

A CASE STUDY IN **COLLABORATION:**

Looking back at
the National Graphic
Design Archive

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ABSTRACT:

Inspired by the 1980s interest in graphic design history, an initially productive, but difficult to sustain, collaboration among three American universities from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s, is the subject of this case study. The ideas behind a much-needed archival consortium, its organization and its difficulties in sustaining collaboration are examined. The essay concludes with constructive suggestions for reflection on collaborative associations between institutions.

Today collaboration in a professional design context is the norm, working as an effective strategy for individuals, groups, companies and institutions. On a basic level, even though design students often work individually on projects in school, when they enter professional practice, they must function as members of interdisciplinary problem-solving teams with shared responsibilities and specific competencies.

The word collaboration has at least two meanings. In the past, “collaboration” had sinister implications such as collaborating in a crime. During World War II it also had a negative connotation, referring to those individuals who identified with the axis enemies. Today collaboration has a positive bent; it stands for working together cooperatively. In his book, *The Planning of Change*, Warren Bennis (1969), a management science guru from the late 1960’s, provided a detailed and useful definition of the collaborative relationship. He wrote:

a collaborative relationship is a complex series of expectations and encounters which include

- joint effort that involves mutual determination of goals;
- spirit of inquiry—a reliance on determinations based on data, publicly shared;
- relationship growing out of a concrete, here-and-now encounter;
- voluntary relationship between change agent and client with either party free to terminate the relationship after joint consultation;
- power distribution in which the client and change agent have equal or almost equal opportunity to influence one another;
- emphasis on methodological, rather than specific, substantive goals.

The history of the National Graphic Design Archive is an instructive illustration of collaboration among three institutions of higher education. This brief case study documents a vision that led to a national collaboration including determination of its purpose and its history. This essay concludes with commentary about the successes and shortcomings of the joint venture which will provide interested readers with constructive suggestions for entering collaborative relationships.

During the 1980's, an interest in the history of the field of graphic design emerged. This manifested itself in important events such as the publishing of *A History of Graphic Design* by Philip B. Meggs and the "Coming of Age" conference on graphic design history at Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT). In tandem with this trend came the need to preserve and document this history. Many modernist design pioneers were passing on; their professional archives were important historical records needing to be saved. Several universities began developing archive projects. The University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) collected materials about the history of Chicago including special collections such as that from Container Corporation of America. Cooper Union (CU) had acquired the archive of designer Herb Lubalin and turned it into a center for history and interpretive exhibits. Rochester Institute of Technology acquired designer Lester Beall's archive, cataloged it and developed an interactive image bank. Professor George Sadek of Cooper Union in New York and colleague Marilyn Hoffner conceived a national project to bring together several leading institutions with the intent that eventually others might join in a national network. Initially the other participating schools were the University of Illinois at Chicago (Gretchen Lagana and Beverly Lynch) and Rochester Institute of Technology (R. Roger Remington). Each institution had its own collection focus, policies and working organizational structure. At Cooper Union, the Lubalin Center is part of the School of Art. At UIC and RIT, the archives were part of the university libraries. Each school had faculty and staff advocates who were teaching design history and utilizing the original source materials in the classroom. Although different in many ways, each school was in agreement about the importance of preserving historical exemplars of the history of graphic design and of the potential for sharing their experience and knowledge with others.

Cooper Union was successful in obtaining a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to support the formation of a consortium. Implicit in this was the fact that each school would be required to support the project with funding and in-kind resources. Meetings were held at each of the three schools and, after extensive discussions, a vision statement was written and adopted:

The National Graphic Design Archive is

...a consortium of individuals and organizations that will systematically coordinate the archiving, documentation and interpretation of the artifacts of the history of graphic design in America so that this heritage will be preserved for the future.

There is a national need to identify and facilitate access to the artifacts of the history of graphic design in America to insure that these materials will be saved and made available for study, reference and interpretation throughout the country. The NGDA will be an innovative network of people, projects and institutions that will provide collecting frameworks, investigate appropriate technology for the documentation, access and sharing of materials electronically and become a clearing house for information about this history. NGDA intends to be perceived by its users and others as being a reliable, technologically oriented, productive and approachable institution.

To accompany the vision statement the three schools added a set of goals:

- 1 To coordinate the collection and preservation of significant images and data about the history of graphic design
- 2 To utilize the database for educational and informative interpretive programs as demonstrations
- 3 To apply appropriate technology for the development of pilot programs, networking and sharing of information
- 4 To disseminate information about NGDA, its activities, products and goals
- 5 To seek ongoing development resources to sustain the organization and its activities
- 6 To develop a functional organizational structure that will enhance the project operations and activities
- 7 To regularly evaluate the organization and modify it as necessary

