



Spanning Our Field Boundaries: **Mindfully Managing LAM Collaborations**



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I. Introduction

Museums, archives, and libraries serve as knowledge conduits for their constituent communities. A core focus for each of these three fields is organizing and adeptly connecting users with content, often in service to the public good. This mission alignment positions organizations in these fields to collaborate. Federal funding agencies, such as the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), even directly recommend that organizations pursue such alliances to cross-germinate, achieve efficiencies of scale, leverage limited resources, and better serve their user communities.¹

While museum, archives, and library missions may be aligned, there is a wide variance across these fields (and their myriad sub-fields) in other aspects, including organizational sizes and governance structures, staffing and funding, acronyms and vocabularies, disciplinary specialties and user communities served. These factors may create real or perceived boundaries to cross-field collaboration. Each of these three fields has its own sense of identity and focus, and individual libraries, archives, and museums operate largely within the bounds presented by these field (and sub-field) identities.

This brief will examine the perceptions and perspectives that make cross-field collaboration difficult for archives, libraries, and museums. It is not meant to illuminate the “real truth” about the similarities or differences between these three fields. Instead, it aspires to shed light on some of the issues that currently hinder our boundary-spanning potential, so that together we can mindfully observe and manage these issues as we develop collaborations between our archives, libraries and museums.

We hope this document continues to progress the longstanding conversations² about how to better work across LAMs, setting the stage for conversations regarding how we may recognize and then span the boundaries that may separate libraries, archives and museums. We also hope it will inspire more formal research initiatives on this topic in the future.



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¹ Creating a Nation of Learners Strategic Plan 2012-2016, *Objective 1.3 focuses on facilitating such partnerships: Objective 1.3: Facilitate partnerships among museums, libraries, and other education providers to expand learning opportunities for the public. Effective partnerships among museums, libraries, and other education providers can increase the availability of high-quality educational experiences for individuals and allow partners to capitalize on organizational strengths to meet learners' needs. IMLS encourages effective partnerships using a holistic approach to address the learning needs of all people in a community.*

² For a history of issues surrounding collaborations among LAMs, also reference Diane Zorich et al., *Beyond the Silos of the LAMs: Collaboration Among Libraries, Archives, and Museums*, OCLC.org, last modified September 2008, <http://www.oclc.org/content/dam/research/publications/library/2008/2008-05.pdf>



II. Background

The conversations and partnerships that informed this document are in large part the result of the open, collaborative environment generated by library, archives, and museum organizations and associations in the *Mapping the Landscapes* project, an IMLS-funded planning project overseen by the [Educopia Institute](#) on behalf of the Assessing the State of the Field working group of the [Coalition to Advance Learning in Archives, Libraries and Museums](#). Guided by 38 leading organizations, this Mapping project aims to map out individual learner needs within and across the museum, archives, and library fields.

The sources informing this brief have been relatively informal and broad-ranging, including years of our own observations from working within cross-sector collaborations. We also focused our attention on these topics through small-group discussions and an informal survey distributed to all 38 Mapping project partners.

While the span of the project partners' own organizational memberships is vast, providing their representatives with a 'twenty-thousand foot' view of their fields, the engaged individuals form an extremely small and specific population—all of whom are already involved in cross-field collaboration. Accordingly, care should be taken to not over-generalize the findings below, but instead to use them as signposts that point to areas for future research.

III. Defining ‘Boundary’ Issues

Boundary-Spanning in Practice

Encouraging collaborative approaches to shared challenges by related stakeholders is of critical importance in moments where industries and identities are in flux or under threat. Strong cross-sector collaboration can broaden the base of perspectives and expertise, yielding strong and often unexpected answers to complex problems. It can also help move practice from the institution level to the system level, enabling smaller groups to achieve great scale and leverage limited resources by working together. Due to a collision of forces—political, economic, technical, environmental, and social—the early 21st century marks a moment in which many “public good” institutions, including libraries, archives, and museums, face rapid change and constrained resources. As their resources and staffing continue to condense, many are also interested and willing to collaborate, as evidenced by hundreds of joint activities springing up, many of them enabled or encouraged through foundation and federal funding opportunities.

Creating nexus points between libraries, archives, and museums requires more than funding sources and good intention; it requires careful cultivation.³

In the course of the *Mapping the Landscapes* and *Coalition to Advance Learning* projects, we have identified several key areas of tension and/or friction that we highlight below. We have grouped these issues into three main areas for discussion: Field Diversity, Resources, and Vocabulary. These issues and areas are meant to be illustrative, not exhaustive.

Powerful perceptions exist, some of which may be grounded in fact, and others of which may not. Since the difference between truth and fiction is often affected by the views and history of the beholder, we instead point to issues so that we can better understand them to collaborate across them.

