DALNET, the Information Hub

The Detroit Area Library Network, DALNET, is a consortium of academic, public, and special libraries located in Southeast Michigan. Founded as a non-profit corporation in 1985, DALNET initially enabled its members to better serve the information needs of their users through cooperative efforts among multi-type libraries in the Metropolitan Detroit area with its shared advanced library automation applications. At that point, DALNET had over ten years of experience running a shared integrated library system and fostering cooperation and innovation in a complex environment.

From 1985 through mid-1998, DALNET had a single online catalog maintained by a central site host institution as part of its integrated library services. However, when DALNET converted to a new online product in '98, each library had its own online catalog but the catalogs were still hosted at the same central site. This transition to stand-alone catalogs added complexity to patrons searching as additional steps were required to view what is available outside of the home institution or public library site.

Following a planning retreat in late 2002, the environment changed when the two largest institutions in DALNET announced their intent to purchase and implement new computer system software, software different from one another and different from the remaining DALNET members. Internet access to three different online systems has posed only minor problems, while the loss of the significant economic support of the two largest DALNET institutions has put the organization not only into financial crisis but faced with questions on how or whether the members would continue to work cooperatively when the main focus of the organization had always been serving the public through a shared system.

After months of financial review and staff downsizing, discussions of options and host site location, the Board members determined it would be advantageous to again have a single catalog for those members sharing the same software and the Board is currently pursuing that goal. The two largest institutions, although on different systems, also reiterated their continued support and membership in DALNET. With all this settled, DALNET will need to slightly adjust its vision for itself to a DALNET that is decentralized but highly collaborative and a well-managed urban information network whose members, through partnership and shared effort are committed to a role as a model regional information hub.

Even while the minds and efforts of many Board members were occupied with the changing of systems, addressing the planning retreat results and follow up investigation, the development of the information hub concept went forward. The HUB Committee established ten goals to move the organization toward a realization of the DALNET Information Hub. These goals included development of an array of image databases, a collection development plan that includes a set of criteria for selecting HUB projects, a process for funding digitization projects, a plan to secure a search engine and user interface that will allow users to search across the various HUB databases in an integrated fashion, and others. Planning for the development of the HUB and work on HUB projects went on simultaneously. For example, the DALNET Health Calendar Project, an online events calendar where organizations that provide health-related events to citizens in the seven county Detroit metropolitan area went live during the planning process. This

ongoing project continues to require a strong cooperative effort between DALNET and many social and health-related organizations and has become a major repository of health-related information for the community.

Another aspect of the Information Hub concept is the commitment to an evolving collection of electronic resources. Residents of the DALNET libraries' service areas reside in an area rich with special collections related to the cultural and economic history of the area, however, many of these collections are not publicly viewable due to fragility caused by age and or light sensitivity or have not been identified with user friendly access points. DALNET, in trying to address this situation, established three state-of-the art digitizing facilities at the three largest member libraries. In order to maximize the benefit of establishing the three digital laboratories, and to ensure compatibility of hardware and software, representatives from the three institutions jointly determined the equipment specifications. The three host institutions agreed that the use of the equipment and software purchased would be shared with DALNET staff and other DALNET member libraries' staff for their digitization projects. In May 2001, the IHC ranked the seven top DALNET digital projects on which its members should focus. Four of the projects have been completed, one project has the text images completed with the metadata currently being developed, but the remaining two have seen no activity. What is most encouraging is that six additional digitization projects which were not part of the original ranking have been put online by the members.

The Michigan Library Exchange (MiLE) is an innovate program of resource sharing in Southeastern Michigan where two library cooperatives, the Suburban Library Cooperative and the OWLS Region of Cooperation are partners with DALNET in serving over fifty-one percent of the population of Michigan. In this program the participating groups have created the linkages necessary to allow for patron initiated interlibrary loan that seamlessly integrates with the local library systems. With these linkages, a virtual catalog of libraries in six counties (serving 3.7 million patrons) was created. To enhance the information hub concept of serving the community, each of the partners joined an existing truck resource delivery service offered by The Library Network. As a statewide document delivery system was established in October 2004, the three partners moved to serving an even broader community.

DALNET is working in a new environment with different automated systems, fewer staff members to complete the required work, and member representatives stepping forward to pick up assignments previously handled by staff members. Another significant change has been the loss to the consortium of the expertise and contributions of members of the largest institutions and a different political environment where Board members do not get to vote on every issue, only issues in which their particular institution participates. But, in spite of these changes, the values and principles to which the DALNET membership subscribes have not changed. DALNET principles continue to place the highest priority on service, including, end-user research, recreational reading needs, commitment to research sharing and providing ease of access to information. DALNET strives to recognize partner diversity, maintain flexibility in implementation of initiatives, build strength based on common goals and needs, be creative and provide leadership in information issues within Michigan.

This summary of DALNET has been taken from DALNET program proposals, project plans, planning retreat, minutes of meetings, and its brochure, "DALNET, the Detroit Area Library Network: One Region Sharing the World."