

The Western North Carolina Library Network: "Well Begun is Half Done"

Deborah B. Babel

This is the story of the beginning of a network. The libraries of the three western campuses of the University of North Carolina system agreed in 1983 to cooperate and form a network which would enable all three to have on-line catalog and circulation systems. The institutions are Appalachian State University (ASU) in Boone; the University of North Carolina at Asheville (UNC-A); and Western Carolina University (WCU) in Cullowhee. The network they formed is called the Western North Carolina Library Network (WNCLN).

The article describes the origins of the network, how it came to be, and the reasoning that went into its creation. The network itself is then described, how it functions and what it purports to do.

This story has only just begun. Early profiling for the local system has started, yet at the time of writing, the central computer has not been delivered, and the telecommunications have not been connected. The reason there is a story to tell at all is that the Western North Carolina Library Network has been a project well thought out and carefully planned. As the libraries encounter the early stages of implementing the local system, they already see the value in the hours spent in discussions and planning. They have faced decisions, and discussed problems and solutions that many libraries do not encounter until the questions are asked by the project manager.

This article is intentionally non-technical, and of necessity refrains from in-depth analysis and discussion. Its purpose is to describe how the network came to be, and what it is.

How Did the Western North Carolina Network Come About?

It would be nice to say that the network emerged because cooperation makes sense and is in itself an admirable, achievable goal. This was not entirely the case with WNCLN. As with so many other ventures, this one emerged as the

result of several less lofty factors. The others fueled it. That the participants are inclined to cooperate anyway helped tremendously during the formative stages of the network.

Primary Factors

There were four main factors that contributed to the formation of the network. These were timing, common sense, economics and support.

Timing

Each of the libraries was already committed to preparation for an automated system. In 1983, when the initial talks took place, ASU had issued a request for information for an automated library system, and had completed more than half of a retrospective conversion project. UNC-A had begun a recon project, with the intention of closing the card catalogs. WCU had completed a recon project and was beginning to write a request for proposal for an automated library system. During the various interchanges that accompanied these events, it was evident that each school would need, within a relatively short time, a large infusion of money to support the purchase of an automated system. As each is a state-supported institution, the primary source of funds was the same for all. That is where common sense came in.

Western North Carolina Library Network

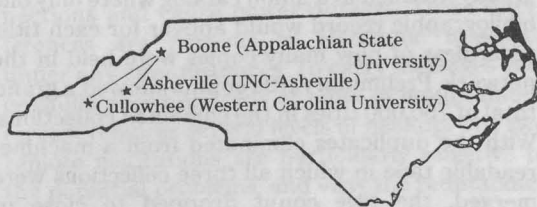


Figure 1

Common Sense

It was obvious that the requests for automation should be coordinated. Each library understandably wanted full funding, and each wanted to keep its request in line with the others. Moreover, the libraries needed to convince the legislators that this would be money well spent. This

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last consideration led to the third of the primary reasons for the network, economics.

Economics

In seeking to justify automation, the libraries suspected they might be able to afford a better system collectively than they would be able to purchase individually. General cost figures gathered during 1984 supported this theory. The initial figures showed that for the same amount of money it would take to put an on-line catalog in each library, a shared on-line catalog with circulation systems for each library could be purchased.

Support

Without early, whole-hearted support from the library directors and their respective administrations, the network would have remained a dream. Convinced by the factors listed above, the administrations of the three institutions have fostered the wide-reaching implications of cooperation by their support for this additional service to the western part of North Carolina. This support has been essential to the early success of the network.

Secondary Factors

Three secondary factors fueled the progress of the network. These were the similarities of the collections and the cataloging histories, and external events.

Similarities of the Collections

Each school supports a basic undergraduate curriculum, and is mandated by the state to have these materials available on campus. While this does not permit the libraries to save money by purchasing fewer copies of the books, it was thought that there was substantial overlap among the titles of the three collections. Storage requirements for an automated system would be greatly lessened in a union catalog where only one bibliographic record would appear for each title, regardless of how many copies were held in the network. Preliminary title counts showed a grand total of 750,000 titles in the combined collections. With the duplicates eliminated from a machine-readable tape in which all three collections were merged, the title count dropped to close to 600,000.

