

What's In It for Me?: The Pleasures and Pitfalls of Joining a Consortium

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When Joe Anderson of the American Institute of Physics asked me last year to consider being a part of this panel, I had two immediate thoughts: Joe is crazy and Joe is a genius.

I thought Joe crazy because I could only imagine tormenting an audience of stoic archivists by stating the obvious - that there are many benefits and challenges in any consortium activity. Of course there are.

I realized, though, that Joe also was a genius, or at least clairvoyant. I had been in my position just a few months and had come into the AIP-EAD finding aid project at MIT mid-stream. What Joe perhaps knew at that time was that I was beginning to notice the very issues *any* institution considering such a collaboration must consider and be prepared for long before agreements are made and expectations set. Joe may have known from his experiences thus far with my home institution, MIT, that by the Summer of 2000 I would become worldly-wise about the pitfalls and pleasures of consorting with other archivists and other archives. I might even accumulate a few thoughts worth passing on to others.

My role today is to describe the non-technical impact that participation in an EAD-consortium project can have on a member archives. Truthfully, many of the issues I raise not only could apply to any type of archives but also any type of joint project, technology-related or not. To some degree, my comments, which are based on my experience at MIT, fall between the tame and the confessional - between the categories of ***"This Is How We Handled It In Our Shop"*** and ***"True-Confessions - Real Encounter With Growing Archives."***

Let me launch in first with the beneficial impacts of participation.

[overhead - benefits]

The first benefit to MIT of this AIP consortium project will be the **increased exposure of collections** to further their use. This particular benefit is two-sided. The good work of the AIP in promoting both the project and the use of materials relating to the history of physics likely will bring consortium-member archives new business - - it will also assist AIP in fulfilling one of *its* missions.

Not everyone whose research could benefit from the use of one of the MIT collections will seek out or stumble upon our collection descriptions in, for example, the RLIN database. Regular users of historical collections, especially in a university setting, will often follow that path. But not all researchers, even rocket scientists, are that knowledgeable or savvy about the online bibliographic databases. Due to their subject interests and with a professional affiliation to the AIP, some non-traditional users of historical collections – perhaps the scientists themselves – will find materials previously unknown to them. And they will find full finding aids. Those working in physics browsing the website may even be inspired to think about their own papers in new ways.

The second benefit for member archives is the potential to **raise the profile of holdings at home**. Demonstrating that an outside organization, such as AIP, values your collections enough to request inclusion of your finding aids in this project, is one terrific way to draw attention to the worth of the archive's holdings, especially among those who may not always understand or appreciate the archives' value. Pointing out the collected descriptions to those in a physics department with affiliations to AIP, for example, might help make more understandable what an archives is interested in collecting, encourage more in-house use of collections, and even assist MIT in bringing in new collections. Pointing out the collected descriptions to “the powers that be,” such as a director of libraries or a provost, might, in the re-packaging process, make a bit more clear the importance of holdings, especially to the outside world. This may not translate immediately into greater understanding of the work of the archives or increased funding. However, when the time comes to request funding for processing of physics collections, and with the end products including additions to the AIP database of holdings, funds may be more easy to justify.

Third, such projects, by necessity, require an attention to detail about collection descriptions, especially with the legacy finding aids produced decades ago. Benefits, then, are **updating** – and possibly improving – old finding aids, bringing closure to long-standing problems, and forcing decisions that need to be made anyway. At MIT, we made the decision to address issues of inconsistency in the front matter in our now multigenerational finding aids. When sending materials off for inclusion in such a consortium project, you want to put your best foot forward, making sure that you have a consistent look and feel to your products.

Institutions that have not yet moved into marking-up finding aids for the web, may find this sort of consortium project **the push they need** to make this happen beyond such a project. Thus, a fourth benefit – if an archives is looking for an excuse to get started on such work – is that a joint project will be inspirational. Simply seeing your finding aids transformed will energize a staff to move forward. If insufficient staffing and funding have been the issues, then, again, having

administrators at your home institution see the potential, as provided by others, may help move such work along.

Joining in on such a project also **encourages community** understanding and discussion. Just like any of the now old-fashioned published guides that gather information about disparate holdings related to a particular subject, the AIP project can encourage those institutions with similar materials to become more knowledgeable about the work of others holding related collections. Being brought together in this way has the potential to foster further, and different, communications, especially if contributors can work to keep the current project up-to-date.

And finally, a great benefit, with perhaps surprising results, is to have your products, that is your finding aids, **tested by others**. We all think, especially in archives such as MIT with a long track record of finding aid production, that we follow our own rules and that what we compose is concise and clear. When others take your work and interpret it for another format, we can learn how well – or not – we are doing. It can be a useful and humbling exercise.