Field Diversity

The sheer spread of structural and disciplinary differences repeatedly have been referenced as a barrier to collaboration, both within and across fields. The terms “libraries”, “archives”, and “museums” each represent a vast range of institutions that conform to certain institutionalized understandings of



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³ Research has demonstrated that there are six stages to healthy “boundary-spanning” work: “buffering, reflecting, connecting, mobilizing, weaving, and transforming.” The concept of “spanning boundaries” is explored in depth through the “Boundary-Spanning Leadership” research and work conducted by the Center for Creative Leadership. See Chris Ernst and Donna Chrobot-Mason, *Boundary Spanning Leadership: Six Practices for Solving Problems, Driving Innovation, and Transforming Organizations* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 2008).

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a field of practice. The term “museum” encompasses art galleries and zoos, children’s museums and historical societies, and many, many other entities, all (arguably) united by their primary focus on exhibitions for the public.⁴ “Libraries” likewise includes a broad set of public, commercial, academic, and government entities, identifiable through a shared mission to build, house, preserve, and provide access to collections that are usually largely text-based. “Archives” denotes a wide range of entities which collect, protect, and provide access to primary source materials—varying both in terms of the subject matter (academic, government, business or religious) and scope (local to national).

While the type of “object” being managed differentiates LAM workflows, processes, and day-to-day operations, organizational structure is not as simple as “are you a library, archives, or museum environment?” Each of these three fields has its own identity, but each also segments into numerous subfields. The needs, constraints, and operational realities of state, academic, business, and private environments differ radically and add another layer of complexity to the identity of a library, archives, or museum environment. The size (small/large), setting (rural/urban), organizational structure (nonprofit/embedded/public), and audiences (mixed/children/academic researchers) of an institution help to define its operational realities and experiences. Libraries, archives or museums may also be embedded within each other, with staff bridging LAM cultures on a day-to-day basis. Examples include libraries and museums with archives within their organizations, and archives with their own libraries and museums.

For the purposes of collaboration, it is important to recognize that an individual’s work is influenced both by their overall organization and their organizational unit. For example, within a university archives under a university library system, archivists and the work that they do is likely to be more aligned with the work and standards of academic libraries than an archive embedded within a museum. A similar example holds true for many state archives that reside under state libraries, or an archives existing within a museum. In other words, an embedded organization often has to adapt and operate within the standards, models, and working culture of its parent organization.

Professionals are perceived as entering each of these three fields through different pathways. Generally, librarians are thought of as earning a master’s degree in library or information science, with many of these programs

⁴ Eugene Dillenburg, “What, if Anything, Is a Museum,” *Exhibitionist*, no. 30.1 (2011): 8–13, accessed September 14, 2015, name-aam.org/uploads/downloadables/EXH.spg_11/5%20EXH_spg11_What,%20if%20Anything,%20Is%20a%20Museum__Dillenburg.pdf

offering specialized tracks for archivists as well. Yet, for archivists, having a standard MLIS graduate degree is not necessarily the only career pathway. For those who clearly are on an education and career track to become an archivist, master's or PhD level training is common, within either a disciplinary specialty (e.g., history, English) or perhaps through records management tracks in MLIS programs. This advanced degree is usually required for academic archivists, largely because of the connection to the requirements of librarian and professional tracks within academia. But among the broader field of archivists, there are many with a bachelor's degree or who have not had any formal college education (although this is becoming increasingly rare). Within corporate, government and non-profit archives (e.g., historical societies, particularly local), it is not uncommon for a staff member to fall into the role of archivist, thereby learning "on the job."⁵ Similarly, museum staff are perceived as having the most diverse range of backgrounds, spanning training in nonprofit management, relevant degree programs (e.g., art history), education, and many other subject domains.

None of these professions require ongoing certification for employees, as we see in other industries like medicine and law. However, individuals can enhance their resumes through specialized programming. Archivists may opt to earn and maintain a status designation such as a Certified Archivist through the Academy of Certified Archivists (ACA) or become certified as a Digital Archives Specialist (DAS) or in Arrangement and Description through the Society of American Archivists (SAA). There are also post-graduate certificate and "badge" programs geared towards librarians, such as San Jose State University's Post-Master's Certificate program and the Digital Badges awarded by many American Library Association affiliates (e.g., YALSA).

The different training pathways belie similarities in function across the three environments. Conservation, for example, requires many of the same professional skills in each of these environments; as a result, some professional associations and training opportunities intentionally bridge librarians/library staff, archivists, and curators/educators/museum staff around this shared skillset (e.g., American Institute for Conservation's programs). Other perceived similarities have yielded professional alliances that cut across libraries, archives, and museums, including heritage (e.g., Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries, and Museums) or geography (Pacific Islands Association of Libraries, Archives, and Museums). This deliberate focus on sub-characteristics (e.g., heritage, geography, or function) provides a meaningful nexus point for interaction and cross-fertilization.

