Collaborative Structures:
Many Ways, Common Paths

by *Alexander Goldowsky Ed.D.* and *Betsy Loring*

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* In addition to collaborative and exhibition websites, where available, this chart is based on: Coats (1994); Dierking (1997); Pacific Science Center (1997); Aloia, G.F. (2003); Carroll, et al. (2005); Trautmann, et al. (2005); St. John (2008); Dianne LaFollette, Network Coordinator Arkansas Discovery Network, personal communication, Sept.10 & 23, 2009; Sherry Marshall, Director, Oklahoma Museum Network, personal communication, Oct. 1 & 5, 2009, Feb. 1, 2012 and the authors' personal experience with EEC and Exhibit Lab.

Not all happy collaborations are alike. After years of coordinating the Environmental Exhibit Collaborative (EEC), the authors have researched a range of other exhibit collaborative models. While each project may be unique, we found it useful to make some basic classifications; groupings that reflect the role that each partner plays in the collaborative structure. Is one model best? It depends on the participants, their goals and capacities.

As Pearson points out in the accompanying article (2012) starting or joining an exhibition collaborative is a major strategic decision. Time, money and the quality of exhibitions in your museum, not to mention staff sanity, are all at stake. At the outset it is worth reflecting on the range of approaches that have been tried. In thinking about the models in the table below, or a new model, you might start by asking the following questions:

- Do the member institutions have roughly equal roles—or are roles purposely asymmetrical (e.g. hub and spoke models)?

- What roles are centralized? Even in a group of "equal" partners someone has to keep track of schedules and accounts.

- What structures are in place to maintain quality, and how are decisions made so as to insure products work for all members?

- Is each museum responsible for developing a whole exhibition (e.g. Build and Swap models) or is it a shared task (e.g. Collaborative Development)?

- Are staff development and capacity-building explicit goals in addition to developing exhibits?

This table is not intended to be definitive in terms of the classifications or examples used. We present it as an outgrowth of the research we did in setting up and running an exhibition collaborative, and as a starting point for dialog. We would welcome hearing about other examples, ideas, and experiences.

Exhibit Collaborative Structure Examples*		
Exhibit Development Model	**Examples**	**Notes**
Hire Out: Exhibitions developed, designed, and built by outside contractor, overseen by staff of the small and mid-sized member museums.	**Arkansas Discovery Network**-Round 1; **Oklahoma Museum Network**-Round 2	Funded to provide access to quality traveling exhibitions for members and increase expertise in exhibit development for member museums with varying levels of experience in this area.

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Exhibit Development Model	**Examples**	**Notes**
Buy Turnkey Components: Each small or mid-sized museum selects off-the-shelf exhibit elements to illustrate a theme, and then creates a storyline and graphic elements to unify.	**Arkansas Discovery Network-** Round 2; **Oklahoma Museum Network-** Round 1	Same institutions, funding and goals as above. Working with the funder, each collaborative decided to adopt aspects of the other model in the second round of funding, to take advantage of the different benefits the respective models provided.
Build and Swap: Museum members share resources for each to develop separate exhibitions. Exhibitions then travel to each partner.	**SMEC:** Science Museum Exhibit Collaborative; **ERC:** Exhibit Research Collaborative; **YMEC:** Youth Museum Exhibit Collaborative; **SCC**: Science Carnival Consortium; **TEAMS 1:** Traveling Exhibits at Museums of Science	Designed to provide structures for sharing exhibitions among institutions with similar exhibit needs and of generally similar experience in exhibit development and production. Each collaborative has a different business agreement and operational policy for sharing resources (i.e. grants, dues, fee based), and for insuring that common interests, tour schedules, and quality standards are established and maintained.
Build a Copy for the Group: Exhibition created by one museum. A copy of the exhibition is fabricated for travel to members of the collaborative.	*Flip It, Fold It* by the Museum of Life and Science for **North Carolina Grassroots Collaborative;** *Magic School Bus Kicks up a Storm* by Children's Museum of Houston for the **Magic School Bus Collaborative** and **YMEC**	Mechanisms for sharing an exhibition originating at one museum (which may have more exhibition development capacity, or targeted funding) with other collaborating museums with common interests and exhibition needs.
Partner, Build and Swap: TEAMS 1 "veteran" museums partner with a single "new" museum; each pair collaboratively develops and builds an exhibition. Exhibitions travel to all partners.	**TEAMS 2;** **TEAMS 3**	Based on an evolving collaboration, this model brought in partner museums with less exhibit development capacity. The emphasis on staff development and research increased.
Hub and Spoke: Exhibit elements developed and built by a lead museum. Partner museums subscribe to receive exhibits and professional development.	**ExNET:** Exploratorium Network for Exhibit-based Teaching; **TexNET:** Texas Network for Exhibit-based Learning and Teaching; **SMRC:** Small Museum Research Collaborative	Structures designed to allow dissemination of exhibits and professional development from a large lead institution to partners (generally smaller and/or new museums).
Topic Specific: Multiple organizations oversee the development of a topic-specific traveling exhibition.	*Seasons of Change* for the **Northeast Science Center Collaborative;** *What About AIDS?* for **NAEC:** National AIDS Exhibit Consortium; *Wild Midwest Weather* for **SPARC** Collaborative	Partnership is driven by mutual topical interest. Role of partners may be asymmetrical based on exhibition development capacity, etc.
Collective Development: Partner museums work together to jointly develop and produce exhibitions, which travel to different partner museums (EEC); or collaboratively develop permanent exhibit components installed in multiple partner museums (Exhibit Lab).	**EEC** (Environmental Exhibit Collaborative); **Exhibit Lab** (a project of EEC).	Designed to divide the work involved in producing a traveling exhibition (EEC) to make this task manageable for small and mid-sized museums; Exhibit Lab focuses emphasis on staff development though collaborative work on permanent exhibit components.

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