

Forum 3: Resource Networks and Collaborative Partnerships Toward Healthy Communities

On April 27, 2022, OCLC hosted 22 participants for the final in a series of three online REALM Forums. Among the participants, local, state, and national organizations were represented, as were archives, libraries, museums, foundations, and the public health sector.

This Forum was designed to facilitate discussion on how networks and other collaborative partnerships among organizations have bolstered the collective capacity of libraries, archives, and museums to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic in our communities. The Forum also elicited perspectives about the role participants played to build, strengthen, or maintain a network; and how their network responded to the needs of their communities during this crisis. Some of the networks represented in the Forum were in place prior to the onset of the pandemic; others came together in response. Many of these networks are cross-sector collaborations among government, nonprofit, business, and community-based organizations; some are local or regional in their focus, some are national. The two-hour event covered the following agenda items:

- Welcome
- Breakout 1: Building. How does an organization position itself to join (or create) a network?
- Recap themes from Breakout 1 discussion
- Breakout 2: Relating. How does one cultivate positive working relationships within the network?
- Large group discussion: How might networks be maintained so that they can be activated in response to future crises/needs?
- Next steps and final reflections

The overarching discussion question for the Forum was, “How can libraries, archives, and museums (LAMs) join, participate in, and help sustain collaborative cross-sector networks that are working toward a shared goal of improving public health outcomes?”

To promote clarity and focus for the discussion, a working definition of *network* was circulated to the Forum participants: “A network is three or more organizations working together toward a common purpose.”

The following summary synthesizes notes from the two breakout discussions and the large group discussion.

Building or Joining Networks

Network-building organizations.

Some organizations have existing missions, departments, or roles to set up and activate networks. In this role, these organizations identified key players to join the network, made introductions among the players who joined, and planned a kickoff event that brought all players together – virtually, during the COVID-19 crisis – to discuss the common purpose they would be working toward and the modes of interaction.

Some of the organizations had a national scope to their network building, which meant having to find common ground across states and regions that had very different needs and situations.

Other network-building organizations work at the local level and already had familiarity with the other organizations in their community, but they needed to help everyone band together for a different, larger effort during the pandemic.

Others in the group described how they saw a need arise that no single organization was equipped to meet on its own and took on the role of creating a network on the fly. For example, one participant noted that no one was satisfying community members' interest in understanding the history and nature of pandemics and public health, so they rallied together various organizations that could work together to produce information for the public.

Network-building people.

When discussing the forming stage of a network, participants acknowledged the importance of leveraging existing personal and professional relationships. They also noted that individuals are often in organizations that can have very different missions and goals. So, there is an important step that involves building bridges between organizations that are approaching the same problem space from very different orientations.

Participants mentioned how individuals within an organization can play key connector roles. Some have strong connections inside the organization; these staff can raise their colleagues' and leadership's awareness of and alignment with the common purpose of the network. Others may have strong connections outside of the organization; they can offer a warm start to forming a bond with those organizations. Both types of connector-

people are important to have in any organization that is interested in collaborative partnerships.

Some organizations leveraged their reputation in the field to bridge connections. They recognized that their organization was known and respected, and that led others to feel more confident about joining a network with which their organization was affiliated.

Network-building during COVID-19.

Restricted to the online format for most or all interactions during the pandemic, participants noted how that constraint impacted the network-building experience. On the upside, they were able to meet more frequently, which kept them in closer communication while navigating the fast pace of crisis management. However, they found it harder to maintain the social glue among network members. In some cases, over time the communication patterns shifted from multidirectional – with organizations sharing across the network – to unidirectional, with one “hub” organization gathering and sharing the information out to the “spoke” organizations.

Having limited access to physical spaces offered challenges for how to help newcomers find networks and tap into the resources the network is producing. Some mentioned that they learned quickly not to rely only on social media (such as Facebook) to reach people; they found that many of the people they needed to reach with information and include in decision making are not on those platforms.

Even those who were well experienced with networks found they learned more during the COVID-19 pandemic. There was novelty introduced in some networks that found professional sectors collaborating for the first time or in a different way in response to the needs raised by this crisis. Those representing the public health sector reported that they expanded their understanding of the capacities and strengths of the cultural heritage field/institutions, having seen only a narrow slice of their work before this experience.