Similarities of Cataloging

The cataloging departments of the three libraries share similar policies in that they use Library of Congress classification and subject headings for current cataloging. Each has applied current cataloging rules and LC interpretations, and each was a charter member of SOLINET. That the policies were similar has not insured uni-

formity of practices. The foundations were similar enough so as not to preclude cooperation because of incompatible or unresolvable differences in cataloging records. Since the network is based on the idea of a union catalog, it was mandatory that the cataloging departments cooperate. The degree of cooperation that has taken place among these departments has been outstanding, and is becoming characteristic of the network.

External Events

At approximately the same time that early planning was taking place in the west, the University Librarians' Advisory Council, a committee of the library directors of the UNC system, began to explore the possibility of a coordinated request to the state legislature for funding to automate all the libraries of the UNC system. The reasons for this were essentially the same as those which propelled the western network. The result was a coordinated request for library automation funding from the UNC libraries. Funding was approved for this state-wide project in 1985. Receipt of this funding gave life to the Western North Carolina Library Network. Two years of planning an idea gave way that year to reality.

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What Is the Western North Carolina Library Network?

The description of the network will fall into two broad categories. The first is the purpose of the network; the second, its form and structure.

Intent and Purpose of the Network

The bylaws of WNCLN state three objectives for the network: to establish and maintain an on-line catalog and circulation system for the libraries of its members; to increase access of students and faculty of each institution to the resources of the members; and to investigate and pursue other avenues of cooperation.

On-line Catalog and Circulation System

The primary purpose of WNCLN is to automate the catalogs and to provide automated circulation for the libraries. This has been met through the acquisition and installation of the LS/2000 system. As implementation of the system takes place, careful consideration will insure that future cooperative agreements may take place

without technical interference from the profile. For example, although cooperative circulation is not in effect among the libraries, the profiling and planning for bar codes is being done so as not to preclude its taking place in the future.

Increased Access

The second objective is to increase access to the libraries' collections. By taking advantage of advances in automation and telecommunications, the three universities can expand access to their resources to a much broader area than has been possible traditionally. By making records available on-line, the collections of the universities will be available for the first time to one another. Access to the catalog will also be possible from outside the library buildings. Those with access to microcomputers equipped with modems will be able to dial into the system and search the holdings of the three libraries. Access will also be possible from terminals on each campus that are connected to the campus mainframes. Once this is done, the stage is set for the third objective, further cooperation.

Further Cooperation

Other services which will add value to the network include document delivery, a network interlibrary loan agreement, cooperative circulation agreements, and possibly cooperative collection development to support the research needs of graduate students and faculty. These are possibilities and do not necessarily constitute a plan of action.

Form and Structure of the Network

The network exists mechanically and technically through the data base, telecommunications, and governance structures.

Data Base.

The central product of the network is a data base of some 600,000 bibliographic records, or titles, with nearly 1,000,000 items, or volumes. The on-line catalog will provide for public access and bibliographic maintenance, and is integrated with a circulation subsystem that will operate independently at each library.

The libraries share a Data General MV10000, which is located at Appalachian State University, in Boone. OCLC's LS/2000 software will enable creation and maintenance of the union catalog. Holdings of the three libraries will be accessible from terminals located in each library. The union display will be complemented by an institution-only default, which will first display to the user the titles housed in that institution.

The libraries will download cataloging through the OCLC interface, directly into the local

system.

Telecommunications

The network wouldn't exist if it had no way to connect the libraries. The connection system used by WNCLN is the state-wide data communications network operated by the University of North Carolina Educational Computing Service (UNC-ECS), an agency which also offers services to non-UNC institutions. The telecommunications network is known as LINC NET, and will provide access to the libraries of the UNC system, once all are on-line.

