

# A Decade of Collaborating, Preserving, and Sharing: The Chicago Collections Consortium

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**abstract:** This article chronicles the founding of the Chicago Collections Consortium (CCC) and its growth in its first decade. The authors, two of the consortium's original founders, acknowledge the contributions of the CCC's member institutions and leadership. They also speculate on the reasons for the consortium's success and what the future might hold for the organization.

## Introduction

Anniversaries are occasions for celebration and reflection. The Chicago Collections Consortium (CCC) will mark its 10th anniversary in 2022 with events throughout the year. The consortium is a collective of nearly 60 libraries, museums, archives, historical societies, and other organizations with primary resources that help tell the story of the Chicago area's history and culture. Central to its activities is an online portal that provides a common point of access to the finding aids for these resources, which continue to reside in the members' collections. The portal became fully operational and freely available to the public in the fall of 2015. But the anniversary the CCC will mark is linked to its formal incorporation as a not-for-profit in Illinois in June 2012, when the portal was still only an idea and a general goal. Indeed, the organization's roots go back to 2005. In this article, the authors—two of the original founders—reflect on the growth of the CCC from 2005 to the present, as it has become a thriving organization.

The CCC's tagline is "Collaborating. Preserving. Sharing." Across the years, the consortium's enduring mission—to preserve and share Chicago's history and culture, and to provide free and open access for all comers—has been vigorously endorsed by its individual member organizations. By belonging to the CCC, member organizations make access to vital primary resources—manuscripts, photographs and other images, maps, and books—easier for their users. In return, the members benefit from oppor-

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tunities arising from the organization's joint programs and from working closely with peers.

The CCC's development may be divided into four phases: the initial meetings and planning in 2006 and 2007, the planning period (2008–2011), followed by four years (2012 to 2016) of building the organization and the portal, and then the current phase (2017 to date) of rapid growth and expanding partnerships. The article that follows touches upon each of

these phases, concluding with some thoughts about the key considerations that have led to the CCC's success.

### **Beginnings (2006–2007)**

The mid-2000's brought several new directors to Chicago area libraries who were all collaboration-minded, including the authors of this article. Initial conversations in 2005–2006 between the two authors about a potential partnership of the Newberry Library and the University of Illinois Chicago (UIC) Library quickly expanded to include other colleagues and a broader range of possibilities. Many local library leaders agreed that it was time to “think big” about how research libraries could do more collectively than they had done in the past. In 2006–2007, the directors of what ultimately totaled 15 institutions, including academic, research, public, and museum libraries, gathered to talk about collaboration.<sup>1</sup> Their discussions addressed such possible projects as joint purchasing, combined storage facilities, common Web access to collections, shared conservation and digitization capacity, cooperative efforts to collect and preserve primary resources, and infrastructure building to support citywide exhibitions.

All these activities interested the CCC's founders. But they realized that it would be critical to agree on a focus around which they could build a consensus and achieve broad and sustained commitment from such a large and diverse group of institutions. Accordingly, in the summer of 2007, they began to talk concertedly about how they could ensure the care and preservation of the vast trove of Chicago-related primary resources held in their various collections, and how they could make these materials more visible to scholars and the public. Primary resources about the region's history and culture were scattered across many institutions. As a result, researchers and even librarians and archivists often had trouble knowing where the materials were and how to help patrons use them effectively. The founders believed that this common challenge could be pursued most effectively by working together.

To help understand and document the scope of the challenge, the founders took a quick census of the Chicago-related manuscript and image collections held by their libraries. Using submissions from each institution, the archivist at the Ryerson and Burnham Libraries at the Art Institute of Chicago compiled a spreadsheet identifying more than 4,000 relevant collections. This document revealed not only what each library



held but also the substantial overlap of many collections, in part because donors in the past often divided the materials they donated among several institutions. In addition to serving as an important data point for future grant proposals, the spreadsheet was adopted as a current reference tool to help librarians and patrons find related resources beyond their own institutions.

Given the extent of the collections, digitization, however worthy a long-term goal, could neither serve as a plausible near-term objective for the group, nor could it provide an effective strategy for increasing the visibility and use of these materials. Instead, the founders identified two major goals: (1) the development of an online portal to all the individual institutions' finding aids and digital images, and (2) the creation of a new organization, called the Chicago Collections Consortium, that would build and manage the portal and consider additional future joint activities, such as educational programs, exhibitions, and digital initiatives.