The discussion raised examples of positive results from leveraging existing partnerships between universities and public health departments that had staff resources that were not fully committed to the “front line” of COVID-19 response. Combining the strengths of these two organizations offered a reliable information resource to news organizations and members of the public seeking vetted information about pandemics and vaccines.

Network-seeking.

For those who do not already have a network to tap into – perhaps they are new to the profession or to the community – participants offered encouragement to get creative and be bold. Examples included:

- Draw on your past for connections you might be overlooking, or look to your family, friends, or neighbors who might be connected.
- Listen to other people for clues about networks or other partnerships they might be involved in. Ask to be introduced!
- Join groups that can lead to networks, such as email discussion lists or member associations.
- Volunteer for local public health organizations.

Participants also acknowledged that professional development courses could be designed to help staff in their organization build their networking skills and to learn how to find networks in their area.

Roles a person or organization can play

When asked to describe the role that they and/or their organization played in their network, participant responses included the following:

- **Bridge.** This role involves helping to define the network's common purpose, discovering the complementary assets and needs among network participants, and/or keeping an eye out for new people and perspectives to bring into the network. As one participant stated, "If you're the common person in between other networks and you can connect them, be that bridge."
- **Matchmaker.** While related to the bridge role, the matchmaker is slightly different. This role involves making the introduction between two people who each have trust in the matchmaker and who the matchmaker trusts. Once the introductions are made, the matchmaker steps out of the way to let the trust take hold between the newly connected people.
- **Facilitator.** These are the people or organizations that create containers and space for network interactions to occur, such as hosting the video calls, planning agendas for meetings, and keeping the communication flowing across the network.
- **Information resource.** This role involves gathering information on topics of shared interest, vetting the information to ensure it is relevant and reliable, and sharing it through communications channels.
- **Participant.** When invited to join a network, a participant could take specific steps to strengthen their connection to the group by telling their story and their organization's story. Participants articulate how they could support the common purpose and what they (and their organization) were seeking in return. Several commented, "Check your ego at the door."
- **Amplifier.** This role involves leveraging the organization's visibility and reach to raise awareness within their community of the information gathered or produced by the network.

- **Middle man.** A role often played by foundations or other philanthropic organizations, the “middle man” connects organizations to funding or resources that fuels programs or initiatives. Those in this role could, however, also connect the organizations they resourced together, learn from the specialized knowledge or experience those organizations bring, and share back out through their grantee communication channels.
- **Trusted resource.** Organizations that have trust established with their community are a boon during a crisis, as people more readily turn to that organization for information or support. Participants recognized that their institution could go a long way to help people find reliable information that they felt they could trust.

Benefits to participating

For an organization to continue participating in a network, there must be some benefit. Researchers have documented the potential benefits of participating in a network, including the ones listed here: ¹

- **Resources:** Stretched, built on, or strengthened limited resources; increased access to resources not held within an organization
- **Risk:** Reduced risk to any one organization by sharing or distributing risk across the network
- **Efficiency:** More efficient use of resources or found economies of scale
- **Coordination:** Able to offer better-coordinated or higher-quality services
- **Advocacy:** Greater impact of outreach and advocacy efforts
- **Information:** Greater access to and exchange of knowledge among more people
- **Change:** Exposure to new ways of thinking and doing, inspiration to break out of organizational norms
- **Innovation:** More opportunities for applied learning and innovation
- **Accountability:** Progress toward a collective impact with a sense of shared accountability across the network
- **Agility:** Developed increased flexibility and responsiveness to crisis

When asked how their organization experienced a benefit of network participation during the COVID-19 pandemic, participants’ responses gravitated around the following:

- Getting information that would have been harder to find on their own
- Being included in conversations that informed their decision-making; having a seat at a broader decision-making table

¹ List adapted from Popp, J. K., Milward, H. B., MacKean, G., Casebeer, A., & Lindstrom, R. 2014. “Inter-organizational networks: a review of the literature to inform practice.” IBM Center for The Business of Government.

- Small organizations found they got connected to larger organizations through networks; and, in turn, they were then able to introduce other small organizations to the large organizations
- Networks connected to other networks, thus further extending the resource and information-sharing capabilities
- Broadened reach and impact of their institution's services (such as school visits, either in person or online)
- Gaining more momentum toward a common goal

Relating

Participants discussed how interpersonal and interorganizational dynamics are affected by a crisis and, in many ways, the effect on networks is positive. For example, several pointed out that the crisis situation invigorated the common purpose of the network and motivated its players to prioritize time for network activities. For networks that formed in response to the crisis, the formation and "getting to know you" stages were accelerated and helped organizations quickly overcome any competitive issues as survival became the shared objective. Those representing libraries posited that their institutions tend to be anti-competitive and pro-sharing, a mindset that helped them forge trust and collaboration more easily during a challenging time.

