Rethinking Collaboration: Lessons from the Field

C. Kurt Dewhurst

One of the most overused words in the public sector today is collaboration. Moreover, it is actually often misused in its overuse. In the realm of cultural work, funding agencies, governmental units, and the public express their appreciation and even expectation that "collaboration" yields greater dividends—usually greater impact. But the desire to "collaborate" is rarely as simple as it seems. Often, when one organization approaches another asking "will you collaborate with us," it is really asking "will you cooperate with us—will you lend your institution's resources, endorsement, and energies to our project?" This is not collaboration.

At the Michigan State University Museum, our staff has been guided by a deep commitment to extend the resources of our museum well beyond the walls of the museum buildings... in fact, well beyond the regional campus community. We describe our museum as a "living museum without walls." Many of our projects involve collaborations with small or emerging rural cultural centers, museums, libraries, associations, or organizations. There is a distinctive dimension to this work. We now have experience with many collaborations and have found that each is unique and that the journey is filled with discovery, surprises, growth, and even momentary setbacks.

The Collaboration: Investment in a Process

Many lessons can be learned along the road to true collaboration. The very act of dedication to collaboration is risk taking, time consuming, personally and professionally challenging, and yet, in the end, usually more rewarding than our solitary institutional efforts. We have learned that a commitment to equal collaboration requires ongoing honest assessment, corrective actions, and a great deal of flexibility. One has to be open to reconsider how projects are conceived and how meaningful... collaborations... require that we all leave our "experience" at the door as we begin to explore each partner's resources in new terms.

C. Kurt Dewhurst is a folklorist, professor, and cultural administrator. As director of the Michigan State University Museum and MSU's Center for Great Lakes Culture, he directs both natural and cultural history activities that range from local community work to international collaborations. He has sought to broaden the museum's reach with his collaborative philosophy that helps shape museum partnerships and extend cultural programming to new audiences. He is a council member on the Michigan Council for Arts and Cultural Affairs and the Michigan Humanities Council. He serves on the Advisory Board of the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage and is the vice chair of the Fund for Folk Culture. Among his current activities are research for an exhibition on Native American basketmaking traditions and collaboration with South African museums, archives, and cultural centers in the areas of training, research, and exhibition development.
rural artists and cultural organizations begin with a shared idea. Our museum always approaches these projects with the view that the shared vision is the start of a long-term, ongoing relationship. An approach that values the long view and a potential long-term relationship is perhaps the most challenging new paradigm to cultivate. John Carver, a leading figure on organizational theory, has written, "The greatest difficulty may be in shifting from old to new paradigms. Successful strategic leadership demands powerful engagement with trusteeship, obsessive concern over results, enthusiastic empowerment of people, bigness in embracing the far sighted view, and the commitment to take a stand for tomorrow's human condition." Today, more than ever, we need to initiate collaborations with mutual and equal respect for the people involved from both/all collaborators, a commitment to the "bigness in embracing the far sighted view," and perhaps most important—a belief that responds to community and human needs.

Equal Collaborations Do Not Mean Equal Size

In most instances, collaborative partnerships begin with two or more organizations/institutions agreeing to explore mutual shared interests. More often than not, one collaborating organization is much larger and often has more conventional institutional resources than the other. One organization is perceived as the institution with the most resources (staff, budget, facilities, professional expertise, and experience). These kinds of collaborations are more typical than those in which the collaborators are of equal or similar size.

In our experience, our museum has been viewed as the "historically advantaged institution"—the big elephant in a small savannah. We are conditioned to produce products—research, exhibits, publications, educational programs, and outreach services on our own with our own well-practiced patterns of work. Newly proposed collaborations usually require that we all leave our "experience" (often this means sense of "power") at the door as we begin to explore each partner's resources in new terms. The smaller, community-based rural organization usually has a wealth of unrecognized resources, including a deep understanding of its rural community—its people, the built environment, the social organizations, local traditions, the way people come together and how they interact, as well as real respect for...
Community between Two Worlds: Arab Americans of Greater Detroit co-curator Yvonne Lockwood and traditional Lebanese cook Fatma Boomrad of Dearborn at the national opening of a traveling exhibition at the Detroit Historical Museum. This exhibition was one of the unplanned outcomes of a ten-year collaboration between the MSU Museum and ACCESS (Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services) of Dearborn, Michigan. Boomrad is featured in an educational video that accompanies the exhibition.

