

The background of the page features an abstract graphic composed of three large, overlapping, rounded rectangular shapes. A yellow shape is in the upper left, a blue shape is in the lower right, and a green shape is in the upper right. The shapes overlap in a way that creates a central white space and various colored intersections.

Better Together:

Libraries in the Sharing Economy

A working paper developed for
a preconference being held at the
2015 Illinois Libraries Conference

October 21, 2015 • Peoria, Illinois

BETTER TOGETHER: LIBRARIES IN THE SHARING ECONOMY

The whole idea of libraries is essentially based on resource sharing; initially, a collection was a way to share resources among a group of subscribers or members who paid some kind of fee. Public libraries replaced the private subscription system with a tax-based one, but the idea was still to share resources across a population. The idea of libraries sharing with each other—and thus, in turn, with each others' patrons—came later, mostly not until the 20th century. In Illinois, both individuals and organizations have been pioneers in sharing resources. This conference—Better Together—celebrates the history, the personalities, the landmarks and milestones, the results, the challenges to come, and the ways they are being met today and into the future. This publication is a jumping-off point...join us and jump in!

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**"Illinois has no successful history
of worthwhile cooperation."**

Robert Rohlf, "A Plan for Public Library Development
in Illinois," 1963

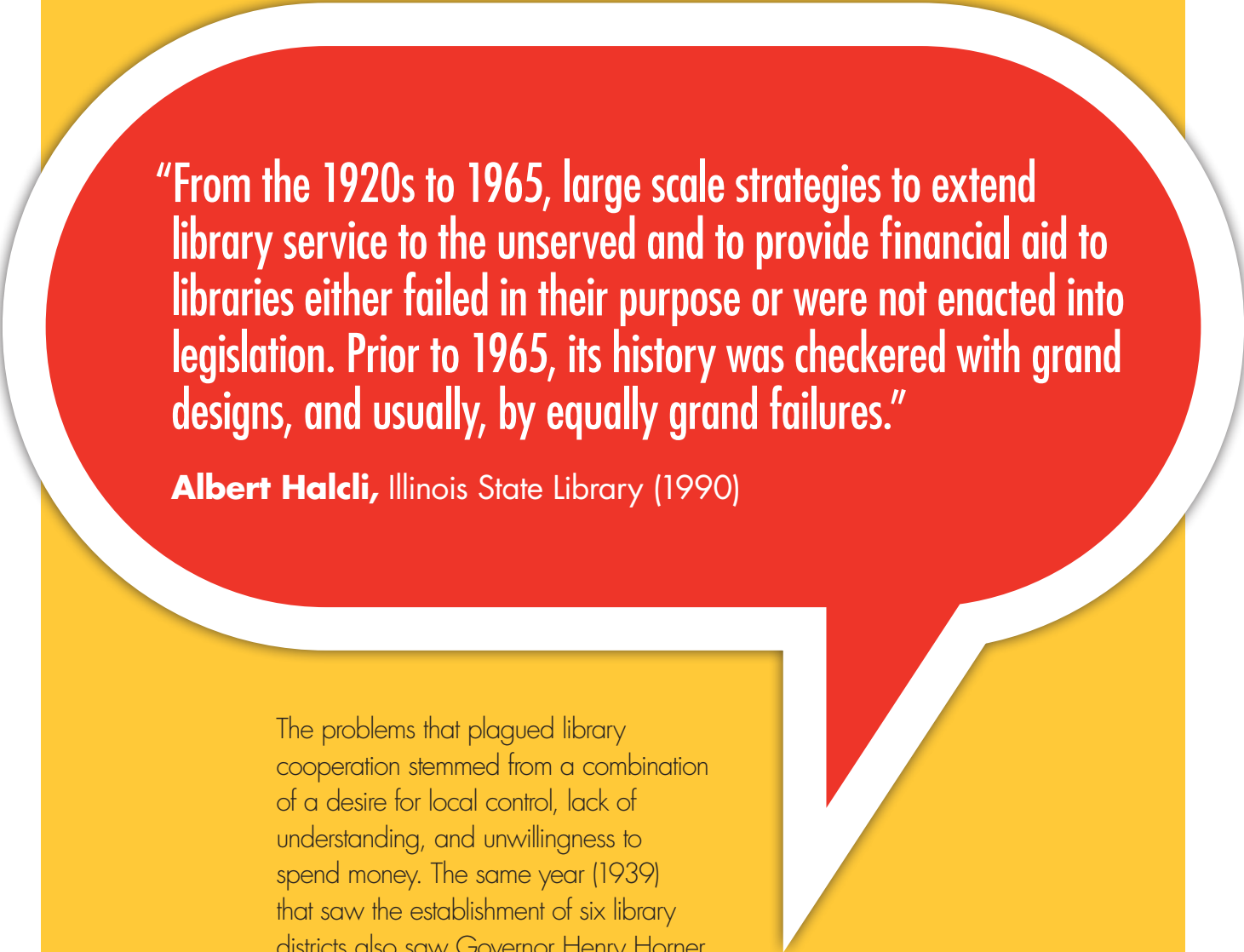
Robert Rohlf's role in the formation of Illinois Library Systems is legendary, though as time passes, his name may start to fade in the memories of those not even alive in 1963. He was the director of a regional library system in Minnesota and hired as a consultant by the Illinois Library Association. His task was to develop a report—provide a framework—that would have some chance of passage by the state legislature, which up until that time had resisted a significant role for state government in library service.