Some organizations had existing networks well before the COVID-19 crisis but found the tenor of the interactions changed to be more mutually supportive, more about stress relief rather than just for information exchange.

Drawing from their experience with networks, advice for building healthy working relationships in a network developed around the following points:

Be curious.

Approach the network with a mindset of learning from everyone who's involved.

When you are participating in a network with people and organizations outside of your profession, industry, or area of expertise, be open to learning the other sector's lingo. When you don't understand a term or concept, ask for a definition or clarification.

Be welcoming.

Newcomers were described as important assets to a network who bring new perspectives that keep the network growing and learning. When you are bringing new people into the network, provide a welcoming and supportive environment that helps others feel like they can be open and can ask questions to build mutual understanding.

Centering community means hearing their story. Bring as many community stakeholders into the conversation as you can, and listen actively to what they tell you.

Language matters.

Mirror the language that comes from the community. Recognize that you might be the outsider, and that their language is the main one. Meet partners where they are – identify a shared vocabulary rather than impose yours on others.

Avoid acronyms! If you use them, explain them so that everyone understands you. Have colleagues outside of your sector review communications, presentations, and reporting to look for jargon or other points of misaligned language.

Make expectations clear.

Be clear about the intention of the network – define and communicate the common purpose. While it can be a challenge to determine whether everyone understands and buys into that intention, doing so is essential for a well-functioning network. As one participant noted, “When you share a common purpose, you can come together to build stronger systems.”

For those who are guiding the formation of a network, lay out all the expectations and clearly identify everyone's roles and responsibilities in those plans. Recognize roles in the process and acknowledge when responsibilities are or are not being met. If they're not, be transparent in addressing that, and work together to find solutions.

For those participating in the network, do what you say you're going to do.

Be kind.

Approaching a network authentically is critical. Being an honest, reliable part of the network is the only way for networks to work successfully.

Listen more than you talk. There's a difference between listening and just not talking when someone else is talking.

Joining a network may mean you've been invited, so remember that you're a guest.

Let go of the need to appear or be perfect. Extend and receive grace.

Weave the network.

Know who your networks are connected to, and rely on those partners for their expertise. Acknowledging the expertise of your partners helps strengthen that partnership and can help ensure you're reaching communities with which you might not have as strong connections.

Notice when you exist in “brackish water” filled with many networks swimming around the same problem space. If you're the common person in between other networks and you can connect them, be that bridge.

Acknowledge the work that the network you're joining has done and is doing. If you communicate about the work with others, always acknowledge all the partners.

When systems collapse, such as they did during COVID-19, individuals within the system rise up and take on a shared stewardship. This form of leadership is different from leading on behalf of a narrow issue or an institutional goal; it can build toward a movement. See the interdependence among people, communities, and organizations.

Bring in newcomers who have ties to other networks to help break up “business as usual” or inside-the-bubble thinking. Fresh perspectives inject health to the network.

Maintaining

At some point, an organizational network will face the decision whether to continue together or let the network dissipate. This decision may come after the common need has been addressed or the shared goal has been achieved; or, it may come when participation begins to wane or organizations drop out of the network. Even in those cases, there are usually a few participants who advocate for maintaining the network; having invested in the relationships, they do not want to lose them.

Forum participants recognized that a network might not need to be maintained once they've reached their original common goal. In those cases, celebrate the collective achievement and then signal an end of the collective work, at least for the time being. Don't continue to maintain the network if there is not widespread buy-in. If a few participants want to keep in touch to sustain the connection or take those connections to build a different network, they can do that.

Evaluation can be used to measure both the health of the network and its impact; and, analytics can gauge the reach of the resources shared through the network. However, most participants indicated that they did not employ formal evaluation of their networks. Setting up criteria for success for the network and determining how to measure results were identified as challenges for organizations, even though the reasons for doing so are sound. One participant noted that the state of evaluation of networks and their fit for purpose is still primitive and unsatisfying. Funded initiatives usually require evaluation, which helps measure community impact but may not measure the effectiveness of the network-based approach.

