

TASK FORCE ON FUTURE VISIONS FOR DIGITAL LIBRARY PRODUCTS

REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

August 17, 2005

Charge

In February 2005, the ILCSO Board charged a small task force to “think big” about the future. Its charge follows:

ILCSO is in the process of licensing and implementing three digital library products: link resolver, federated search engine, and digital library management system. All three products are essential components of the emerging digital library so important to the future of academic libraries.

The libraries in ILCSO deal increasingly with complex local systems environments that include library resources as well as learning management systems, portals, and other campus resources. This, with the added dimensions of consortial resource sharing and shared digital library applications, poses challenges as well as opportunities. One common goal is to make these environments appear “seamless” and interconnected to our diverse user communities. It is clear that ILCSO has a firm foundation upon which the consortium can build effective services, but not without the help of a clear vision and strategy.

The Task Force on Future Visions for Digital Library Products is charged to explore these and other “big picture” issues in ways that will set context and vision for the consortium’s future direction. Rather than concern itself with details, the Task Force should concentrate on developing visions from a ‘30,000 ft’ perspective.

It is expected that the Task Force will produce a White Paper that it will deliver by June 1, 2005.

The subsequent formation of CARLI delayed delivery of this report by several months. It also provided the Task Force with the opportunity to think even “bigger” about a vision for all academic libraries in Illinois.

Vision

Users of Illinois’ academic libraries will have seamless access to an information environment that is rich in authoritative and trustable content and services, easy to use, ubiquitous, and integrated into the learning and research enterprises of their institutions.

Principles

A number of principles are important to CARLI's success in realizing this vision.

- Seamless access will be provided in a distributed environment that will appear to be centralized.
- Access must appear to be simple and be available to users at the point-of-need.
- Unless restricted by license agreements, contracts, or other restricting factors, content will be accessible by all Illinois citizens.
- Member library contribution will be critical to implement new products and services. Some services will be provided in a tiered model, with the core tier being provided as part of CARLI membership and additional tier services available at additional costs.
- There are many innovative products and services being developed by CARLI member institutions. These should be inventoried regularly and made available to other members.

Recommendations

The task force examined a number of ideas for programs and projects that will help CARLI achieve this vision. Each one recommended below is conceived to be an important component of CARLI's success in creating seamless access to an information environment that is rich in authoritative and trustable content and services, easy to use, ubiquitous, and integrated into the learning and research enterprises of their institutions.

All of these ideas, which we are presenting in priority order, are at the conceptual stage. Small and nimble planning groups will be necessary to carry out the next stages of feasibility study and implementation strategy planning.

1. Create a large data base of images to support learning and teaching in all disciplines

We envision this collection to be comprised of images that are publicly available for free or for a price and images that are owned and/or created on members' campuses. Rich metadata will be harvested by leading-edge and reliable tools. Images will be added on a continuous basis and the service likely will require intellectual curation as well as technical attention. Although the images will be stored on more than one, possibly many, servers throughout the state, access will be universal and will appear to the user as a single source.

This project has the very real potential to save campuses and institutions in the state from re-creating in the digital environment the overlapping and ubiquitous slide collections that now exist. Teachers and students throughout the state would ultimately have access to images that support studies in disciplines from art history to medicine and encompass all areas of the world and time periods.

Grant funds should be sought from state, federal, and foundation sources, although it must be recognized that grant sources likely will not provide sustaining funds. Targets of opportunity for funding from the state might be possible by focusing some projects on Illinois-related image collections: art, buildings, literary figures, representations of ethnic groups, and the like.

Because of the ultimate enormity of the data base and the complicated economics (i.e., a mix of 'free' and costly resources), we recommend that this resource be built in tiers, with a 'core' base of images that will be accessible at no cost above CARLI's basic membership fees; consideration should be given to making this accessible to all Illinois citizens. Additional tiers will be accessible with payment of additional fees.

Attention will need to be paid up front to digital rights management to control access to copyrighted or otherwise restricted materials while enabling free and open access to the greatest extent possible.

