Collaboration in the Community

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You don't have to look far to find news about some new library budget crisis. Websites have popped up all over supporting libraries (http://savelibraries.org/) and spreading the word (http://ilovelibraries.org/) about all that we can do for the communities we're in. These sites alone are a great testament to the collaboration abilities of librarians and the fact that we can all come together across worldwide boundaries to work cooperatively to save our libraries—but what about working with our communities and our patrons?

One of the things I like to stress when teaching librarians about open source software is the importance of the communities around these projects. Without an active community an open source project cannot thrive and grow. The same is true with libraries! We are dependent on our communities to stay open, to get funding and to provide services. In these times of crisis, why not turn to our communities for help in collaborative money-saving efforts?

In this issue, I'm going to stray from my usual practice of sharing tools for collaboration and instead talk about the value of collaborating in our communities, in particular our younger community members.

Libraries and Schools

Some states in the United States actually require that their students perform a certain number of community service hours in order to graduate high school. These students often work in libraries at the circulation desk, shelving books or even helping out with story hours. One thing that I think many libraries overlook, though, is the technical skills that these young adults have. Why not utilize to our students to help manage technology in our libraries? Systems management is a huge expense in our libraries and one for which we can easily find volunteers.

Not all states require their students to volunteer in this fashion, so why not take the initiative and work out a collaborative project with your area schools? Librarians could talk to local teachers and come up with a project for the students that will benefit both the library and the kids. In the end the students get a grade and your library benefits with some new (or newly revitalized) technology.

I'm basing my suggestions on personal experience. When I was an undergrad we had representatives from a local car dealership come into our web development class. We were broken into groups and assigned the project of providing the dealership with a new website. The group that the dealership liked the best not only got a good grade, but they got a professional website that they could put on their resume. What I didn't think about at the time was that the dealership saved thousands of dollars (which is what a website of that magnitude would have cost back then) and because they were willing to wait a semester, they got a free website.

Simple collaborations like this, between organizations and schools (colleges and high schools), promote the libraries in the schools and remind the parents and children that the library has more than just books and free Internet access to offer. These collaborative partnerships are a way for libraries to continue to keep their technology up to date and maintained despite our ever-shrinking budgets.

Get Creative

With stories of library closings all over the world, libraries need to get creative in finding ways to continue to offer superior services during tough times. Libraries don't have to limit themselves to students and schools; businesses have been known to participate in barter economies, working in trade with local organizations to promote the services of their business—and yours. We need to start thinking outside of the traditional technology vendor box and find members of our community who support the library and would like to help us keep our doors open on our newly tightened budgets.