The result was the Illinois Library System Act becoming law on August 17, 1965.

"If you didn't know, you might think that regional library systems began on August 17, 1965, when the Illinois Library System Act became law. Actually the impetus for systems began in Illinois and other parts of the country 40 years earlier as a response to larger societal trends for regionalism, assistance to rural areas, and a broader federal role in all types of activities."

Sarah Long, North Suburban Library System (2005)

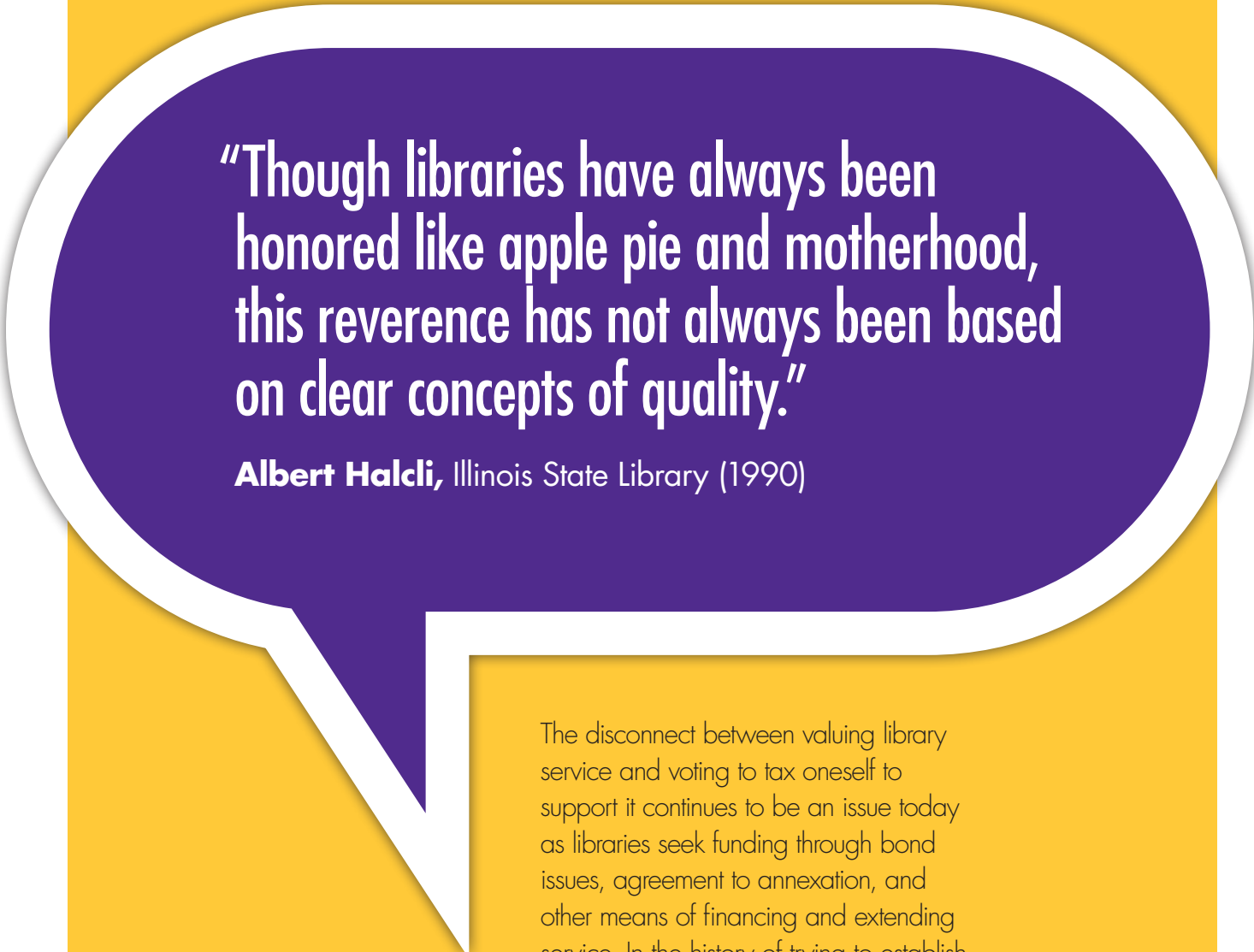
Rollf was correct, regional or statewide cooperation wasn't very successful in Illinois prior to the 1960s, but not for lack of trying. Some of the earliest efforts date to the Public Library Act of 1872, the founding of the Illinois Library Association in 1896, and the establishment of interlibrary loan in 1914. In 1939, the State Library Act was revised to establish six library districts, each with a district library, in an effort to extend public library coverage.



"From the 1920s to 1965, large scale strategies to extend library service to the unserved and to provide financial aid to libraries either failed in their purpose or were not enacted into legislation. Prior to 1965, its history was checkered with grand designs, and usually, by equally grand failures."

