

# Partnerships: Making and Keeping Connections



By Dr. Betsy Hedler, Partnerships Coordinator, Ohio History Connection, Columbus

Let's start by talking about what a partnership is and what a partnership isn't. A partnership is: an ongoing, collaborative, cooperative relationship between two or more organizations in which they work together in various ways that are mutually beneficial and allow both to better fulfill their missions. A partnership isn't: a one-time collaboration to run a workshop, event, or other program. A partnership isn't: a good relationship with another organization. A partnership isn't: sharing volunteers (a given person volunteers at two or more organizations). A partnership isn't: marching next to the other organization in the Fourth of July parade.

This is not to say that all those other types of relationships aren't necessary and valuable to both organizations. In fact, you may find that marching together in the Fourth of July parade allows for conversations that lead to a closer relationship and ultimately to a partnership between your organization and another.

Partnerships often begin with personal connections, with one person in an organization talking to a friend in another organization about a specific challenge. Often, these two people continue to be the point of contact between the organizations as the partnership forms and continues. You never know when a simple lunch invitation could start a conversation that leads you and a friend to realize ways that your organizations can help each other.

But how do you know which organizations might be a good fit to partner with? Look for an organization that has strengths that compliment, rather than match, your organization's strengths. Like a good marriage, a good partnership will make each organization better. You are looking for an organization who can work with you to help you reach your goals, and vice versa; not an organization that you have to carry or who will have to do all your work for you. It's a good idea, with this in mind, to partner with organizations of a similar size to your own. If you are a historical society with two full-time staff people, for example, it might be hard for you to sustain a cooperative partnership with The Ohio State Uni-

Many partnerships grow out of personal connections, like those you make at the Alliance's Annual Meeting or Regional Meetings. Photo courtesy of the Ohio History Connection.

versity, simply because of your relative organizational capacity. It might make more sense to partner with a local Civil War Roundtable or Natural History Society. You might also find it makes more sense to partner with a smaller unit in a larger institution, such as a university archives or history department. The Ohio History Connection's partner relationships, for example, are largely with statewide organizations such as the Ohio Local History Alliance and the Ohio Council for the Social Studies, rather than with individual historical societies or school districts.

Like many relationships, partnerships between organizations take time to develop and can go through phases of greater or lesser closeness. You probably can't (and don't want to) form a partnership with another organization you've never worked with at all before. You may find that your partnership starts by working together on a public event, and over time develops into a collaboration to plan and conduct many events together, for example. Start small by working together on a specific project. Depending on how that goes, consider whether you want to move toward a closer working relationship that leads to a partnership.

A mutually-beneficial partnership takes work. The communication needed for coordination and collaboration takes time, after all, even if it's only the additional time needed to travel across town for meetings! So why do it? Why spend this time?

A good partnership has many benefits for both organizations, both tangible and intangible. Tangible benefits are more easily seen—for example, one organization provides space for

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joint events, while the other provides administrative support for tracking RSVPs and handling catering. Each organization gains something obvious in this example.

Intangible benefits of partnerships can include generating goodwill toward your organization. This can be a benefit when you're trying to justify your funding or recruiting volunteers to help with a project. For example, at the Ohio History Connection, our partner relationships help us recruit judges for the Ohio History Day contests (thank you to everyone reading this article who has judged or otherwise helped out with Ohio History Day!).

Partnerships also facilitate a transfer of knowledge between organizations about issues and happenings of concern to both. Some might call this gossip, and believe it's not important, but the gossip that goes on between those working in partnership is a vital source of knowledge for your organization. Working in partnership with other organizations can also help you keep up with the concerns of members of your community who aren't members of your organization. For example, my work with the Ohio Council for the Social Studies as part of our partnership allows me to learn many things about the concerns and needs of social studies teachers in the state of Ohio. ■