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⁵ For more information, see the Society of American Archivists A*Census (<http://www2.archivists.org/initiatives/acensus-archival-census-education-needs-survey-in-the-united-states>)

There are not-for-profit museums with robust development apparatuses and multi-million dollar operating budgets, just as there are small, rural public libraries with all-volunteer staff or nested archives embedded within the full range of organizations.

As libraries, archives, and museums explore new ways of working together, our diverse perspectives, especially on operations and sustainability, can strengthen our collective work. Acknowledging our structural and organizational differences, both within and across the fields of archives, libraries, and museums, enables us to highlight and utilize the different skillsets and knowledge that various players bring to the collaborative environment.

Resources

“We need more money, staff and time” has been a consistent refrain across archives, libraries and museums of all types. How do resourcing perceptions influence these fields’ ability to partner? Tensions often arise around the topic of resources between libraries, museums, and archives, both regarding their perceived field sizes and perceived external funding opportunities available to each field, and these tensions inhibit collaborations.

In the course of the *Mapping the Landscapes* and *Coalition to Advance Learning in Archives, Libraries, and Museums* project work, representatives from all three fields have shared their perception that overall, the library field seems to be better resourced than the museum or archives fields in terms of staffing and funding. Most have also perceived museums as mid-pack in terms of staff and funding resources, and have considered archives as the least resourced of these three fields.

In contrast to these field-level perceptions, representatives from all three fields marked the wide variety of subfields. There are not-for-profit museums with robust development apparatuses and multi-million dollar operating budgets, just as there are small, rural public libraries with all-volunteer staff or nested archives embedded within the full range of organizations. Government funded organizations are at the mercy of political budgeting winds in the same way that not-for-profits are subject to fluctuating endowments and their community’s economic health.

The operational funding streams supporting libraries, archives, and museums differ greatly according to their types and disciplines. Nested programs may have an operational buffer within a greater organizational budget; some organizations offer direct public services to recover costs. Some embedded groups depend primarily on governmental funding and elected officials, and others upon a private or nonprofit environment. These embedded organizations in particular usually need to demonstrate their value and service, not just to their users or audiences (who would be “buyers” in the commercial marketplace), but to the government officials or organizational entities that control their budget lines. The many institutions that rely heavily upon donor support face similar pressures to show value

to those donors. This is both a point of distinction between fields and subfields, and also an opportunity for possible learning between the fields and subfields.

Variance in staffing levels, and in staff members' abilities to take on public service or in-kind work as parts of their daily jobs, poses a direct challenge to cross-sector collaborations. For many institutions, human bandwidth for joint efforts is severely limited, particularly due to the simultaneous expansion in services and downsizing of staff that has happened during the last two decades due to technical changes and resource pressures.

Grant funding opportunities likewise differ across the three fields and subfields. Libraries *as a field* are perceived to have the broadest set of opportunities, including foundations as well as a wide range of federal/state funders. However, these opportunities tend to narrow considerably depending upon the subfield (e.g., NEH, as well as NIH, and NSF grants tend to be available to medical/science/academic libraries that work in partnership with faculty). Museums often report frustration with grant funding limitations, including perceived inequities in funding between libraries and museums from agencies that fund both fields (e.g., IMLS). Archives also report frustration regarding what they perceive to be a limited and highly competitive pool, with NHPRC serving as their core federal funder.

Across the fields, we have witnessed the barriers individual players and organizations may face as they seek to join cross-sector collaborations, especially if there are not clearly defined expectations of how to contribute, or ways to directly recognize the collaboration as benefiting the organization itself.⁶ Similarly, *starting* and *maintaining* a multi-field initiative can be daunting. There are many areas where each field could benefit from joint work (e.g., leveraging infrastructure and reaching scale). However, individual institutions rarely have the staff or resources necessary to organize and lead such initiatives. Having neutral groups that can organize and facilitate efforts, providing a sort of "glue" between the players, may be a missing key for engaging in joint work across sectors.

As we collaborate across field boundaries, we need to maintain an acute awareness of the different sources of revenue that fund our individual environments. These provide both pressure points and potential alignment points, particularly for joint efforts that may expose their players to new

For many institutions, human bandwidth for joint efforts is severely limited, particularly due to the simultaneous expansion in services and downsizing of staff that has happened during the last two decades due to technical changes and resource pressures.

⁶ See e.g., *collective impact* methodologies and their success in establishing clear, shared cross-sector goals and then charting measurable progress for and by multi-stakeholder groups toward those cross-sector goals.

