

# TOGETHER WE ARE STRONGER

*In just a few short weeks ALIA Members and colleagues will be gathering at the ALIA National 2014 Conference in Melbourne. This month, INCITE continues our series of articles featuring our conference keynote speakers with a Q&A with Susan Benton.*

Collaboration is the theme of our conference this year and Susan Benton has significant experience to share with us on this important topic.

Susan Benton is President and CEO of the Urban Libraries Council (ULC), a membership organisation of leading public libraries in North America. With a network of the top library executives in the United States and Canada, ULC articulates the strategic role public libraries serve for strengthening their community in economic and workforce development, learning and education, citizen engagement, health and public safety.

As thought leaders and change agents, ULC libraries regularly receive accolades at the international, national and local levels. While ULC libraries primarily represent urban and suburban settings, lessons from their work are widely adapted by libraries of all sizes, including those in rural settings.

Susan Benton has worked with cities, counties and libraries for over 20 years. Her professional career is dedicated to assisting public sector executives align resources to meet the opportunities and needs of the knowledge era and bring their organisations into the 21st century. She comes to ULC from her position as Research, Development and Strategic Partners Executive at the International City/County Management Association (ICMA), the professional association of over 9,000 city and county managers around the world.

**Q. EVERYONE SEEMS TO BE TALKING ABOUT COLLABORATION. IS THIS A FAD OR AN APPROACH THAT IS HERE TO STAY?**

**A.** Good question!

When I started working with local governments in the 1980s, public-private partnerships were all the rage in many US cities. In essence, these partnerships were collaborations that were formed to address an issue that needed the expertise and resources of more than one organisation.

So, I would say that collaboration has been around for a long time but we have used different words or terms to describe the effort. And, I think collaboration is here to stay.



If anything, partnerships and collaborations are more important in the 21st century than ever. The challenges and issues that we face are so complex that it is difficult for one entity to serve as the problem-solver.

We have some formidable challenges in the United States that require knowledge and expertise from multiple disciplines. A good example is education and making sure that our children and adults are able to productively participate in the knowledge economy.

**EVERY COLLABORATION OR PARTNERSHIP THAT I HAVE PARTICIPATED IN THAT HAS BEEN SUCCESSFUL HAS HAD GREAT COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE BEGINNING TO THE END OF THE PROJECT.**

Historically, we've thought of education as being the sole responsibility of schools. There is a slow but emerging understanding that schools alone cannot do the job. The Urban Libraries Council (ULC) is participating in an initiative called Connected Learning that takes a holistic approach to how an individual gains knowledge, and the multitude of people and organisations that contribute to education. In some cities, we now have schools, libraries, museums, theatre companies, foundations and corporations working together – collaborating – to dramatically enhance the education opportunities provided in their community.

Susan Benton, seen here speaking at the Next Libraries Conference in Chicago, will be a keynote speaker at the ALIA National 2014 Conference next month.

BELOW: Left to right: Brian Bannon, Commissioner of Chicago Public Library and Rahm Emanuel, Mayor of Chicago with Susan Benton at the Next Library conference in June.



## Q. WHAT IS THE HALLMARK OF GOOD COLLABORATION?

A. I have learned a lot about collaboration during my career and I can certainly remember partnerships in which I've participated that have been less than successful. I have some hard-won lessons learned! The elements that I describe here for good collaboration would not be a surprise to any of your leaders.

It is really important to have shared values that include a commitment to transparency and communication. Every collaboration or partnership that I have participated in that has been successful has had great communications from the beginning to the end of the project. For example, the five elements that I identify here would be fully discussed and developed by the partners and written in a collaboration agreement.

## Q. WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT LIBRARIES AND COLLABORATION?

A. I would say two things now and look forward to talking further about this when I am in Australia.

One, libraries are often the most important partner in a successful collaboration. We understand the issues facing our community. In addition, we know the people who come into our libraries and we understand their lives often better than any other organisations. We have market intelligence that others need.

And two, libraries can find themselves either overcommitted on collaborations or not included on critical initiatives. In the United States, our libraries suffer from both.

## Q. ANY LAST WORDS PRIOR TO YOUR VISIT?

A. I am so looking forward to being with the Australian library community. While I have worked with public libraries in the United States for almost five years, I have a lot to learn. I know that libraries, no matter where they are located, have much in common. I hope to share stories from the US while hearing and learning from all of you.

## COLLABORATING FOR SUCCESS SUSAN BENTON'S TOP FIVE

1. Be clear about the objectives of the collaboration.
2. Have a clear understanding of the role and responsibility of each partner.
3. Articulate the strengths and assets of each of the partners.
4. Have a plan that includes key milestones and when/how/who makes decisions.
5. Be in agreement that mid-term corrections and adjustments will be required and have a process that supports this.



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