According to these goals, a work plan was developed with each school involved in developing parts of the project according to their unique strengths and resources. Cooper Union administered the National Endowment for the Arts grant and developed interpretive programs through the Herb Lubalin Center. UIC worked on contributing descriptive standards for archiving graphic design materials. RIT offered consortium planning expertise, production of an interactive image bank, printing of a global “what’s where” directory of design archives and produced a NGDA newsletter. (See *figure 1* for a description of the collaborative elements.) Expanding the network proved difficult as the three original schools had not yet developed a functional relationship to fully meet the NGDA goals. Others, on a program basis, joined the consortium. MIT, the Society of Environmental Design and Westvaco Corporation contributed to the interactive image bank prototype. Between 1989 and 1994, the span of NGDA’s formal existence, changes in personnel occurred at the participating schools as newcomers infused new energy into the original vision. The consortium received continuing funding from the NEA through the mid-1990s, but full participation began to wane. In time resources became more limited and several of the sponsoring schools felt internal administrative pressure to “pull back” the effort in order to support internal goals that were, in effect, more controllable. In addition, there were perceived inequities with the project load and deliverables, questions about equitable resource allocation and resistance to a tighter, more structured organization plan that was fully understood and agreed upon by the schools. When one member proposed a working structure for the consortium and its program development process, others felt threatened by the implicit discipline involved. So there was a fundamental difference of preferred organizational style among the participants ranging from a very loose, figure-it-out-as-we-go style to another school who was advocating a systematic form. One founding member institution chose to retire from participation and focus on internal priorities. The two remaining participants continued for several years in the mid-1990’s, maintaining a new website image bank under the NGDA banner at Cooper Union.

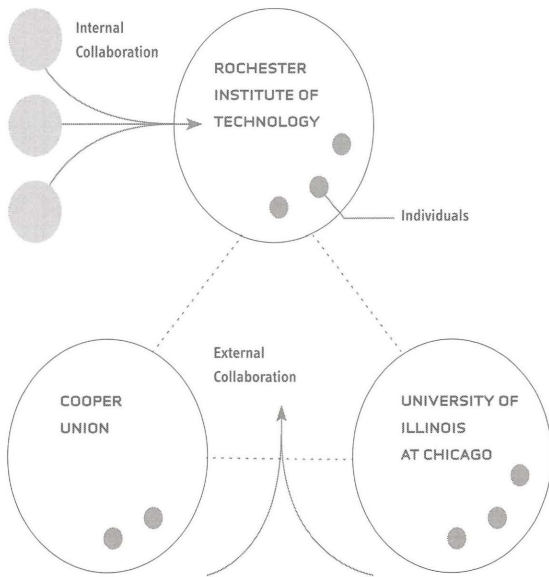


FIGURE 1:

Network building

There were considerable differences among the schools in their digital capabilities and technical support. This created a serious imbalance when it came to delegation of resources as the institution with the greater computer resources felt the need for more of the grant monies. Another larger technical difficulty was that the Macintosh computer and the Internet were in early stages of development so the three schools were wed to different existing technologies. If the consortium were to begin in 2003, the technology issues would be fewer. The National Graphic Design Archive, which had started out with such grand expectations and potential, diminished ultimately in realizing its major goals of collaboration toward a functional national network. It was a victim of the risky challenge of inter-institutional collaboration.

In retrospect, what lessons were learned from this project? What might institutions be aware of as they sense a need and respond to a motivation to work together in addressing a common challenge?

What follows is one participant's look in the rearview mirror, offered as a set of constructive suggestions for future collaborative ventures between institutions:

- Consortia provide excellent opportunities for participants to evaluate their own work in relationship to others.
- Consortia are very appealing organizations for funding agencies and foundations.
- When establishing a consortium, there needs to be a conscious equity in every aspect of the project, in the organization, in the mission, in the administration and organization, in the program development plan and in the expected deliverables.
- Participants must realize up front the amount of energy and passion that will be necessary to overcome the lethargy and pressure for maintaining the separate institutional status quo.
- The consortia should consider hiring an organizational consultant to bring objectivity to the planning process.
- In the initial planning, the group should emphasize strategies for sustaining the vitality of the organization into the future.
- Participants should read the current and classic literature on organizational planning such as the book, *Why Change Doesn't Work* by Robbins and Finley (1996).
- From the outset, participants should devote time, energy and resources to monitoring the psychodynamics of the organization itself and the means by which participating individuals interrelate.

Sociologist Warren Bennis (1969) was realistic when he wrote, "Collaboration is always an achievement not a gift. It is usually attained through open and grueling confrontation of differences, through conflicts faced and resolved, through limited areas of collaboration growing into larger areas of collaboration as fuller trust develops." Finally, when thinking about collaborative relationships, it is instructive to remember the wisdom of the Gestalt psychologists when they offered, "the whole is different from and greater than the sum of its parts."



Bennis, W.G., Benne, K.D. and Chin, R. 1969. *The Planning of Change*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 147.

Bennis et al., *The Planning of Change*, 152.

Robins, Harvey and Michael Finley. 1996. *Why Change Doesn't Work, Why Initiatives Go Wrong and How to Try Again and Succeed*. Petersons Guides.

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