

The Arkansas Libraries Collaboration UnConference

**Amigos Fellowship Final Report
November 2009**

Submitted by

**George J. Fowler, Old Dominion University
(formerly University of Arkansas)**

BACKGROUND

Individuals interested in technology in libraries in Arkansas didn't have a venue to communicate about issues affecting them with other like-minded people. The state library conference included IT topics, but not significantly. Additionally, there was a technology conference for school librarians, but it wasn't open to others. It was this need that I wanted to meet by convening an unconference.

STRATEGY

The first step was to see if others thought the same way about our needing our own event. I conducted an informal email survey through statewide listserves to gauge interest and received sufficient responses to encourage my proceeding with convening an event.

I asked most of the early respondents if they would volunteer to help coordinate, to which most responded affirmatively. Some members were sought out to ensure representatives of academic, public, state, and K-12 institutions. By including this diversity in the planning phase, the issues addressed by the event were more likely to be inclusive of and relevant to all types of organizations and would encourage a much broader participation.

The organizing committee consisted of the following individuals:

Michael Strickland – Coordinator of State Library Services, Arkansas State Library

Sally Hawkes – Coordinator of Library Network Services, Arkansas State Library

Lisa Caldwell – Automated Services Coordinator, Springdale Public Library

Shawna Thorup – Director of Operations, Fayetteville Public Library

Jan Owens – Media Specialist, Greenwood High School

Amanda Moore – Director of Bailey Library, Hendrix College

Dennis G. Van Arsdale – Technical Services Librarian, University of Arkansas - Fort Smith

Dominique Hallett, Reference Librarian, Arkansas State University

George J. Fowler – Head, Systems Department, University of Arkansas - Fayetteville

Ronald S. Russ – Electronic and Public Services Librarian, Arkansas State University

EXECUTION

The first issue identified was funding. To that end, we petitioned the state library association and AMIGOS for funding. We were fortunate to receive funding from both associations, which covered setup, supplies, and lunch and morning and afternoon refreshments.

After addressing the need for funds, we worked on the structure of the event, location, time, audience, and ways to attract participants.

In order to accommodate and attract the greatest number of participants from across the state and types of libraries, we did the following:

- Chose an unconference format to engender more participation, more timely discussions, and ease of facilitation;
- Held it at Hendrix College, which is centrally located in the state;
- Held it on July 31st, 2009, which was a slow time for all types of libraries in the state;
- Made registration free;
- Limited the event to one-day (9:00 am to 4:00 pm);
- Provided 6 hours of state-approved Continuing Education Units (CEUs) to all participants;
- Streamed the general and break-out sessions via UStream.tv.

To initiate the Collaboration UnConference “CuC” as the event was titled, the committee set up a blog to communicate information, solicit feedback, and organize registration. This not only shared the information, but also increased registrations and solicited suggestions for conversation topics.

The expectation was that the blog would remain an active collaboration tool after the CuC, where participants would post updates to projects and initiatives begun at the CuC. While a few people posted their evaluations of the CuC, itself, no one posted any collaborative information.

RESULTS

We had 75 in-person and three (3) virtual participants from all library types and from throughout the state and two neighboring states (Louisiana and Tennessee). The diversity of the participants contributed a lot to the energy and success of the event.

The initial forum was dedicated to the participants selecting the topics. On paper and in discussion, this sounded like a good idea. Unfortunately, in execution, it didn’t work as well as planned. Instead of lasting one (1) hour, it last 2.5 hours. This session was streamed and recorded via ustream.tv

Afterwards, the breakout sessions and the wrap-up session went as expected, though there were technical difficulties because not many people knew how to set up the sessions for the ustream.tv streaming and recording. They were also not very effective in speaking loud enough for the microphone to pick up. These were minor issues because the primary participants were the in-person attendees and there wasn’t much interest in viewing the events virtually, either live or recorded.

The Collaboration UnConference concluded with many exhausted, but invigorated, participants.

LESSONS LEARNED

Overall, the participants expressed their pleasure at how productive the event was. Of particular benefit was the opportunity to talk with like-minded or similarly-employed colleagues about mutually beneficial topics.

Further, an event that was practical, local, inexpensive, provided CEUs, at a convenient time was highly appreciated, with many participants indicating that it was the most productive event they had been to in many years.

We decided to have another CuC in 2010, in which 60 people participated, though opted not to stream.