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Distributed Depository Responsibility

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When preparing for this presentation, I re-read an earlier presentation I had made about the Shared Regional in South Carolina and I find that that presentation is still accurate in describing the origins of the Shared Regional and in touching upon some of its problems. The difference for this presentation is that I am going to attempt to explain WHY I think we have had a less than total success for the South Carolina Shared Regional.

I need to emphasize here that this is MY interpretation, that it has not been "approved" by anyone at my library or anyone else at a South Carolina depository. In addition, many of the "villains" are no longer working at South Carolina libraries so cannot defend themselves or even offer a differing interpretation. It is possible that I am dead wrong--but I don't think so. I may be wrong on some details but the main analysis is, I believe, correct.

First, a brief history of the South Carolina Shared Regional. The movers behind the program were depository librarians at several selectives, especially those with many items they wanted to dispose of. I am told that efforts were made over some years to convince the University of South Carolina (USC), the state's largest library, to become the regional but the then director was adamantly opposed to this.

A state GODORT was formed with one of its purposes being to set up a Shared Regional and this was done involving 4 different libraries, 3 to be shared regionals and the State Library acting as a sort-of "secretariat" for the plan. Since I was not then involved in documents in South Carolina, I do not know how they convinced the libraries, especially the reluctant USC director, to participate. But note this significant fact: the push for setting up this program came from libraries other than USC or Clemson, both of which ended up as the Shared Regional after this early plan crashed.

If I had to give one reason for the less than successful Shared Regional in South Carolina it would be this: the two libraries which became the Shared Regional were not the ones most involved in setting up the program; one in fact was not only reluctant but hostile to the idea (I refer here, of course, to the library's administration, not to the documents librarians). The two libraries could be said to have little or no "ownership" in the program. And this led to the greatest problem experienced in the plan: the unwillingness of the administration of the USC library to devote any resources to their Shared Regional responsibilities.

And GPO didn't help any either, revealing another potential problem for any future Shared Regionals. GPO's distribution section began sending all regional shipments to USC, expecting them to then distribute them to the other two libraries. This didn't last long but it gave USC a legitimate gripe against GPO. It also showed a lack in GPO's organization which could be significant if other states explore the Shared Regional alternative.

Should there be additional Shared Regionals, GPO really needs to have a distribution system appropriate for that group of depositories and there needs to be a lot of communication between the libraries and GPO about HOW shipments will be made. This "nuts and bolts" issue was overlooked at the beginning of the South Carolina Shared Regional and it almost sunk the program at its inception.

Now to return to my statement above about the USC library, what precisely do I mean? Although a regional is charged with several responsibilities including reference assistance, training and orientation and so on, what the South Carolina selectives wanted was the ability to dispose of older materials.

The state's GODORT had been quite active in training and the larger selectives had given informal reference assistance for some time so those regional responsibilities were, at least in part, taken care of without having a South Carolina regional. But the older selectives in the state had accumulated many older documents for which they no longer had a need or space.

Disposal regulations were drawn up, the two Shared Regional libraries divided up the active and the "dead" agencies, and disposals began with Clemson handling the A's. Although some of the lists were very long (Clemson's first disposal list covering E, ED, and EP was 32 pages long, single spaced--and this was after we accepted numerous titles in these areas), Clemson managed to keep up the schedule we had set. But USC, with a larger professional but smaller non-professional staff in documents, could not process the lists it received and later stopped accepting disposal lists--which meant that South Carolina selectives could not dispose of materials from many agencies.

USC was handicapped not only by staffing restrictions but by a lack of equipment. My library had numerous computers and word processing software from the beginning of the Shared Regional program--and this greatly facilitated the preparation of disposal lists--while my colleagues at USC had a typewriter (and I'm not even sure it was electric). I remember once commiserating with Debbie Yerkes of USC who was typing (yes, typing with a typewriter) a disposal list while at Clemson we had students creating a disposal list on a computer. (I should add here that this situation has changed and USC has staff computers today.)

But my purpose is not to trash the USC library but to warn any of you contemplating creating some kind of shared arrangement to be certain that the libraries involved--especially their administrators--understand what is involved and are willing to commit needed resources to the program or you will not accomplish your goals.

In South Carolina, libraries were able to dispose of older materials for half of the agencies but that is less than they had hoped when the program began in 1986. In fairness, I must

say that within the past 6 months, the situation has improved and Clemson and other libraries have been able to have disposal lists processed by USC. I hope that this will continue.

It's appropriate now to mention another lack of the South Carolina Shared Regional that might have been useful in the situation described above. There is no evaluation mechanism for the South Carolina Shared Regional; no official way to assess progress and to describe problems. There is not even any provision for an annual meeting of depository librarians although we have often had an informal annual session. The first South Carolina State Plan related only to drawing up the initial Shared Regional, the one involving 4 libraries, and when that ended, so did the State Plan. And that State Plan concentrated only on setting up the program, no one contemplating that it might not operate as described.

I am now convinced that a State Plan that includes an elected advisory council and an annual report on regional activities written by that council would be a good thing, especially if the assessment was taken seriously and if the report was sent to library directors of the Shared Regional and all the selectives (and, of course, to GPO). This would serve as almost a "mini-inspection" where problems could be listed with the expectation that the Shared Regionals would report back to the depository advisory council about their plans for correcting shortcomings.

So what does all this say to any of you contemplating moving to some kind of a Shared Regional?

1. First, make sure that the program and its requirements are honestly described to the administration of the libraries involved. There WILL be extra work in being a Shared Regional and some provision must be made for this. If the library administration of any of the libraries is less than enthusiastic about the program--as was the case in South Carolina--you can expect problems as that administration will be reluctant to designate any resources to the program.