2. Build a repository of Illinois digital materials

An ever-increasing volume of born-digital and digitized content related to Illinois is being produced, but unless we act aggressively to preserve and archive it, Illinois' digital heritage is in danger of disappearing. The task of saving everything is daunting. Therefore, we recommend that CARLI build a theme-based service and concentrate early efforts on identifying, locating, seeking permissions, providing access, and preserving and archiving pertinent digital content. Examples of themes include history, literature, ethnic groups, theses and dissertations produced at CARLI member institutions, popular culture, agriculture, industry, web sites of politicians running for state or national office, and digital versions of manuscripts created only digitally by Illinois authors.

Here we present another daunting task, but one that is critically important to current and subsequent generations of students, faculty, and the citizens of Illinois. We recommend, as we did above, that the CARLI board move swiftly to create a small team to move this idea beyond the concept stage towards a working model. Several CARLI members are experienced in creating similar services for their campuses and should be called on to provide assistance.

Grant funding should be sought for the start-up phases of this resource-based service and opportunities for funding specific 'themes' should be pursued. Partnering with the Illinois State Library, the Illinois Library Systems Organization (ILSDO) and individual libraries, museums and historical societies will be an important success factor with this initiative.

3. Advance work to create simple and seamless access to resources provided to and by CARLI members

Today, we present our users with a dazzling and confusing arrays of entry points to the myriad resources we make available to them. Implementation of WebFeat will reduce those arrays but not eliminate them. Contemporary students, faculty, and yes, even librarians, demonstrate daily their preference for Google's simple entry box on a white page. We think it is important to develop new Google-like front ends that will be both easy to use and effective in retrieving content. The interface and search engine needed to provide the advanced access we envision probably does not yet exist. CARLI needs to be vigilant in monitoring the state-of-the-art in this area and the organization must push development of the desired new technologies with the vendor community and beyond.

4. Build a collection of learning objects developed in CARLI institutions

Using the concepts tested by Merlot (<http://www.merlot.org/Home.po>), and Rice University's Connexions (<http://cnx.rice.edu/>), build a free and open resource designed primarily for faculty and students of higher education, containing learning materials along with annotations such as peer reviews and assignments. In this facility, authors (which includes librarians) will be able to publish and collaborate, instructors could rapidly build and share custom applets and courses which can be used and reused by members of the greater CARLI community, and learners will be empowered to explore the links among concepts, courses, and disciplines.

5. Develop and keep current a data base of tools and products developed in CARLI member libraries and available for use by CARLI members.

CARLI members are home to many talented librarians and other staff members who continuously develop new tools, products, and techniques that help improve access to library content. Finding effective ways to share this expertise and extending the availability of these items to all CARLI members will improve service to all who use Illinois academic libraries and builds on the best practice of collaboration in the consortium. It is premature to estimate the values and costs of this service. The CARLI board should create a small team to investigate the feasibility of this idea.

6. Develop ways to enhance CARLI staffing and capabilities

The CARLI staff is a talented, but small group. It will require additional talented people to develop any of these recommended services, or any others, but the staff capabilities needed for each service differs one to the other. We recommend using different approaches to involving talented people in these enterprises.

- Create opportunities for librarians and other staff in CARLI libraries to spend 3-6+ months as Visiting Program Officers, assigned to work on specific projects or to carry out research and writing on topics that relate to CARLI's work. VPO salaries will continue to be paid by their home institution with small stipends for 'release time' provided to those institutions by CARLI.
- Work with UIUC's GSLIS as it develops a new curriculum and programs for training digital librarians. Offer internships to students and one-year appointments to new graduates
- Develop a post-doctoral program designed to attract new PhDs who will work on the content development aspects of CARLI's services and programs. Identify ways to expose post-docs to broader aspects of librarianship and encourage them to explore librarianship as a career choice.

Conclusion

CARLI has many opportunities to use its collective power and resources to achieve the vision of providing seamless access to an information environment that is rich in authoritative and trustable content and services, easy to use, ubiquitous, and integrated into the learning and research enterprises of their institutions. The ideas we have offered are designed to move this new organization to new heights of service as it develops new resource sharing models for the rest of the country to emulate.

Respectfully submitted,

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