Growing a Law Library Consortium: What Size is the Right Size?

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Membership in library consortia offers a number of benefits including collaborative collection development projects, cost savings achieved through group purchases, and networking opportunities to name just a few. A recent survey revealed that more than seventy-five percent of academic law libraries belong to some type of consortia. However, not all consortia are thriving. In 2011, the Consortium of South Eastern Law Libraries (COSELL) was dissolved by its board of directors.

The Mid-America Law Library Consortium (MALLCO) recently grew in size from eighteen to twenty-four member libraries. This article will explain the process MALLCO used to evaluate expansion options and successfully grow its membership.
The History of MALLCO

MALLCO was created in 1980 as a non-profit Missouri corporation consisting of eighteen law schools from Missouri, Kansas, Illinois, Iowa, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and Arkansas. Concerns over rising costs and diminishing space for library resources were the impetus driving its creation. Initially, MALLCO focused on sharing library resources and cooperating in interlibrary loans. MALLCO’s bylaws call for each member school to be represented by one member of the Board of Directors. Board positions are held by the law library director of each member school.

The addition of a half-time Executive Director has allowed MALLCO to greatly expand the benefits it offers to member libraries. The Executive Director facilitates group discounts, licenses, and trials with 20 vendors. Harnessing the collective power of the Consortium allows members to receive group discounts on resources. In 2011 these savings exceeded $140,000 for all members, not counting significant standing discounts from vendors such as YBP and bepress. Although MALLCO is much more than just a buying club, the financial benefits are substantial.

The Executive Director coordinates extensive annual surveys of member libraries. Detailed information on salaries, collections, staffing levels, technology resources, and physical facilities are collected and compiled into a summary format and distributed to members.

Recently, MALLCO has been exploring collaborative collection development. In 2011 a majority of the member libraries entered into an innovative State Statutory Code Sharing agreement. Each participating library agrees to maintain subscriptions to a handful of “official” print state statutes and annotated statutes. Collectively, the participating libraries have priority access to quick citation checks and interlibrary loan requests for the “official” code and one annotated code for each of the 50 states. This agreement has allowed participating libraries to cancel costly and under-utilized print state statutes.
One of the great benefits of MALLCO membership is information sharing and professional networking among the member libraries. The Board of Directors meets in person three times each year for formal board meetings. In addition, the Board holds occasional topical phone discussions. In 2011, the Consortium began hosting pre-conference roundtables in conjunction with the Mid-American Association of Law Libraries Annual Meeting. These roundtables led to the formation of interest groups, which are open to non-directors.

**Membership Expansion**

Membership remained relatively static for the first twenty-five years of the Consortium’s life. Law schools from North and South Dakota joined in the mid-1990s while the Universities of Iowa and Illinois dropped from the Consortium in the mid 2000s.

Planned and deliberate expansion of MALLCO was not considered until 2008. Around this time the organization reached a turning point. Board members had ample ideas for new projects and initiatives but could no longer delegate these tasks to their librarians and staff. In order to efficiently manage these projects the Board hired a librarian with a wealth of knowledge and experience, Susan Goldner, as a half-time Executive Director. To fund Susan’s position the Board considered a dues increase or adding new members.

The prospect of adding new members was appealing on several fronts. New members could be carefully selected to complement the existing collections of MALLCO libraries, new Board members could inject fresh ideas into the Consortium, and their dues would help defray the Executive Director’s salary. Vice President Randy Diamond conducted a thorough review of academic law libraries to uncover potential new MALLCO members. Based on this information and with the input of the Board, MALLCO President Darin Fox confidentially approached several schools to see if they were interested in joining the Consortium. In the fall of 2010 the “Chicago Schools”—Chicago-Kent College of Law, DePaul University College of Law, John Marshall Law School, and Loyola University Chicago School of Law—joined MALLCO.
The addition of the Chicago Schools quickly expanded MALLCO membership by twenty percent. The sentiment among the Board of Directors was to take a step back and carefully evaluate any future expansion. The following year, the issue of membership expansion was taken up as a part of a strategic planning process.

The Strategic Planning Committee was charged with developing an expansion plan informed by several factors, including whether the Consortium wished to expand or to remain the same size, whether to offer different categories of membership, and how any new members might be integrated into MALLCO.