As I have already said, I was not in South Carolina when the South Carolina Shared Regional was set up but I can only guess that the eagerness of some depositories to dispose of materials blinded them to the dangers of depending upon a library whose administration was reluctant to enter into the program.

2. Should there be other Regionals that want to explore some kind of a Shared Regional arrangement, I believe that GPO must create a "shared regional liaison" person to answer distribution questions. (To say nothing about who gets to sit on the bus. I believe we were told "one per regional" for this meeting; so how many seats are allotted for a Shared Regional?)

Should there be numerous libraries moving toward a shared arrangement, it may be necessary for GPO to rethink its "regional or selective" distribution system and to create a third distribution category. We have sometimes had to query GPO about how our library will be treated for a particular publication (such as dual format materials, Congressional Record, etc.) and we do not always receive consistent answers from GPO--which reflects the fact that Shared Regionals fall outside the

boundaries of GPO's two distribution patterns. And this also means that, although my library is the South Carolina regional for DOE, we do get "rain checks" and "short, do not claim" for DOE titles so that we end up with a less than complete collection. (In a recent case, we failed to get a major DOE title (rain check) but a very small selective in our state did get it--I suppose we will eventually get it as a discard if GPO doesn't send it as a "rain check" item.)

3. Make sure there is some kind of evaluation procedure for the operations of a Shared Regional. And be certain that the evaluation results in a written document which is sent to GPO and to the library directors of all of the state's depositories. I think this could best be accomplished by writing it into a State Plan which would include an elected advisory committee which would actually write the evaluation but certainly other methods could be devised to accomplish this. I would also suggest that there be a provision for an annual meeting of depository librarians at which the most recent evaluation would be discussed.
4. In considering Shared Regionals, think "outside the box." In South Carolina (and I think in North Dakota which was our "model") we simply divided all regional responsibilities in half. That's certainly an acceptable way to do it but I can think of other ways to accomplish a sharing of regional responsibilities.

Perhaps a library with a large storage facility could maintain the entire retrospective collection for a state while another library--maybe one blessed with staff but not space--could receive ALL materials and later transfer many items to the "retrospective regional."

Some responsibilities such as help with loading CD's, training for Internet access, running a depository listserv might be assigned to another library depending upon interest and expertise. In South Carolina, the documents listserv is run by a selective because the librarian there had the knowledge and the interest to do it. And, as I had earlier explained, most training has been handled by the SC GODORT organization which used workshops as a way to generate revenue.

If our state writes a new State Plan, I see no reason why these tasks could not be written into the plan but continue being handled as before. Perhaps one member of the state plan advisory group could be appointed as the training liaison to the SC GODORT. This would ensure that SC GODORT would always be aware of training interests among the depository libraries.

5. Make provision for tasks or responsibilities not even considered when the regional program was set up. The two tasks that I think of are recon of older documents and assistance in using all the new electronic resources now a part of the depository program.

To my knowledge, there is no GPO requirement that older documents appear in a library's online catalog, but many libraries are adding OPAC records for their retrospective collection. My library is now considering whether we can afford to begin a recon project. A plan for a recon project could be included in a State Plan or other

document setting up a Shared Regional if the libraries concerned are willing to take on this task.

At the very least, any new Shared Regional plan should include a requirement for one member to monitor cataloging projects such as the CIC pre-1976 documents cataloging project so that all depositories in the state can be kept up to date on these developments.

Work with the new electronic sources should also be addressed, although I think this is a task that could be "assigned" in a State Plan or a Shared Regional agreement to a library other than a regional. Again, this could be decided based upon the staffing of the Shared Regionals, and the interest and knowledge of the state's depository librarians.

As mentioned earlier, in my state the more knowledgeable depository librarian for the new electronic sources is at one of the state's smaller selectives. Should SC write a State Plan, I would expect that he would figure in the plan as our "electronic guru" at least initially.

6. While it may not always be possible, I think a Shared Regional could best be planned when the librarians involved know one another and have had some experience working in the state (i.e., they know where the bodies are buried). I assumed responsibility for documents at Clemson with only two years experience in South Carolina and without having even met most of the document librarians in the state including the librarians at our other Shared Regional library, USC. I did not learn until later of the reluctance of the USC administration to take on the Shared Regional program or of some other features of that library that had an adverse impact upon the program. I like to think that I would have been more cautious in recommending participation by my library had I had more knowledge of these facts.

So am I sorry that Clemson has been one half of South Carolina's Shared Regional? I'm not sure. We have certainly expended staff time in processing disposals for South Carolina's selectives but, in turn, have been able to dispose of very little ourselves until the last few months. And we definitely receive materials that are never used in our library, some of them "problem" titles that require lots of work and/or space. (Why, oh, why don't those accursed Davis-Bacon reports get transferred to the Internet?) Our library has fallen upon hard times in the past year and withdrawing from the Shared Regional has been suggested as one means of coping with our diminishing resources. But being part of a Shared Regional definitely fits with Clemson's mission as South Carolina's land grant school and I believe our dean is unlikely to want to face the wrath of his fellow depository directors when they learn that the program allowing them to dispose of documents has ended. (I am assuming here that Clemson's withdrawal would mean there would be no Regional in SC.)

My prediction, then, is that the South Carolina Shared Regional will continue but I hope that it can be improved by the drafting and signing of a State Plan by all the library directors concerned--a State Plan that would address the issues I have raised here. As I mentioned at the beginning, South Carolina is now operating under its second Shared Regional plan, the first one having been a dreadful fiasco from which Sheila McGarr rescued us (but that's

another story). Maybe it's now time for the third South Carolina Shared Regional--the one of which it can be said "third time's the charm."