendations was made to the NILRC board. With minor exceptions, the board accepted the recommendations.

The most valuable outcome of the membership question was the lesson learned from the evaluative experience: There are ways the cooperative can respond to fundamental challenges and can influence the directions it takes in the future.

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Conclusion

As can be ascertained from the NILRC model, community college learning resources cooperatives can be successful. That success, however, takes effort from the people involved and just does not happen accidentally.

Along with the human element, a learning resources cooperative must have other foundation stones. Those supports include a common philosophy—the comprehensive community college and learning resources concept. Bylaws and membership agreements help to define organizational structure. Additionally, the supports encompass focal points that provide meaningful direction: cooperative purchasing, information and resources sharing, and staff development. Finally, methods for coping with successful growth insure a cooperative's ability to adjust to sociological as well as technological change. Such a foundation may not guarantee successful cooperation. Nevertheless, without it, library or learning resources cooperation of any type can easily founder.

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