

# Synergy for the Greater Good

Monday, July 11, 2016 - by [Jeffrey S Reznick](#), [Brett Bobley](#)

## A successful interagency collaboration between the NEH and NLM provides a framework for federal agencies interested in working more closely together in mutually supportive ways.



Collaboration between like-minded federal agencies doesn't make good sense, it makes great sense—strategically, financially, and managerially. A synergistic collaboration helps agencies:

- achieve their respective missions and serve the public effectively
- leverage their resources and use them efficiently
- foster creativity and teamwork
- expand learning and professional networks.

### The Opportunity

Interagency collaboration can begin in different ways, mean different things, and involve a variety of activities, [a report from the Congressional Research Service](#) explains. Ultimately, the character of any collaboration depends on how it develops, why it exists, and who is working to achieve it.

We've been able to find collaboration success through our work at the [National Endowment for the Humanities \(NEH\)](#) and the [National Library of Medicine \(NLM\)](#). The NEH is an independent grant-making agency in the executive branch dedicated to supporting research, education, preservation, and public programs in the humanities and in those social sciences that use humanistic methods. The NLM is the world's largest biomedical library, also an executive-branch agency, and a unit of the National Institutes of Health of the Department of Health and Human Services.

[The collaboration ball](#) started rolling when a colleague suggested we get in touch. Jeffrey had previously had a positive experience with NEH through a fellowship awarded two decades earlier. Through our conversations, we learned about the work being done in our respective organizations, specifically within the departments we oversee: the History of Medicine of the NLM and the Office of Digital Humanities of the NEH. From there, we gained a mutual interest and willingness to build something together under the well-known premise that two (or more) minds are greater than one.

[The Office of Digital Humanities](#) supports research, education, collaboration, and interdisciplinary learning related to the broad and lasting impact of computers and technology on our culture and society. Its annual [Digging into Data](#) challenge is a unique program that supports humanistic inquiry into how digital technology is changing our world. Why, then, collaborate with the NLM? Primarily because it was a means to reaching a community of researchers who, as they study the history of medicine, are increasingly interested in methods and tools of the

digital humanities.

The NLM is a leader in the application of computer and communications technology to the advancement of health and improvement of the human condition. Its [History of Medicine Division](#) embraces the future as a steward of the past by documenting the history of human health and disease through a collection of traditional and 21st-century materials—from books to blogs, manuscripts to videos. Why, then, would it collaborate with the NEH? Primarily because the methods and tools of the digital humanities hold great promise to unlock the richness of these artifacts for the benefit of research, teaching, and learning about the human condition.

Delineating these complementary missions and interests helped us to define the roles of our agencies in a collaboration, how each could support the other, and why working together made great sense.

We also thought about the complementary resources each agency could bring to the table. The NEH could offer funding mechanisms in the area of digital humanities, a field that is increasingly of interest to historians of medicine and medical librarians who regularly use NLM historical collections, databases, and data sets. The NLM could offer deep connections into these communities, particularly through its [National Network of Libraries of Medicine](#) and its popular blog, *Circulating Now*. Additionally, the NLM could offer the resources of its History of Medicine Reading Room and state-of-the-art meeting space at the National Institutes of Health.

## The Solution

By looking critically at what each of our program areas could contribute to a collaboration, we defined the terms of the memorandum of understanding between our agencies.

Securing the support of our leadership was essential as we defined these terms. We achieved this by clearly defining roles and responsibilities, emphasizing the strategic value of the collaboration for both the NEH and the NLM, and noting the relatively minimal financial cost of working together.

Another step in crafting this memorandum was close cooperation with our respective executive offices, specifically legal counsel, to ensure mutual agreement on the format, content, and intent of the document.

Integral to the development of our collaboration has been our rapport, our mutual respect and support, and our clear and consistent communication. We modeled this relationship with and for our respective teams so that they also would contribute their skills to partnering with each other and with the other organizations that have become a part of our collaboration. Admittedly, the top-level support we received was a linchpin to our success, but our strong rapport has been—and remains—a key factor in the success of the initial collaboration and its subsequent reaffirmation.

## The Results

Our collaboration has achieved measurable results, namely a constellation of dynamic, cross-disciplinary, and impactful public research and education programs. The collaboration took root around [Shared Horizons: Data, Biomedicine, and the Digital Humanities](#), an international symposium funded by the NEH and co-sponsored by the NLM and Research Councils UK in April 2013. Furthering the concept of collaboration, funding was obtained

through a grant to the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities of the University of Maryland.

Shared Horizons, which has garnered widespread praise, brought together researchers from the digital humanities and bioinformatics communities to explore collaboration, research methodologies, and the interpretation of evidence arising from the burgeoning area of "big data" and biomedical-driven humanities scholarship. The success of Shared Horizons led us to collaborate again on a second symposium, [An Epidemiology of Information: Data Mining the 1918 Influenza Pandemic](#).

Shortly thereafter, we discussed how we could leverage the momentum of our collaboration to develop a workshop uniquely for medical historians, medical librarians, and information technology professionals who are studying medical history and contemporary medicine. We facilitated a conversation between our colleagues at Virginia Tech and the Wellcome Trust, encouraging a collaboration around the workshop. Virginia Tech subsequently applied to the NEH for the necessary funding. The Wellcome Trust would lend support for selected scholars from the United Kingdom to participate; the NLM agreed to host the workshop and offer support in other ways.

In the early spring of 2015, NEH awarded a cooperative agreement to Virginia Tech to support the workshop [Images and Texts in Medical History: An Introduction to Methods, Tools, and Data from the Digital Humanities](#). The organizations involved contributed to publicizing the event. Through its Twitter hashtag [#medhistws](#), the event reached a wide audience, achieved broad and sustained engagement, and reinforced the foundation for future collaboration.

Bottom line: Strategically designed, mutually supportive, and impactful partnerships make great sense. They testify to powerful institutional synergies and the determination of colleagues to build and sustain a collaboration on multiple levels. The NEH/NLM collaboration is an example of one such partnership that has yielded effective public programming, sound financial decisions, and collaborative management. Our investment of time and effort was substantial, but it has yielded lasting dividends for everyone involved, especially the public.

While our collaboration is unique in many ways, the approaches we took to build it, and the values we held to develop it, can operate in any agency culture to serve the greater good.

## COLLABORATION RESOURCES

Learn more about interagency collaboration from these resources:

- "3 Tips for Effective Interagency Collaboration," an article from *Government Executive*
- *Managing for Results: Key Considerations for Implementing Interagency Collaborative Mechanisms*, a report from the U.S. Government Accountability Office
- *Effective Strategies for Interagency Collaboration*, a presentation from Transition One Stop, a collaboration of the Interdisciplinary Human Development Institute of the University of Kentucky and several Kentucky nonprofit organizations and state government units.

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