### Planning (2008–2011)

The initial large roundtable meetings soon gave way to a more formal structure, including a steering committee with representatives (usually the directors) from interested institutions. A set of working groups—consisting of archivists, special collections librarians, and technology staff—investigated issues facing the consortium and suggested ways of dealing with them.

The CCC's highest priority then became seeking financial resources. Its first planning grant proposal to a local foundation had been rejected in 2007. A three-year period of thinking and regrouping followed this disappointment. Several of the library directors had relationships with the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and they conferred with it about its priorities and the CCC's intentions. The foundation's genuine interest led to an invitation to submit a planning-grant proposal. Mellon approved the grant proposal in June 2011—and the CCC was on its way.<sup>2</sup>

The planning grant was intended to fund the exploration of two related tasks: the development of a workable concept for the CCC's envisioned portal, which would offer users an access route to the members' collections, and the creation of a collaborative organization. Recognizing that it would need the help of external experts for the work ahead, the steering committee had included a budget for consultants in its proposal to the Mellon Foundation. For consultation on organizational structure, the CCC selected Martin Levitt, librarian of the American Philosophical Association. Levitt served on the board of the Philadelphia Consortium of Special Collections Libraries, which was something of a model for the CCC. He was joined by his colleague Babak Ashrafi, head of the Philadelphia Area Center for the History of Science (as it is now known). The CCC recruited Tracy Seneca, manager of the Web Archiving Service at the California Digital Library, and Dawne Tortorella, a consultant in Chicago, to advise on portal technology.

With funding and consultants secured, planning began in earnest on both the portal and the organizational structure and governance. Several key concepts guided the shape of the portal. The CCC recognized that working with manuscript collections—whose finding aids had been created with varying formats and vocabularies over many years and in many institutions—would present significant challenges. Participation would




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depend on a portal design that would not require members to redo years of work or maintain separate versions of their metadata records. Moreover, given varied user communities, the portal had to accommodate expert researchers, schoolchildren, and the public. Finally, it needed to be affordable to maintain.

The technology team recommended XTF (extensible text framework), an open-source platform developed by the University of California. This

platform would be flexible and cost-effective, allowing the ingestion of metadata in multiple formats while creating a single index. The portal team then developed functional specifications for an administrative tool that would allow archivists to submit finding aids in an automated way, without the need to change any metadata.

### Building (2012–2016)

After much discussion during the planning phase, the members decided to establish the CCC as a separate not-for-profit corporation. The CCC developed bylaws and, in June 2012, filed as a not-for-profit corporation in Illinois with 12 founding members.<sup>4</sup> The organization marks this event as its official launch and hence will hold its 10th anniversary celebration in 2022. Subsequently, the consortium filed for 501(c)(3) status with the federal government, finally receiving approval in January 2014.

After the planning grant period, Mellon invited the CCC to submit a proposal to build the portal, which it did in early 2014. The portal, christened Explore Chicago Collections, launched in October 2015.<sup>5</sup>

With its nonprofit status in place, the CCC moved into what might be called the “building phase” of its history. Critical to this stage was the hiring of an executive director. The first executive director, Jaclyn Grahl, joined the organization in July 2013.<sup>6</sup> She was housed at the DePaul University Library thanks to Scott Walter, DePaul’s library director at that time, who arranged for his institution to serve as the executive director’s physical home. The CCC negotiated an agreement with DePaul that provided an office for the director at no cost. Quarterly funds transfers by the consortium paid the director’s salary and benefits. From the start, this administrative arrangement with DePaul worked well, and the agreement remains in effect today.

Grahl’s early work involved collaborating with the CCC’s Board of Directors both to implement a committee system and to launch a strategic planning process.<sup>7</sup> Because

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the board believed that it was critically important to tap the expertise of staff at individual member institutions, they were included on all committees except the Executive, Nominating and Governance, and Audit and Finance Committees. Consequently, the many advisory committees, including those for content, development, digital exhibits, discovery systems, membership, programming, and user



assessment, benefited from the experience and ideas of people doing related work in member institutions. Each committee reported quarterly to the CCC's Board of Directors, and the presence of an Executive Committee member on most committees and task forces guaranteed multiple channels for communication within the governance system.