[overhead - challenges]

As for the **challenges** wrought by participation, I should subtitle my remarks, “What can go wrong, will go wrong.” Rather than slyly refer to hypothetical things that can affect Archives X, I will use the real MIT situation as the example here. This is the time for true confessions with which others, I am certain, can identify.

Our first challenge to participation came when **staffing changes** at MIT coincided with the initial round of fact-finding and sign-off on this project. Due to the nature of the interim staff appointments in the Archives, the project decisions made early on by well-meaning non-archivists disrupted the work of staff at both AIP and MIT months later. The Institute Archives had been without a head for nearly two years when the call came from AIP for participation. There was not a great deal of knowledge on hand, then, to consider the work that participation in the project would require of MIT Archives' staff. In addition, other Archives' staff had left their positions or were in the process of doing so. However, eager letters of support were written and collection choices made for inclusion in the project. Due to valiant efforts of a few staff members, the Archives at MIT managed to stay the course and ready itself for anticipated problems. In smaller archives with fewer staff than MIT, the departure of a key – or only – archivist or the loss of positions to carry out requests could have a dramatic and deleterious effect on a consortium project.

As with any archives that has been around for decades, MIT is no exception when it comes to the lingering problems of collections with no signed gift agreements, legal challenges over ownership and copyrights, questions about restricted materials, additions to collections that have never been fully accounted for in descriptions, outdated tools, and changing standards in finding aid construction. In addition, the finding aid methods testing ground that MIT was known as for over fifteen years left a legacy of inconsistencies the staff now needed to address. It should come as no surprise, then, when many of these problems arose with a number of the physics collections chosen for inclusion in this project.

Not wanting to let the folks down at AIP, **numerous long-standing problems needed resolution** – or alternative collections needed to be considered for inclusion in the database. The solution was a mix of the two. In reference to the previous staffing issues, this was the most difficult issue to resolve, for as the new head, I wanted to fulfill the commitments made by MIT to the project, but needed to find time to do so in the midst of much more long-term and pressing issues for the Archives. Without more than a few months on the job, it was nearly impossible – and I dare say not desirable – to approach donors of collections about which there had been protracted negotiations and disputes, for example. In the end, we needed to let the AIP down on a few counts to protect ourselves from issues we needed to resolve on our calendar – not the consortium project calendar.

Just how to **prioritize project requests** within the broader needs of an archives becomes another challenge at times. In an extremely busy archives such as MIT, and during a time characterized by short-staffing and training of new staff, the AIP project deadlines could not always match our own. Let me quote to you from a memo: “I am most sorry to be replying by e-mail rather than talking to you which I hope I can do next week. We’re in the midst of performance evaluations, a [library-wide] public services self-study, a communications evaluation, and creativity workshops – and that’s just this week. Tomorrow comes the day-long celebration of Building 20, that historic barracks structure at MIT where the Rad Lab worked during WWII and where so much fun, creativity and MIT madness has occurred ever since...I’ll go on to the Building 20 celebration tonight and be in touch later.”

In the end there were no tragic consequences. We did not suffer a depression of Scandinavian proportions! But, we did not always meet deadlines and, although they were too polite to say so, we know we did not make life easy for the folks at AIP that we wanted to please. The Archives at MIT also, due primarily to the timing of staff losses, had lost precious time in the whole EAD process taking place across the profession. One benefit mentioned earlier – that of this sort of project inspiring more mark-up work – was needed, indeed, but a few months out. *Project timing*

is not always your timing. We probably would have been better partners in the process and organized our work and questions differently had we been able to arrange project priorities along the lines of our own.

Overall, the greatest challenge to participation in a consortium such as that of AIP is the simple fact that it **creates more work** for participating members. And, I do not mean to begrudge such work – the end product is worth the time and effort. However, it much be recognized that such consortia project work always brings with it some level of task that needs attention, but for which no staff member is assigned regularly. For example, for our finding aids to appear as part of a consistent whole, someone needed to be responsible for consistency in abbreviations, format, terminology, or policy statements. We do not normally have any one person on the staff to go back over decades of finding aids with an eye to such adjustments, investigation, and reflection. Delegating such short-term responsibilities and delaying deadlines for other projects, should be expected. I'm not sure we succeeded in all our efforts.

[overhead - combined charts]

In conclusion, I will say that there simply is never a good time to engage in such consortia work, for we are all overworked, all the time. You can never anticipate the wide range of staffing problems that can arise and come into play. If you want to participate in consortia projects, you must believe in the worthiness of the final product and simply plunge in with the faith that the work will get done, as long as there is some forethought and good, nimble management. And, as you can see from my chart, the benefits to member archives of participation in such projects, in my opinion, outweigh the challenges. Just be prepared.