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Partnerships: Lighting the Fire

by Sarah Long, Executive Director, North Suburban Library System

Go into any public library or bookstore and look at the books on business and management. You'll notice an amazing array of titles with words such as leveraging partnerships, building alliances, competitors becoming cooperators. The business world has discovered a truth that the non-profit world has known for many years: There is strength, profit even, in working together. The purpose of this column is to highlight partnerships, alliances, and cooperative projects in the library world. This first column is devoted to the story of how the Illinois State Library strengthened its partnership with the regional library systems. I talked with Pat Norris, Associate Director, Illinois State Library, about a project called "Lighting the Fire." You can find more information at the [Illinois State Library Web site](#).

In August, 2000, the Illinois State Library announced that approximately \$500,000 of the state's federal Library Services and Technology (LSTA) funding would be devoted to a process designed to increase the creativity of grant proposals reviewed by the state and that the 12 regional library systems would be partners in this project. Representatives of each of the 12 library systems attended a statewide brainstorming and planning retreat. After that, each system received LSTA funds to hold its own brainstorming and planning retreat and to fund grants resulting from the process.

When I asked Pat why she felt the need for such a process, she replied that she had been troubled for a long time about the level of creativity the State Library was seeing in grant proposals. Illinois has always been a leader in library innovation using federal grant funds and returning 96% of those federal dollars to libraries in Illinois. Over the years, that's meant a number of innovative pilot projects such as statewide delivery of materials, books for newborns in hospitals, and after-hours reference service. Pat has been in charge of the grants program at the state library since 1992 and has seen more and more grant proposals target basic operations as libraries struggle with declining budgets and growing technology. The proposals have been less creative and represented less risk. She felt that the State Library alone did not have the answer, rather, there was a need for a process to find the answer. She approached Jean Wilkins, Director of the Illinois State Library, and asked her to convene a group to brainstorm and come up with a process that would promote broader thinking, more risk, and more creativity in grant writing. They convened what they called "Lighting the Fire," a group made up of the most creative people in all the library systems in the state. The group devised the idea of turning a certain amount of money over to the systems to see if they could motivate their library members to develop innovative and creative grant proposals.

The outcomes of the project have been more rewarding than anyone anticipated. There were proposals from whole new groups of librarians around the state. The process seemed to be a siren call to all the creative people in Illinois. But almost more importantly, Pat said that she has seen a real warmth and bonding in the library community that was never there before. People who have participated have said that the process changed their lives and how they think about each other and work together.

Pat thinks the reason the project has been so successful is that it was an equal partnership. Clearly the state library wasn't in "drive and dictate" mode. By turning over money to the systems and allowing them to make their own rules, they gave a clear signal regarding the terms of the partnership.

And it's not over. The State Library has scheduled a statewide wrap-up and evaluation session for representatives from each system later this year and is sure they will get more ideas. They've heard from the systems, and observed that they really have lit a fire. Their intention was to light the fire of creativity. The bonus was that they have also lit a fire for building a statewide community of librarians. There has been a sea change in Illinois.

If your organization is involved in a creative partnership, alliance, or cooperative project, I'd love to hear from you. Call me at 847-459-1300 ex. 7125 or [e-mail me](#).

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