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Coalition for Networked Information

Summary Report of the December 8, 2003
CNI Executive Roundtable on Institutional Repositories

The CNI Executive Roundtable is an opportunity for roughly ten institutional teams composed of paired senior library and information technology leaders to hold a focused discussion on a topic of current interest. These Roundtables are intended to inform the participating institutions and through the meeting summaries the broader community, and to provide insights that can help to shape the Coalition's program. In the interest of candid discussion, we do not record actual minutes of these meetings, and do not normally attribute observations to specific institutions.

The topic for the December 8, 2003 Roundtable was institutional repositories. Among the specific issues discussed were:

- constructing the case for institutional repositories within the campus community
- varying strategic approaches to getting started in repository activities (for example, an initial focus on different sectors of the campus community or different types of content)
- policy questions raised by institutional repositories
- funding questions, models, and strategies
- organizational collaborations needed to make progress
- roles and responsibilities of different organizational units in the repository effort
- preservation plans
- prospects and directions for inter-institutional collaboration, both in developing repositories and in federating institutional repositories in various ways

Below are some of the key points that emerged from the discussion.

In many ways, discussing "institutional repositories" is misleading, in that the term is too limiting and focuses on a tool rather than the strategic imperative, which is planning for institution-wide digital asset management and developing both infrastructure components and a range of applications to support this.

There is a good deal of commonality in the long-term vision of how institutional repositories might ultimately evolve, but the first steps that institutions are taking vary widely and are strongly driven by local institutional culture and priorities.

There was a range of opinion and some very interesting observations about building the case for institutional repositories. Many participants believed that pilot projects were a particularly effective strategy; at the same time, there was a great deal of concern expressed about how we were developing de facto institutional repositories in inappropriate settings (for example, using proprietary learning management systems). There was also discussion about when to shift from a bottom-up pilot project approach to a more systematic and institution-wide one. Questions were raised about whether it

was appropriate to frame institutional repositories as new initiatives (requiring new funding) as opposed to simply new expressions of ongoing core responsibilities. One participant also observed that "we did not build the case for the Web."

We need a much better understanding of the high-level architectural issues involved in digital asset management - services, roles, components, and interrelationships. For example, it seems clear that there are a number of infrastructure components (i.e. identifier management, perhaps some abstractions of storage systems) that could serve a wide range of digital asset management applications, not just institutional repository systems, and we should be thinking about articulating and designing such services explicitly as infrastructure that will support this broader context. Other applications that might share infrastructure with institutional repositories include learning management systems, departmental or research-project-based repositories, or various kinds of records management or data management systems.

The boundaries of institutional repositories are going to be very problematic. It is clear that the large scale science initiatives proceeding under banners such as "cyberinfrastructure" or "e-science" will lead to a growing number of repositories for various materials organized and managed along disciplinary lines. At the same time, it is equally clear that there will be a great deal of material that doesn't fit within the available constellation of disciplinary repositories, and that this constellation of disciplinary resources will change over time; responsibility for managing this material will fall primarily to specific higher education institutions. A high priority should be establishing conversations with funding agencies, leading Principal Investigators, and Vice Provosts of Research to try to ensure that disciplinary and institutional efforts are coordinated, follow common standards and architectures where possible, and evolve in a complementary fashion. We will need to understand how and when transitions of materials between institutional and disciplinary systems should take place. There are also questions here involving funding agency mandates and responsibilities for the preservation and distribution of digital assets and how these should be reflected in determination and allocation of indirect costs.

In a sense, the institutional repository is part of the public view of an organization's digital assets. A number of policy issues surrounding the image of an institution (or units within the institution) emerge in this context, just as they have with Web sites. Socially, politically or artistically controversial materials are an obvious example, but there are many others. For example, a department may become very concerned about its reputation as expressed by material in a repository and attempt to establish review/refereeing procedures, which will slow down dissemination and potentially transform a review process that is traditionally disciplinary in scope to one that is institutional. We need to be very careful about the boundaries between scholarly publishing and repositories.

There are also boundary problems between institutions that follow from faculty collaborating across institutions. Faculty members also move frequently from one institution to another. We need to think hard about how to define institutional responsibility in these settings and about how institutions relate to each other and distribute effort in support of the collaborations of their faculty.

The Roundtable discussion illuminated a number of interesting policy issues connected to access management and stewardship of materials. We have tended in the past to

focus very much on traditional legal rights (e.g. copyright): Do we have permission to host the material and make it available? Who owns the rights? These questions are problematic enough as we deal with material that faculty may also place with publishers, material with multiple authors (including students), and material that has been created elsewhere that higher education institutions would like to adopt and take responsibility for. But it also becomes clear that as we deal with scholarly material we must consider ethical questions and disciplinary and institutional norms; consider here problems involving cultural heritage materials or field observations from ethnographic or anthropological research. How do we deal with policies that say "anyone may use this material, provided that it is treated and presented with respect and not re-used out of context"? It is clear that we will need an extended dialogue with scholars across the disciplines on these topics.

In terms of collaboration between institutions, one key opportunity is for institutions to work together to promote an organized dialogue with funding agencies and with specific scholarly disciplines (as represented both by individual disciplinary leaders and by scholarly and professional societies). CNI can play a valuable role in facilitating this collaboration and these discussions.

CNI Executive Roundtables, held at CNI's semi-annual membership meetings, bring together a group of campus partners, usually senior library and information technology leaders, to discuss a key digital information topic and its strategic implications. The roundtables build on the theme of collaboration that is at the foundation of the Coalition; they serve as a forum for frank, unattributed intra and inter-institutional dialogue on digital information issues and their organizational and strategic implications. In addition, CNI uses roundtable discussions to inform our ongoing program planning process.

The Coalition for Networked Information (CNI) is a joint program of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) and EDUCAUSE that promotes the use of information technology to advance scholarship and education. Some 200 institutions representing higher education, publishing, information technology, scholarly and professional organizations, foundations, and libraries and library organizations, make up CNI's members. Learn more at cni.org.