On multiple occasions in the *Mapping the Landscapes and Coalition to Advance Learning* projects, we have noted early stage conversations where new partners or partners from one field either tune out or pull back from participating because the language they hear seems foreign.

ways of thinking about resources, new connections to funders, and/or new opportunities. Successful joint projects may benefit from stakeholders first establishing and uniting around common goals that clearly benefit local organizations as well as the fields they represent.⁷

Vocabulary and Acronyms

A key boundary between the fields is the vocabulary each uses in its day-to-day work. So often, archives, museums, and libraries find that they are saying the same thing using different vocabularies. *Or*—perhaps more problematic—they find that they are using the same term in different fields to mean different things.⁸

On multiple occasions in the *Mapping the Landscapes and Coalition to Advance Learning* projects, we have noted early stage conversations where new partners or partners from one field either tune out or pull back from participating because the language they hear seems foreign. We have also seen frustration arise when the language being used within a cross-sector project team derives from another sector entirely (e.g., business or finance) and is misunderstood by players from each LAM field as deriving from one of the other LAM fields.

The overabundance of acronyms in each field also complicates collaborations. These acronyms provide an important shorthand for players, approaches, and tools, but they are often highly field-specific. When used in multi-sector gatherings, they often have the unintended impact of alienating those from other sectors—erecting powerful boundaries where we intend to build bridges.

When crossing over fields, especially in the early stages of collaboration, we must maintain an awareness of the vocabulary we use, both as a project member and as a project team. Especially when our partner relationships are starting out, it is vital that we build an environment where people can stop and ask for clarification, or actively define or avoid cumbersome terms that can derail conversations. Coming to a joint understanding about the meanings of the terms we use in our collaborative work would go a long way in joining forces between the fields.⁹

⁷ Systems-change methodologies such as “Collective Impact” may provide useful tools and techniques to support such longer-term planning, implementation, and measurement.

⁸ In the *Mapping the Landscapes and Coalition to Advance Learning* work, we have identified a number of troublesome terms that often mean different things to different fields, including metadata, processing, cataloging, access, preservation, and even collection.

⁹ A long-standing, cross-sector association—the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (AIC)—recently has undertaken a cross-fields glossary-development project through its Collections Care Network.

IV. Collaborative Starting Points


Easy places to start

We each have our depths of expertise within our own fields and areas of specialization. Yet, many of our organizations do not have dedicated communications, advocacy, fundraising, or technical staff, so individuals are tasked with learning these functional areas in addition to their own professional areas of training. One challenge across libraries, archives, and museums is how to learn together and from each other in these cross cutting domains.

In our project work, we have identified a number of “growth” areas that our fields have in common. These all vary slightly in practice, not only if you are in a library, archives, or museum, but also according to whether you are a large or small organization, high or low resourced, and public, private or not-for-profit. These areas may be ripe for collaborations, particularly ones in which all of the cross-field players remain mindful of both their similarities and their differences.

Shared problems include:

- 1. Digital transitions**—management needs an increasingly sophisticated grounding in technology in order to manage staff, vendors/suppliers, and daily operations.
- 2. Funding challenges**—across each field and sub-field, fiscal pressures require major operational changes, diversification of revenue streams, and increased advocacy outcomes.
- 3. Policy changes**—a range of federal, state, and local policies have vast implications for our ongoing management of our organizational infrastructures and our collections.
- 4. Leadership challenges**—leaders increasingly need training to address organizational and field-level issues, ranging beyond subject-specific needs to topics from the realms of business, marketing, finance, strategic communications, etc.
- 5. Succession planning**—across the fields, we have noted that waves of retirement at top leadership positions seem to be complicated by a sense of reticence by the “next generation” to take on leadership positions.



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As leaders across the LAM fields, we are positioned to change perceptions.

V. Call to Action

In today's quickly changing, resource-challenged environment, it becomes increasingly important for information centers like libraries, archives, and museums to coordinate and explore opportunities to achieve efficiencies of scale through collaborative activities. Doing so across the still-prevalent "silos" of the library, archives, and museum fields could bring about transformational changes across the fields.

Successful collaborations between libraries, archives, and museums require us *as individuals representing organizations, sub-fields, and fields* to recognize and challenge encountered perceptions that hinder collaboration, despite how commonplace such perceptions are among our peers.

As leaders across the LAM fields, we are positioned to change perceptions. Help your peers to recognize the different types of organizational differences that can add unique perspectives, knowledge, and resources to project activities. Actively and strategically seek out and leverage partnerships with organizations unlike your own. As we do so, we will change our collective story of cross-field collaboration and span the cultural boundaries that have siloed our fields for so long.