For those who maintain a network for the longer term, participants advised committing to ongoing check-ins, and to revisiting and adjusting the common purpose along the way. They expressed the need to nurture organizational relationships that can withstand

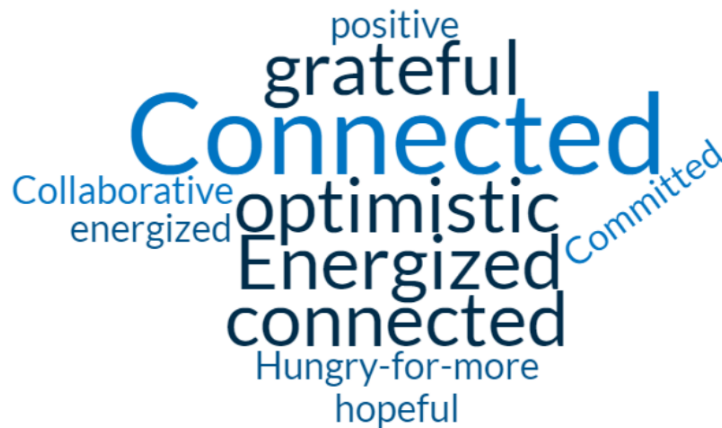
turnover of staff within an institution. This underscores the point that while “on paper” the network is made up of organizations, the connective tissue is the relationships between people working in those organizations.

Challenges

During the three rounds of discussions, a few observations came up that pointed to some of the challenges or hard lessons experienced by those participating in networks during the COVID-19 crisis:

- Public health professionals and other first responders. These workers were 100% focused on the pandemic, giving them less time for collaboration. Then, burnout and turnover severely impacted that industry. Organizations have had to build new relationships as a result.
- Regret for not learning from past experiences with crisis-based networking (e.g., Hurricane Katrina), which would have led their organization to having made changes to documentation or policies that would have better prepared them for this experience.
- Recognition that there are always crises and will continue to be crises. Many are experiencing crisis fatigue. Others are painfully aware of the inequity around which crises get attention, when, and by whom.
- The COVID-19 pandemic presented special challenges for how to mobilize to reach and support those struggling to access or those completely cut off from essential services. Organizations found they had to expand outreach to include new methods and new people and places within their communities.
- Newcomers to communities were especially challenged when trying to build connections during various stages of lockdowns and social distancing. The challenge was to figure out how to help these new residents tap into networks and meet people when they couldn't go to physical places or talk to people in person.
- Organizations that do not have a collaborative mindset will be more reluctant to help build or participate in networks. Individuals at those organizations who see the value of collaboration can have difficulty making the case to leadership.
- Sometimes there are financial barriers to participating in a network or accessing an organization's resources. Participants grappled with how to be inclusive of those who did not have the means or access to dues-paying membership.

At the end of the two-hour Forum, participants were asked to share one word to describe how they were feeling at that moment. The results are an example of the benefits of networks:



Next Steps

The REALM project team is using the input from these discussions to document recommendations for future projects or initiatives that can help build the capacity of LAMs to serve as community hubs in times of crisis. That documentation will be part of the final set of outputs for the project.

High-level findings from the Forum were presented to the REALM Executive Project Steering Committee in May 2022. The final version of this summary will be circulated to those stakeholders, Forum participants, and posted to the REALM website.

Forum Discussion Prompts

Building: How does an organization position itself to join (or create) a network?

- How did your organization get connected to the network (or initiate the network)? How much did personal connections play a part?
- What is your/your organization's role in the network, and Why? (connector, facilitator, consultant/SME, outreach, convener, etc.)
- Did your network expand to include a new sector?
- What is your advice to those who are new to the area/profession or have few personal connections? How do they find/join a network?

Relating: How does one cultivate positive working relationships within the network?

- How did you build trust and rapport with other network members?
- How did you avoid or navigate "turf wars" among network members?

- How did you figure out shared vocabulary and goals with organizations outside your sector, field, or regions that participated in the network?
- How have relationships between organizations been maintained when the individual representatives changed?
- Has the health of the network relationships been monitored or measured?

Maintaining: How might networks be maintained so that they can be activated in response to future crises/needs?

- What and how should information be captured to document the network for future reference?
- How do network participants steward the relationships with other participants, once the initial crisis/project has ended?
- Who takes on the role of “glue” that keeps the bonds maintained? What are the personal qualities or motivators needed to take on that role?