Grahl also launched a strategic planning process. The Board of Directors and its committees developed a three-year plan with annual goals and regular reporting requirements. This plan, adopted in 2014, set four basic goals, two externally focused and two internally. First, and most important, the CCC would seek to advance the shared awareness, preservation, accessibility, use, and growth of collections related to the history and culture of the greater Chicago region. Second, it would aspire to encourage scholars, educators, students, and the public to seek out and use the Chicago-related content of member collections as resources for teaching, learning, research, and creative exploration. Third, as an organization, the CCC would endeavor to nurture a robust and sustainable membership program offering value to member institutions, adapting to their changing needs, and promoting meaningful and innovative collaborations that support Chicago-related collections and their use. Fourth, the consortium would seek to practice responsible self-governance through developing and sustaining effective organizational systems and financial practices.

Much of the activity of the "building years" focused on creating a functional and sustainable organization. Policies and procedures had to be invented, strategies to expand membership were needed, a realistic budget had to be set, and the CCC required a renewed website and branding. The organization needed such mundane but essential items as insurance and an auditor. Building also involved the development of the portal—a complex and intensive process shepherded by Kate Flynn, the portal manager, who held a part-time position initially funded by the Mellon grant. Finally, the CCC recognized that it needed to raise its visibility to generate interest from both potential members and donors.

One important milestone in these latter efforts was a public celebration of the CCC through a physical exhibition, *Raw Material: Uncovering Chicago's Historical Collections*. It included key items from member collections and was hosted at the Harold Washington Library Center of the Chicago Public Library in downtown Chicago from August to November 2015. As the CCC described the exhibition, "The stories Chicagoans tell about themselves and their history are as diverse and dynamic as the city itself. But where do they find the resources and evidence to bring those stories to life? *Raw Material* answers this question using letters, maps, photos, personal diaries, and more from 20 archival repositories."<sup>8</sup> The exhibition, along with the media attention it attracted,<sup>9</sup> made clear that a group of institutions with rich Chicago-related resources and interesting connections to one another could work together effectively.

Also in 2015, the introduction of the CCC portal, Explore Chicago Collections, signaled that the organization offered a new and easily navigable pathway to finding hidden Chicago treasures. The consortium described the portal as "a free centralized,

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web-based search engine and record-finding tool” that would “allow researchers, teachers, students, and the public to readily locate over 100,000 maps, photos, letters, and other archival material at member institutions all over the Chicago area.”<sup>10</sup> The CCC also quickly inaugurated Ask Chicago Collections, a virtual reference desk staffed by institution-based volunteers that facilitates use of member collections by responding to portal-generated inquiries.

Once the portal was launched, the CCC hosted several focus groups with scholars and teachers, many of whom had earlier provided the CCC with guidance, to learn how the consortium could increase the impact of its collective resources. From these discussions came ideas for such initiatives as topic and curricular guides and digital exhibits—which would help contextualize the vast collections available at the members’ institutions. All these ideas have been implemented by the CCC.

Throughout its history, the CCC has benefited from the increasing support of donors. In fall 2012 and every year since, the consortium received a generous unrestricted gift from a major Chicago donor who wished to remain anonymous. These funds contrib-

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uted to its strategic planning, the updating of its branding and website, the public interface for the portal, and the inaugural exhibition, *Raw Materials*. The exhibition was also supported by the Gladys Kriebel Delmas Foundation. Soon after *Raw Materials* opened, the CCC received operational support from the MacArthur Fund

for Arts and Culture at the Richard H. Driehaus Foundation. In January 2016, the CCC was awarded a grant from the Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation, also for operational support. These two funders have remained regular generous supporters of the CCC. Over time, the consortium has also received funding from the Illinois Arts Council Agency, Illinois Humanities, the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events, the Terra Foundation for American Art, and numerous individual donors.

### Expansion (2017 to Today)

After Grahl moved out of state in 2016, she was succeeded as executive director by Jeanne Long in February 2017.<sup>11</sup> Long brought extensive experience in developing partnerships with civic and corporate entities from her time at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She used that background to develop initiatives with organizations in the area. Especially noteworthy is a partnership she pioneered with the Chicago Cultural Alliance, a group of local museums, cultural centers, and historical societies.<sup>12</sup> The ongoing collaboration has led so far to several new members joining the CCC and made possible a digital archive project called *Stories of Im/Migration: Chicago*. This project, funded by an Illinois Humanities Multiplier Grant, resulted in the digitization and deposit in Explore Chicago Collections of over 1,000 images from six organizations<sup>13</sup> and the creation of a tool kit for use of these resources in schools and libraries.

Supporting small cultural organizations as members was a goal and challenge for the CCC from the beginning. Its mission has always included the preservation and highlighting of unique Chicago materials, wherever they are. In this creative partnership, the Chicago Cultural Alliance underwrites a modest cost for its members to join the CCC, and grant money has paid for the digitization of image collections.



