COLLABORATIVE PORTAL PROJECTS

Most libraries implement portals for the benefit of their own patrons and staff members, but a few collaborative projects exist that are designed to benefit multiple institutions' patrons and staff members.

Among these, the three most important are the Association of Research Libraries Scholars Portal Project, the Agricultural Network Information Center (AgNIC), and the OCLC Public Library Portal. The last one is solely for the benefit of library staff members.

ARL Scholars Portal Project

One of the most significant developments in portal technology for libraries was the establishment of the Association of Research Libraries' (ARL) Scholars Portal Working Group in 2000. The project was launched by several ARL member libraries in collaboration with ARL and Fretwell-Downing, a portal vendor.

The group's goal is to advance a collective research library presence on the Web. The rationale is, in part, to respond to the danger of academic research libraries losing their constituencies to commercial information services in the Web environment.

Campbell's white paper, www.arl.org/newsltr/211/portal

The idea was first advanced by Jerry Campbell, chief information officer and Dean of University Libraries, University of Southern California, in a white paper in which he asked the ARL membership to consider what role the association should play in portal development for the scholarly community.

Campbell argued for a collaborative approach and that research librarians are better qualified to create a scholars portal than anyone else. He suggested that the portal should:

- Include high-quality content
- Be based on standards
- Search across multiple and disparate databases
- Offer many supporting tools
- Offer enhanced support services (such as digital reference)
- Integrate electronic thesauri

The portal should be "the place to start for anyone seeking academically sound information," he writes. After the white paper was published, a series of discussions followed at subsequent ARL meetings that culminated in the establishment of the Scholars Portal Working Group.

Two principles were established as the foundation for the working group:

- Access to disparate electronic resources and services can be improved through integration, both within a single institution and across multiple institutions.

- Efforts to effect such integration should leverage work already being carried out in ARL libraries.

The initial step was defined in spring 2001 as the development of a super discovery tool, one that could search, aggregate, integrate, and deliver licensed and openly available digital content across a range of subject fields and from many institutions. The working group agreed that ARL should not develop the tool itself but should identify potential partners for collaborating in the development.

The core feature of the tool should be the ability to query two distinct streams of electronic resources:

- Universal stream of unrestricted resources from websites targeted for quality and academic relevance
- Local stream of information, access to which is restricted to local users by license or other agreement

Another feature subsequently determined was the ability to map a search against different types of metadata.

More than 30 products were identified, but the number was soon narrowed because many products organized only internal records or searched only Web resources. Ten organizations and companies were identified that might be potential partners with the working group on the development of the scholars portal.

In mid-2001, the working group decided to work with one vendor rather than working with two or more, or simply calling for competition in the marketplace. Later in 2001, the ARL board of directors accepted several recommendations from the working group. These recommendations included:

- Discuss a collaborative exploration with the preferred vendor to lead to a project funded entirely by the participating libraries.
- Begin discussions with the preferred vendor about the details of the project with the goal of beginning a project in the fall of 2001.
- Develop evaluation criteria.
- Evaluate the results.

The board selected Fretwell-Downing Informatics, but contract negotiations were more protracted than expected. A contract wasn't signed until April 2002. Participating ARL members are the Universities of Southern California, California at San Diego, Arizona, and Utah; Dartmouth College; and Arizona State and Iowa State universities. Additional participants may join the group.

Implementation began in the fall of 2002 with the goal of demonstrating the viability of the scholars portal during the three-year life of the project.

Many other ARL members have already launched portals independently of the Scholars Portal Project, including the Universities of Alberta, California at Los Angeles, California at Riverside, Illinois, Kentucky, and Oklahoma; Pennsylvania State, Auburn, Cornell, Duke, Laval, Vanderbilt, Case Western, and Brigham Young universities; and Boston College.

Eight of these universities have had their portals in productive use for more than one year. Most of these portals can be accessed from anywhere in the country. But many of the resources are restricted to the faculty, students, and staffs of the institutions.