The Committee decided that, before it could make financial decisions, MALLCO needed to establish a fixed operating reserve as a percentage of MALLCO’s overall budget. The Board ultimately decided to require that MALLCO maintain an operating reserve of no less than 15% of total operating costs. This requirement is sound fiscal practice and also set the stage for the Committee to consider dues increases simultaneously with membership expansion.

The Committee began this task by surveying the Board to determine if any consensus about expansion could be reached. Committee members personally called and e-mailed each library director seeking their views on the ideal size of MALLCO, recommendations of specific schools to target, and any geographic concerns related to membership expansion.

The survey was a time-consuming but important exercise that revealed the views of all Board members. Finding just the right size for the Consortium was an important concern shared by all Board members. MALLCO has traditionally been a very collegial group. When the Board meets at AALS, AALL, and MAALL meetings all Directors easily fit around a single table. Board members are on a first name basis and have served together for many years. Most Board members were concerned that this dynamic could be disrupted by adding too many new members too quickly.

Geography was another important consideration. The membership consisted of law school libraries located in a contiguous group of states in the middle of the country. All schools were members of MAALL which allowed the MALLCO...
board to meet in person at the annual MAALL meeting. Some Directors were concerned it might be difficult for new members from non-contiguous states to attend the MAALL meeting.

Size of law school and law library was another concern. Most of the member libraries have similarly sized collections, staff, and budgets. Some board members were concerned that adding new members with drastically larger collections, staff, or budgets would make it more difficult to reach consensus as a group.

Another important consideration was the impact of additional members on the workload of the half-time Executive Director. With membership at twenty-two schools, the Executive Director was able to accomplish an impressive amount of work. Would adding additional schools place an undue burden on the half-time Executive Director and diminish the services she was able to provide to current members?

One possibility the Committee considered was the creation of different levels of membership in MALLCO. This is the approach NELLCO has taken, offering both full consortium memberships and affiliate memberships. In NELLCO, affiliate members pay lower dues, share in acquisitions and discounts, but are not full Board members. Based on feedback from MALLCO members, this option was not explored any further.

The results of this surveying were compiled into charts and spreadsheets carefully prepared by the Executive Director. The various options were discussed over several months at Board meetings. Finally a consensus emerged in 2011 to take a mixed approach of small incremental dues increases and the addition of a few new members over the next several years. Board President Randy Diamond began confidentially contacting schools identified as acceptable candidates by the membership. In May of 2012, Marquette University Law School joined the Consortium. Several months later, in August 2012, the University of Cincinnati College of Law joined MALLCO, bringing the total membership to twenty-four schools.

(2012)
Consequences of Expansion

The expansion of MALLCO membership from eighteen schools to twenty-four schools in a few short years has changed the Consortium in interesting ways. The new Board members are an enthusiastic and diverse group with a wide range of interests. Many of the new members hail from schools serving larger legal markets than most existing MALLCO member libraries. As a result, the entire Board gains first-hand knowledge of quickly emerging trends in legal education. Interestingly, the group dynamic has not changed significantly, though it is twenty-five percent larger.

The new members brought an interest in pursuing new vendors, which resulted in the availability of new discounts. Although some vendors offer larger discounts when more libraries purchase their products, to date there is no evidence that the additional members have increased the size of group discounts.

The addition of six new members in a few short years has increased the workload of MALLCO’s Executive Director. The major impact is within the first year for new members, as they are integrated into the group and begin participating in group subscriptions. But the Consortium has not yet crossed a threshold where the size of the membership is overwhelming for one half-time person, although the Board has authorized the Executive Director to hire a student worker to assist with clerical tasks.

Conclusion

Library consortia considering expansion should take the time to carefully identify all issues relevant to current members as a first step toward any possible expansion. Issues important to MALLCO members included the financial implications of expansion, maintaining the collegial atmosphere and ability to reach consensus among Board members, the profile of potential new members and their geographic proximity to existing members, and the workload for the Executive Director. Many of these issues are intertwined, so it makes sense to consider all of them contemporaneously. The MALLCO leadership and Strategic Planning
Committee invested considerable time in identifying these issues and developing consensus around them before proceeding with expansion. The recent expansion of MALLCO has positively impacted the consortium. In the immediate future, MALLCO expects to continue along the path of very careful and limited growth.

Notes


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