CLC: A Brief History, 2003-2021

CLC was founded on July 1, 2003, the result of the merger of four regional Cooperating Library Service Units (CLSUs): Capitol Region Library Council, Eastern Connecticut Libraries, Southern Connecticut Library Council, and Western Connecticut Library Council.

The creation of CLSUs was authorized in 1975 by the Connecticut General Assembly, which then funded CLSUs in 1981. “Cooperating Library Service Unit” is defined in Sec. 11-9e of Connecticut State statutes as “an organization of different types of libraries situated in a stipulated area of the state whose purpose is to improve library service through coordinated planning, resource sharing, and the development of programs too costly or impractical for a single library to maintain.”

In July 2003, CLC opened at the former SCLC office in Hamden with transition staff and a state grant of just $150,000 for FY2003-2004. Once the hiring of four full-time staff was completed, CLC offered discounts, media circuits, ILL, roundtables, public programming, a website, and a monthly print newsletter.

In 2005, CLC relocated to its present location in Middletown above the Russell Library administrative offices, launched the online version of the Programming Catalog, and launched a partnership with BookExpo America that continues to this day. This year also featured CLC’s first Trendspotting symposium, and the launch of a pilot virtual reference project called “InfoAnytime.”

CLC began hosting vendor showcases in 2006. InfoAnytime became a significant project, with 24 academic and 128 public library participants and a major media blitz. The following year, the Connecticut General Assembly allocated $150,000 for InfoAnytime, and CLC continued to expand continuing education offerings. Trendspotting became a signature annual event.

CLC’s discount opportunities continued to expand, through CLC’s contracts for books, media, and supplies, and partnerships with WALDO and OCLC that made online resources available at discounted rates.

Summer 2009 was spent fighting for CLC’s very existence, as the Governor’s proposed budget zeroed out CLC and most other statewide library programs. Library staff across the state advocated as never before, and all of the programs slated for elimination had their funding reinstated. Unfortunately, “holdbacks” resulted in the loss of a quarter of CLC’s operating grant, and virtually all of the funding for InfoAnytime, which was quickly shut down. The newsletter also shifted to an online format.

CLC began a major migration to an online content and member management system, Affiniscape, which transformed the way the organization managed its website, communications, member database, and billing. In December 2009, Executive Director Christine Bradley announced her resignation to become Assistant Director at the Norwalk Public Library. In 2010, on the same day that CLC’s new CMS was launched, Jill Dugas Hughes became CLC’s second Executive Director, bringing her expertise in both libraries and fundraising to an organization in need of funding diversity.

In April 2011, CLC and Darien Library hosted the biggest Trendspotting symposium yet: “eBooks: Collections at the Crossroads,” which received national press and attention. 150 librarians from around the state heard from
prestigious speakers, panelists, and industry leaders who discussed the latest eBook trends, products and issues influencing the library profession.

Throughout 2011, CLC and its board and strategic planning committee underwent a far-reaching strategic planning process, resulting in an ambitious plan for July 2012 through June 2015. The plan’s strategic imperatives were clear: Leverage and expand on economies of scale; enable members to stay current with emerging practices and trends in the field; market the value of libraries and the Consortium; and ensure long-range sustainability for the Consortium. CLC’s mission was also revised to its current version.

In the spring of 2012, Jill Dugas Hughes announced her resignation to become the Director of the Edgartown Public Library on Martha’s Vineyard. In August, Jennifer Keohane, formerly Business Outreach Librarian at Simsbury Public Library and a marketing professional, was hired as CLC’s third Executive Director. Jennifer quickly put her expertise to work, improving CLC’s communications and marketing throughout all platforms. CLC also ramped up its continuing education offerings, with programs on topics from “Bed Bugs at your Library” to “Communicating in the Face of Crisis.”

In 2013-14, CLC saved members over 7.1 million dollars on critical products and services; offered 46 special discounts on products like Ancestry.com, Mango Languages, and Scholastic’s ScienceFlix; launched a Maker Market, featuring thousands of products to help library users indulge their creative side; demystified “making” tools and techniques through our Trendspotting: Makerspaces for Everyone symposium, followed by two Technologies of the Maker Movement labs; and helped members navigate the Affordable Care Act through partnerships, training, and resources. In July 2014, CLC finalized a migration from their Affiniscape CMS to a new system hosted by YourMembership, which included a new, mobile-friendly website.

2015, like 2009, was another year focused on advocacy, as librarians across the state rallied to help save CLC and ConnectiCard from the budget axe. Although CLC’s final funding amount was 43% less than FY 14-15, the case was made to restore critical funding to ensure that important library services like CLC continue across the state. CLC pushed forward under these challenging financial constraints by increasing public library membership dues for 2016, reorganizing staffing, and making other key changes to financial operations.

Despite their significantly increased dues, 100% of public library members renewed their CLC membership for 2016, overwhelmingly proving the value of the organization. CLC responded in kind by completing new books and supplies bids with exciting new suppliers and products, strengthening roundtables and partnerships, and saving members $7.4 million – almost $200,000 more than the previous year.

With yet another difficult budget year looming in Connecticut for 2017, CLC contracted with the Kairos Group to create a business development plan, spending much of the year inventorying strengths and weaknesses and exploring options for creating a more responsive and sustainable organization. The move proved prescient, as CLC’s state funding was slashed by another 30%, dwindling to just $124,300, the lowest allocation since the CLSU were first funded in 1981. A business proposal outlining five service areas was presented to the CLC board of trustees in late December, with goals to create added value for members and financial independence for CLC.

In 2018-19, in preparation for launching new lines of business, CLC reconfigured job responsibilities and brought in dynamic new staff. The board of trustees worked harder than ever, establishing committees and task forces for each of the new business initiatives and undergoing a comprehensive bylaws review. Vendor relations were strengthened, and a new vendor marketing program was launched. Vendors began contributing a modest administration fee to CLC, making the organization less reliant on ever-dwindling state funding. CLC developed a robust partnership with public broadcaster CT Public, who welcomed members to their studios and produced a series of videos highlighting Connecticut librarians’ “magical moments” with patrons.

The 2019-20 year was full of promise. CLC staff attended and exhibited at conferences, conducted trainings, and hosted professional development events on location in libraries, museums, restaurants, and even a brewery. And then, in March 2020, COVID-19 forced libraries to close to their users. The CLC staff went home, regrouped, and became Zoom experts. Online “coffee talks” attracted up to 200 members, many of whom had never engaged
with CLC before. Roundtables shifted online. Staff disseminated resources, found discounts on PPE, figured out how to do drive-through media swaps. It was a time like no other.

As the pandemic continued through 2020 and into 2021, CLC considerably expanded its discount programs and opportunities. A massive furniture contract featuring 26 vendors was launched in September 2020, and along with it, an online vendor expo featuring a keynote panel and more than twenty interactive vendor booths. Next came a dramatically expanded supplies contract, featuring not only traditional library supplies but maker and STEAM materials as well. New non-print media contracts were also launched in early 2021. Meanwhile, CLC’s diligent board of trustees launched an ambitious strategic planning initiative, and Executive Director Jennifer Keohane announced plans to leave the organization in January 2022 after nearly ten years at the helm.

CLC’s members continue to advocate for funding for CLC and all State Library services, and CLC looks to the future. With new opportunities to serve members, new markets to explore, and the possibility of self-sustainability, CLC is positioning itself to continue providing savings, education, and collaboration for Connecticut’s libraries for years to come.

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