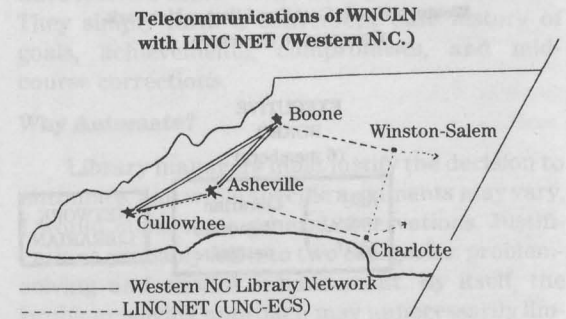


Figure 2

WNCLN will add additional high grade lines between the institutions, and use quad switching multiplexers (QSMs) to communicate between the libraries. The QSMs automatically calculate the most efficient route for message traffic. There will also be two lines connecting ASU to each of the remote locations, WCU and UNC-A. A single line will run between WCU and UNC-A to provide additional backup.

Redundancy is characteristic of LINC NET. The redundancy in the library network is considered crucial to the success of the shared system. All three libraries are well aware of the quirks of nature that periodically disable telephone connections and cause power outages. These interferences are perilous to electronic messages under any circumstances. To carry messages successfully over hundreds of miles of mountainous terrain requires several levels of backup. The two remote institutions are particularly sensitive to the potential problems, and view the redundancy as essential, and not at all frivolous.

Governance

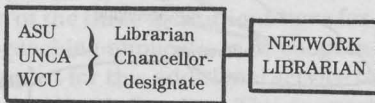
The governance of WNCLN consists of even representation, not only institutionally, but across library functions. The structure is neither unique nor revolutionary. It functions. Although the current membership of the network contains three state-supported universities, the bylaws do not preclude membership in the network by other libraries.

Documentation for the network consists of a set of bylaws and a memorandum of understanding agreed to by the administrations of each institution. These two documents describe the structure outlined below.

The executive board directs and controls the affairs of the network, and is responsible for financial decisions. It is a six-member group, composed of the library directors of each library and a representative appointed by the chancellor of each institution.

**Western North Carolina Library Network
Governance Structure**

EXECUTIVE
BOARD
(6 members)



NETWORK ADVISORY COMMITTEE
(6 members)

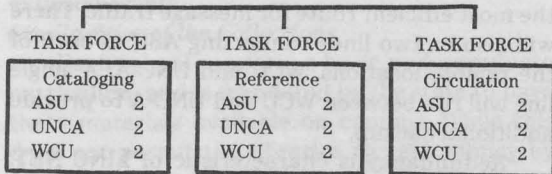
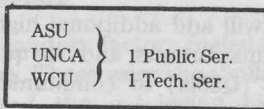


Figure 3

The network advisory committee is composed of a public and technical services representative from each library, appointed by the director of each library. The network advisory

committee deals with operational and technical issues, and is advisory on all matters to the executive board. The chair of the network advisory committee attends meetings of the executive board.

A network librarian, hired by and reporting to the executive board, is responsible for operational aspects of the central computer, in addition to supplementing training and maintaining communication about the network with the staffs of the libraries.

Areas of specialized or technical interest are monitored by task forces, which are authorized by the executive board. These task forces report to the network advisory committee, and consist of even institutional representation, usually two delegates from each library. The task forces function as long as they are required. There are currently three task forces authorized: cataloging, circulation, reference.

Conclusion

This is the end of the beginning of the Western North Carolina Library Network. Its origin has been described, the reasons why it came to be outlined. Its structure, purpose and plans have also been explained.

No one would be so rash as to pronounce this network a complete, unqualified success, especially when it has only just begun. The sense of accomplishment that goes with seeing that job well begun and the sense of pride in watching the library staffs become accustomed to the idea of being a part of something larger than the library, has been gratifying. They have seen the time and energy devoted to planning and to maintaining communication pay off. Without communication, wide open, the good with the bad, a project like this could not have reached the first agreement, let alone manage to write a proposal for a system. If the axiom "well begun is half done" holds true, the Western North Carolina Library Network is halfway there.

Book Week

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