A planning meeting at the Institute of American Indian Arts Museum in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 1999 brought community leaders of regional Native basketmakers and staff from the Michigan Traditional Arts Program at the MSU Museum together to begin a long-range project to research and document contemporary Native American basket-making traditions. The goal is to create a national touring exhibition tentatively titled Carriers of Culture: Contemporary Native Basket Traditions.

Creating a Learning Climate: Principles of Partnership

Will Phillips, an innovative scholar of organizational development and the originator of the “New Visions” program for the American Association of Museums, has argued that “best practices” among cultural institutions are those that create a true “learning climate”—a working climate in which mutual respect, honesty, responsibility, and active participation are honored and practiced. Over the past two decades, our museum has strived—and continues to strive—to establish a learning climate for our staff and for all those organizations with which we collaborate. The result of this collective experience has been a working set of principles of partnership to support effective collaboration.

These shared principles and values have helped shape projects, guide corrective actions, and yielded sustained long-term working relationships. It is worth noting that we have found that...
successful collaborations set the stage for respectful and sustained partnerships. A version of these Principles of Partnership has come to guide not only our rural partnerships but also our state, national, and international partnerships because these principles cut across geography and cultural experience.5

PRINCIPLES OF PARTNERSHIP

EQUITY

Mutuality. At the beginning of every collaboration, time must be devoted to developing a clear understanding of what each organization can contribute to the effort. This begins with fundamental appreciation that everyone who participates has something to offer.

Reciprocity. At the very heart of successful collaborations is the understanding that one of its key tests will be the direct benefit that each organization gains. Ideally, these reciprocal rewards, while often not the same, will enrich each participating organization in both expected and unexpected ways.

Representation. The most successful collaborations bring all relevant stakeholders to the table to launch and implement the collaboration. This requires thinking broadly to identify potential organizational representatives, members of the community who will be affected, and those in leadership positions who might be critical gatekeepers or resources. The tone is set early—will this be an inclusive collaboration or one dominated by the few and strongest (loudest voices)? The key to meaningful representation is established by organizational leaders. Whether all the stakeholders not only are included but also are able to express themselves must be constantly monitored.

Eighteen Michigan museums and agriculture learning centers worked together to bring Michigan State Fair visitors a living-history agricultural community called the Country Life Historic Park. Between 1992 and 1996, the park filled an area the size of a football field with living exhibits and provided fair visitors the opportunity to step back in time to observe and participate in agricultural and home life processes from the late 1800s through the first decades of the 1900s.
The FairTime Project, a long-standing collaboration between the Michigan Association of Fairs & Exhibitions, Michigan Department of Agriculture, and Michigan State University Museum, is providing resources and training within the fair industry and broadening awareness among the general public of the historic role of America’s agricultural fairs in educating citizens and building community. Access to an historic art collection made a series of exhibits possible.

IMPACT

Reach. The best collaborations usually have an impact well beyond the individual project—and the product of the collaboration. An effective collaboration tends to reach a larger audience, enrich the participants through the process, and lead to larger or continuing projects.

Skill and Human Development. Whatever collaborative project emerges, it should result in the empowerment . . . , the transformation . . . , and the building of new capacity within each participating organization.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Establishing the Framework. There should be agreement on the structure of leadership, frequency of meetings, sharing of minutes/results of planning, procedures for mediation in case of conflict, and a clearly defined leadership team. Some of the most promising collaborations are never fully realized because not enough attention is paid to conflict mediation and clarification by organizational leaders.

Belief in Collaboration. Those involved must come to the project with the belief that more can be achieved by working together than alone—and bring this perspective to the dialogue. Without a willingness to learn from one another and to “rethink” how on works to achieve broader goals, the collaboration will not likely achieve its potential.

Institutional Relationships Rather Than Individual Relationships. We all know the importance of capable and dedicated leadership. Collaborative projects, however, should not rely exclusively on a few individuals. The challenge is to build broad institutional engagement to ensure the long-term potential of collaboration. This is especially critical to establish longer-term working relationships and effective partnerships.

COMMUNICATION

Transparency. There is a real need for open and honest expression of aspirations, expectations, and a process to ensure ongoing review and evaluation of the project as it emerges. While it is easy to say, real transparency takes time, energy, and a desire to build a sense of trust and respect.

