The Future of OhioLINK

Recent events surrounding service disruptions and the resignation of the Executive Director of OhioLINK have generated a great deal of concern about the future of one of the world’s most successful library consortium. Service disruptions have been attributed to problems associated with the integration of the complex technical infrastructure of OhioLINK into the OBOR Educational Technology division. However, on closer examination, those problems, as well as the resignation of the OhioLINK Executive Director, are symptoms of much deeper problems with the current governance, management, and structure of OhioLINK. Because OhioLINK is now so thoroughly integrated into the operations of our 88 institutions of higher education, its viability is not optional. If OhioLINK is to continue to be successful, several essential questions must be answered.

What is OhioLINK?

OhioLINK operated successfully for two decades, consistent with and in support of overarching OBR policies and strategies, as a member driven consortium that was partly supported and facilitated by resources from the State of Ohio through the Ohio Board of Regents. This original, collaborative conception of OhioLINK made it possible to build an organization with incredible access to information, exceptional cost control, innovative programs, collective actions, and unique public – private partnerships. Member institutions now annually contribute over $27M to the OhioLINK budget. Many newly recruited faculty cite OhioLINK as a determining factor in agreeing to come to an Ohio institution. In membership service assessments, OhioLINK consistently rates as one of the most valuable institutional services offered to over 600,000 faculty and students.

Because of recent changes in governance and management, OhioLINK now appears to be an agency of the Board of Regents. Not only is the sense of member institution ownership in OhioLINK now in question, but OhioLINK falls prey to being merged with other organizations into, effectively, a State agency with no track record in managing such a complex service enterprise at the level of success that our faculty and students have enjoyed and come to expect.

How is OhioLINK Governed?

OhioLINK was led through a period of unprecedented success by an independent Board that was made up primarily of the academic leaders of its member institutions, as well as OBR representation. This Board directed and participated in OhioLINK strategic planning consistent with overarching OBR policies and strategies. The Board ensured that communications were timely and effective. The Board provided direct advice and consent on the appropriateness of OhioLINK decisions to our members’ academic missions. Most importantly, the presence of this dedicated Board of academic leaders, representative of the entire membership, made it possible for member libraries to agree to cede local control to the OhioLINK collective.
Governance is now solely vested in the Chancellor as the director of higher education for the State of Ohio. The benefits of the dedicated board governance model have been lost and no new benefits of the current model have been seen.

How is OhioLINK managed?

Finding a solution for the management of the technical infrastructure of OhioLINK that brings greater expertise to bear on complex technical issues and that leverages technical investments across multiple agencies is essential for the continued success of OhioLINK. However, it must be noted that the essence of OhioLINK is the set of services that makes use of that infrastructure. It is the successful management of these services that is critical to our members’ academic missions. Correcting technical infrastructure problems is important to the delivery of services but there are significant issues beyond those of the infrastructure.

Currently the roles, responsibilities, and authorities of the OhioLINK Executive Director are undefined and even chaotic, as are the roles, responsibilities, and authorities of involved OBR staff. To successfully manage an inherently collaborative operation, to bring together expertise from the members and turn their knowledge and work into effective consortial programs, to balance the necessary interplay between members, the State’s agencies, OhioLINK staff and a myriad of vendors, all require an Executive Director who has a full set of clearly defined responsibilities and authorities. The OhioLINK Executive Director has been, and must continue to be, the nexus for all consortia actions.

Moving forward.

OhioLINK is an inextricable part of the academic missions and academic infrastructures of our 88 colleges and universities and must continue to be as successful in the next two decades as it has been in the past two. The current leadership transition provides an opportunity for affirming OhioLINK’s core values by working collaboratively to set strategic directions for our shared future. We, the member Library Directors, look forward to joining with our academic leaders and with the Chancellor’s staff to clearly define the nature of OhioLINK, its governance and its management so that its ultimate success can be assured. Most importantly, we urge the (re)creation of an oversight body—one that includes provosts, library directors, and CIO’s—for the programmatic and technological oversight of OhioLINK. Such leadership, on behalf of and by member institutions, is essential for the state to maintain and build upon what has become an internationally acclaimed library consortium.