Today, there are nearly 60 CCC members, and Explore Chicago Collections now includes finding aids to over 7,000 collections and 117,000 digital images. There have been more than 2.5 million page views by users from around the world since the portal's launch in 2015. In fiscal year 2021, the CCC received and answered some 230 questions posed by users from the public through Ask Chicago Collections. Members also collaborate with one another to offer workshops on bibliographic or portal-related topics, which are open to all member institutions. A strong network of area colleagues has emerged as a consequence.

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With substantial growth in membership and use has come a widening and deepening of the CCC's programmatic activities. In the wake of its groundbreaking joint digital exhibition *The Sporting Life: Stories from Chicago Collections* in October 2017, the CCC has created four more digital exhibitions of items in member collections and made them available on its website.<sup>14</sup> These exhibitions, which reveal unique materials that otherwise might have remained unknown to the public, have received considerable interest (especially *Race Riots in Chicago in 1919*) and have often been accompanied by public programs. No single member institution could have displayed as much richness of material as found in this set of relatively inexpensive digital exhibitions.

Over the years, the CCC has partnered with such organizations as the American Institute of Architects, the Chicago Architecture Foundation, and the Caxton Club, Chicago's bibliophilic society, among many others, to present public programs and conferences. The COVID-19 pandemic shifted the venue for public programs online but did not stop them. In the first half of 2021, for example, the consortium produced six live online events on topics ranging from the archives of Chicago State University to the 1925 art deco exposition in Chicago to the archival collections of the Chicago Cubs.<sup>15</sup> Creative partnerships, including two events cosponsored by the Digital Public Library of America, have expanded knowledge of the CCC and its members' collections, as has the consortium's use of social media.

Another important facet of the CCC's programmatic effort is its involvement with area schools, teachers, and students. Following an early partnership with the Chicago

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### Why It Worked

Much more could be said about the creation and evolution of the CCC, but this section will add only a summary of some key factors that likely contributed to its success. The founders have acknowledged since the outset that the consortium was fortunate to have had the right idea at the right time to generate excitement and to sustain commitment,

especially through the long hiatus while seeking funding. The CCC identified a shared challenge that excited commitment to a collaborative vision, a mission that everyone readily appreciated.

Its initial difficulty in securing funding forced the CCC to deliberate deeply and practically about its aspirations and possibilities. If substantial funding had come immediately and easily, the challenge of developing a truly effective organization for the long haul may not have evoked as strong and healthy a response.

People willingly offered their time and expertise not only because they believed in the enterprise but also because the volunteer work in question was substantive and productive rather than routine. Similarly, when the CCC needed consultants and pro bono advisers, it benefited from the first-rate expertise of people who cared about what it was trying to do.

As the portal project developed, the CCC made the key decision to allow members to retain their local bibliographic standards and practices, rather than ask that they be changed to conform to the portal's requirements. This approach made it much easier to sign up new members. Having an ingestion tool that worked with little effort on the part of submitting institutions was also a big plus.

The CCC Board of Directors' serious commitment, from the time of formal incorporation, to planning and outcomes management has allowed the CCC to stick to its central mission rather than being distracted by interesting but possibly entangling tangents.

Members repeatedly came forward and contributed in significant ways, beyond just paying their dues. The institutions' directors always permitted the use of their staffs' time to benefit the CCC. Some of the contributions deserve special acknowledgment. For example,

- The Art Institute collated the original spreadsheet of member collections and hosted the first strategic planning session.
- The University of Chicago devised the first website.
- The Chicago Public Library hosted the initial exhibition.
- The Newberry Library, with its central location and parking, has served as the primary meeting place for the CCC Board of Directors.
- UIC submitted the Mellon grant applications and is home to the CCC portal manager, Kate Flynn.
- DePaul serves as the administrative host for the executive director.
- Many members have served as sites for the annual program, for committee and working group meetings, or as cohosts of programs and workshops.

Finally, the CCC was extraordinarily fortunate to have had two first-rate executive directors, each bringing skills relevant to the organization's stage of development at the time. Their leadership and foresight created a solid foundation on which the organization can continue to thrive and evolve.