Scholars Portal Working Group, www.arl.org/access/scholarsportal

Libraries interested in keeping up with portal development benefit from the collective approach of the Scholars Portal Working Group because of its website, where information about project progress is available. The website will be particularly useful for consortia that are pursuing portal technology as a way of sharing resources.

Agricultural Network Information Center

AgNIC, www.agnic.org

The Agriculture Network Information Center (AgNIC) is a collaborative effort among the National Agricultural Library (NAL), land-grant universities, and other agricultural organizations. AgNIC has 29 fully contributing partner institutions and 11 supporting partner organizations. It focuses on providing agricultural information in electronic format over the Web.

Rather than building a single database at NAL, the participants take responsibility for small vertical segments of agricultural information. For example, the following schools took these subjects:

University	Database maintained
Cornell University	Tropical soils
Iowa State University	Swine
Michigan State University	Cherries
National Agricultural Library	Plant genetics
New Mexico State University	Chili peppers
Ohio State University	Bees and pollination
University of Pennsylvania	State turfgrass
Purdue University	Aquaculture
Texas A&M	Agribusiness
University of Arizona	Rangeland management

A dozen other participants cover a range of topics. Several of the participants have committed to more than one topic. The collective resource benefits all the participants in ways that they cannot achieve on their own, which justifies the local costs of participation.

AgNIC, conceived in 1993 and launched in 1995, is one of the earliest uses of the Internet for the sharing of information. By 2002, it had 38 subject-based websites, some with multiple databases. Each website had to be searched separately. Given the large number of sources, the participants set as their goal the creation of a single point of access for users.

The databases use many different hardware platforms, operating systems, database management systems, and applications software. Combining all the databases on one server was not practical, nor did the participants want to transfer responsibility to a single entity. They needed to develop a portal that would make possible the use a single search engine to access the various databases and to search across databases. NAL assumed that responsibility and installed an AgNIC server at its facility in Maryland in mid-2002.

A patron has the option of doing a simple or advanced keyword search. The advanced search supports truncation, partial word, and exact phrase

searching. Case sensitivity is also supported. Results can be sorted by relevance or alphabetically by title.

Its thesaurus will provide not only broader, narrower, and related terms, but also preferred terms. For example, a search on "genetic engineering" directs the searcher to "biotechnology" as the preferred term and offers "genetically modified organisms," "molecular genetics," and "tissue culture" as related terms.

The simple and advanced search screen also offers browsing by subject in broad areas such as animal and veterinary sciences, aquaculture and fisheries, food and human nutrition, forestry, and plant sciences. A listing of all the participants and their areas of specialization is just one click away from the first search screen.

All the development work was done at NAL. The AgNIC portal is based entirely on open-source software and supports standards such as the Open Archives Initiative and Dublin Core. The interface can be customized by the participants for their staff and patrons, or by individual users. The participants also can modify the result-set ranking weights.

The portal also supports a discussion channel for use by the participating organizations.

OCLC Public Library Portal

Academic libraries are not the only ones that may have a multi-institutional portal. OCLC received a $9 million Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation grant in May 2002 to develop a Web-based, public access computing portal for public libraries. The portal will serve library staff, rather than patrons.

OCLC,
www.oclc.org

The portal will address five critical areas:

- Continuing education
- Technical support
- Purchasing
- Capacity building
- Community building

The portal will include information, an online tutorial, message boards, and access to expert help. During the next three years, OCLC will work with four partners to plan, develop, operate, and evaluate the portal. The partners are the Colorado State Library, Benton Foundation, Isoph, and TechSoup.

The Colorado State Library, which is part of the Colorado Department of Education, contributes expertise and money to the OCLC project because it wants public library staffs to have a source for reliable information that will help them do their jobs. (It is still developing its own portal, but that project is not relevant to the description of the OCLC project.) The Benton Foundation is interested in solving social problems through communication. It considers libraries an important medium for providing information to problem solvers and citizens. Isoph is a for-profit company that produces information technology products for nonprofit organizations. And TechSoup is a nonprofit organization that provides technology information to nonprofit organizations. It is funded by the AOL TimeWarner Foundation and Microsoft Giving.

Colorado State Library,
www.cde.state.co.us.