Continuity and Regularity. A pattern of established regular communication is

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a critical element in all successful partnerships. The establishment of a timeline, respect for deadlines, and a willingness to share concerns as well as successes on a continuing basis should be a goal.

Continual Consultation. Consultation not just within organizations but across participating organizations should be the norm. New relationships demand investments of time, energy, and good will.

Final Thoughts on Effective Collaborations

The rewards of effective collaborations for our museum have been truly extraordinary. We now have colleagues in rural areas around the state who frequently refer other rural organizations to us as resources—or even as potential new collaborative partners. This is not to say that all our work has been harmonious. We are all individuals with our own aspirations, hopes, and desires—some of which are not realized as collaborations take shape and proceed.

And yet, the scorecard indicates that the power, potential outcomes, and challenges of collaborations are indeed real and worth the risk and investment.

Sometimes the smallest things are the most frequent stumbling blocks. The lack of mutually agreed upon statements of credits for a collaboration frequently overshadow impressive outcomes. We have learned the critical importance of agreeing on how we will describe our collaboration—in print—early on, and we stick to this language from the first news release to the final products, whether they are exhibits, programs, publications, or media products.

Another lesson learned over the years is the importance of having a mechanism to address conflict or misunderstanding. This usually involves having a Memorandum of Understanding in place among the partners that reaffirms the ambitions and goals for the project—which each partner will contribute—and how conflict will be addressed. Sometimes it needs to be revised, but it provides a valuable

Willard "Bill" Finch who participated in Masters of the Building Arts, a living exhibition within the 2002 Great Lakes Folk Festival (East Lansing), presented demonstrations of restoration work in wood, stone, brick, metal, plaster, paint, glass, and clay. This project has been a collaboration between the MSU Museum and the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution (Washington, D.C.), as well as numerous master artisans and their respective building-trade professional unions and associations.
framework to clarify and verify how we want to collaborate. While never pleasant, conflict on some level is natural with collaboration. We have learned that it is important to have a procedure—a safety valve—for understanding that concerns are shared with the project leaders from each partner organization and that both their respective directors/administrators will be the mediators/arbitrators. This helps to ensure that any small concern does not grow into an obstacle to the shared outcomes that each partner expects.

Conclusion
The opportunity to collaborate has been seized by many institutions and has become an accepted professional practice in the cultural heritage sector—not only in the United States but now in many countries around the world. Although true collaboration still requires the surrender of control and the taking of risks, the dividends in terms of personal and institutional growth far outweigh the risks. However, in order to empower and develop sustainable rural arts and cultural institutions/organizations, our larger arts and cultural organizations need to take the plunge and engage in meaningful and ongoing partnerships with smaller and emerging rural arts and cultural organizations. Our experience has been a long and winding road and yet the journey has enriched understanding of our work, our mission, and the potential for sharing resources in innovative new ways. The Principles of Partnership are offered here as both a guide and a report card for collaborations. They continue to evolve as we explore new ways of serving and engaging our audiences and established and emerging communities.

Notes

1. Many of the Michigan State University Museum collaborations with organizations such as 4-H, Native cultural organizations, grassroots quilt organizations, refugee groups, labor unions, and culturally specific organizations have been ongoing for more than a decade.


3. The Michigan State University Museum has collaborated with many smaller organizations but also with larger organizations such as the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of the American Indian, as well as with organizations of similar size such as the Michigan Historical Museum and the Michigan Association of Fairs and Expositions.


5. The bases of Principles of Partnership have been developed over a number of years of work, but were formulated as part of a major international collaboration between the Michigan State University (MSU) Museum and MATRIX, Center for Humane Letters, MSU; African Studies Center, MSU; and a dedicated group of South African cultural workers. In 1998, a planning meeting was held in Durban, South Africa (sponsored by the Andrew J. Mellon Foundation) to conduct a needs assessment for a U.S. (led by MSU with the Smithsonian Institution and Chicago Historical Society) planning meeting for a South African National Cultural Heritage training program. This binational effort provided the forum to crystalize these ideas on effective collaboration. Special thanks go to Marsha MacDowell, Mark Kornbluh, David Wiley, Peter Knupfer, John Eadie, Bob Vassen, and Melanie Shell-Weiss.