The CCC will take a little time in 2022 to celebrate how far it has come, but it will not rest on its laurels. Planning will be underway to add to the consortium's accomplishments, including upgrading the portal. Lessons from the organization's experience with the pandemic will surely influence thinking about the delivery of programs and access to research materials. The CCC's strong engagement with its community will position it





well to work on something else that it has learned—that a community’s story or stories belong to everyone in the community. Comprehending those narratives to enable a better future requires more than easy generalizations and platitudes—it takes grasping the reality of the past. This quest lies at the heart of the CCC, and its members understand that they can pursue it better together than they can separately.

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## Notes

1. Among early participants in the CCC, in addition to the authors of this article, Mary Case (University of Illinois Chicago) and David Spadafora (Newberry Library), were Julia Bachrach (Chicago Park District), Brad Baker (Northeastern Illinois University), Jack Brown (Art Institute of Chicago), Mary Dempsey (Chicago Public Library), Gary Johnson (Chicago History Museum), Judith Nadler (University of Chicago), Sarah Pritchard (Northwestern University), Robert Seal (Loyola University Chicago), Christopher Stewart (Illinois Institute of Technology), and Scott Walter (DePaul University).
2. Because the CCC had not yet received status as a nonprofit or 501(c)(3) organization, the University of Illinois Chicago (UIC) submitted the grant proposal to the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation on the CCC’s behalf. The funding was awarded to the Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois. UIC also submitted the Mellon grant for portal implementation.
3. See Philadelphia Consortium of Special Collections Libraries, “Overview,” 2018, <https://pacscl.org/about-pacscl-2/>; Consortium for History of Science, Technology and Medicine, “About,” 2021, <https://www.chstm.org/about>.
4. The original member organizations of the CCC were the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago History Museum, Chicago Public Library, Columbia College Chicago, DePaul University, Illinois Institute of Technology, Loyola University Chicago, Newberry Library, Northwestern University, Roosevelt University, University of Chicago, and University of Illinois Chicago.
5. The Explore Chicago Collections site includes a brief description of the portal’s “Technical Background” (see Explore Chicago Collections, “Technical Background,” 2021, [https://explore.chicagocollections.org/tech\\_background/](https://explore.chicagocollections.org/tech_background/)). The site offers links to the code and documentation developed as a part of the project, which resides in the Bitbucket repository. A more detailed explanation of the development of Explore Chicago Collections can be found in Mary M. Case, “Meeting the Challenge of Collocating Metadata: Explore Chicago Collections,” *Technicalities* (2017), <https://hdl.handle.net/10027/22740>.
6. For information on Jaclyn Grahl’s background, see CCC, “CCC Welcomes Executive Director Jaclyn Grahl,” October 4, 2013, <https://chicagocollections.org/news-events/news/ccc-welcomes-executive-director-jaclyn-grahl/>.
7. For a fuller description of the consortium’s committee system, see CCC, “Committees,” 2021, <https://chicagocollections.org/about/consortium-committees/>.
8. CCC, “Raw Material: Uncovering Chicago’s Historical Collections,” July 20, 2015, <https://chicagocollections.org/news-events/news/inaugural-exhibit-raw-material/>.
9. See, for example, Steve Johnson, “Chicago Collections Brings City-Related Archives under One Digital Roof,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 4, 2015, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/>



entertainment/museums/ct-museums-chicago-collections-history-ent-1105-20151104-column.html.

10. CCC, "Announcing the Release of Explore Chicago Collections," October 22, 2015, <https://chicagocollections.org/news-events/news/explore-chicago-collections-launch/>.
11. For more information on Jeanne Long's background, see CCC, "Chicago Collections Welcomes New Executive Director," January 31, 2017, <https://chicagocollections.org/news-events/news/new-executive-director-jeanne-long/>.
12. The Chicago Cultural Alliance is a consortium of over 40 Chicago-area ethnic heritage museums, centers, and historical societies that represent over 30 different cultures from around the world. Chicago Cultural Alliance, "About," <https://www.chicagoculturalalliance.org/about/>.
13. The six organizations that contributed digital images to the Explore Chicago Collections were the Balzekas Museum of Lithuanian Culture, Chinese American Museum of Chicago, Filipino American Historical Society of Chicago, National Hellenic Museum, Polish Museum of America, and Puerto Rican Arts Alliance.
14. CCC, "Welcome to Chicago Collections Digital Exhibits," <https://exhibits.chicagocollections.org/digital-exhibits/index>.
15. CCC, "News & Events," 2021, <https://chicagocollections.org/news-events/programs-exhibits-events>.
16. Chicago History Museum, "History Fair: Students Learn History through Inquiry," 2021, <https://www.chicagohistory.org/education/historyfair/>.

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