Albert Halcli, Illinois State Library (1990)

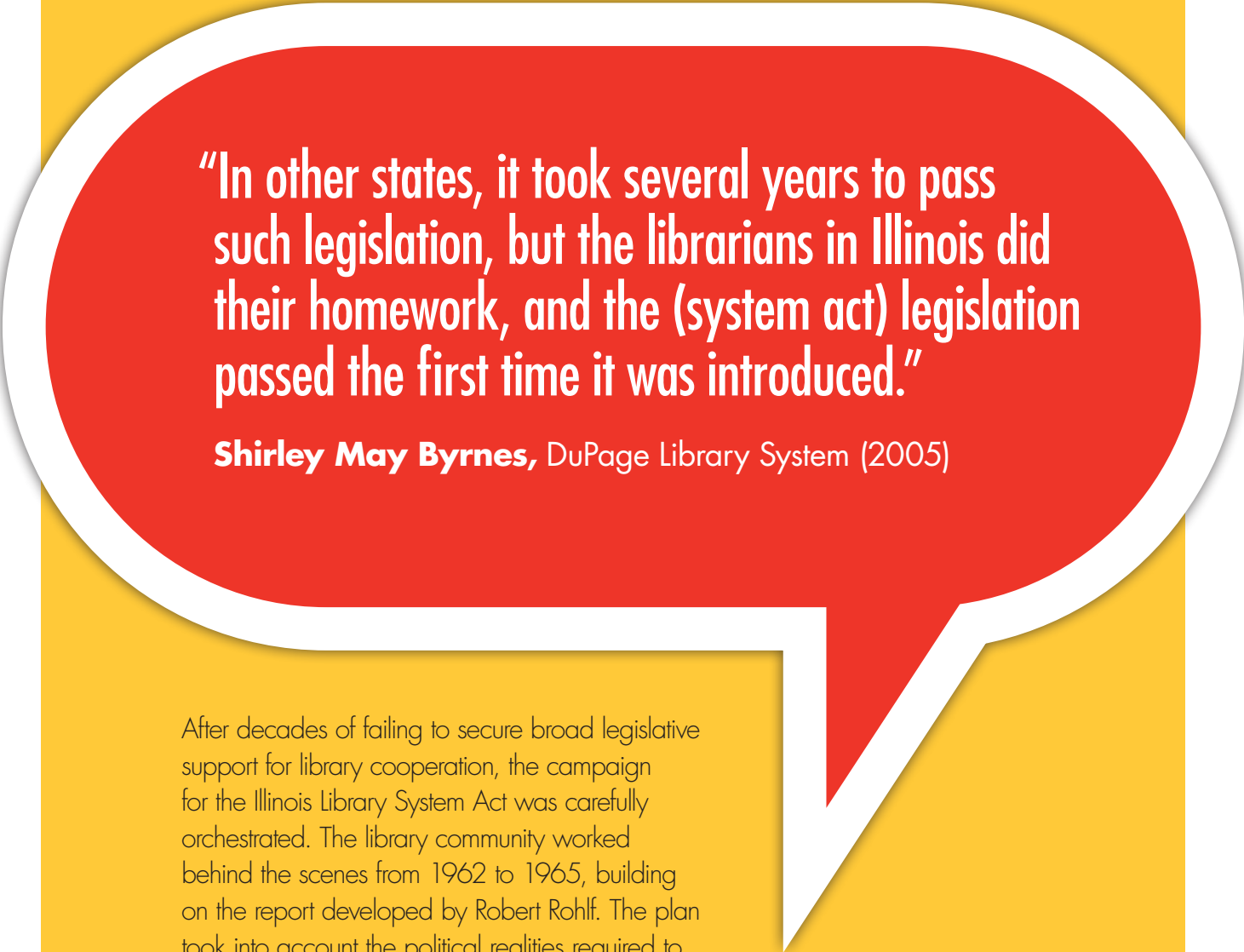
The problems that plagued library cooperation stemmed from a combination of a desire for local control, lack of understanding, and unwillingness to spend money. The same year (1939) that saw the establishment of six library districts also saw Governor Henry Horner veto a bill that had passed both houses of the General Assembly that would have provided state aid to extend library services. In 1943, passage of the Public Library District Act provided for the creation of library districts covering up to five counties, with the idea that large-scale projects would be developed, with limited state aid, but the projects never took hold.



"Though libraries have always been honored like apple pie and motherhood, this reverence has not always been based on clear concepts of quality."

Albert Halcli, Illinois State Library (1990)

The disconnect between valuing library service and voting to tax oneself to support it continues to be an issue today as libraries seek funding through bond issues, agreement to annexation, and other means of financing and extending service. In the history of trying to establish statewide cooperation in Illinois, local communities, especially rural ones, were unwilling to tax themselves to support statewide dreams of reaching the unserved. This remains an issue with currently unserved—and untaxed—library service areas.



"In other states, it took several years to pass such legislation, but the librarians in Illinois did their homework, and the (system act) legislation passed the first time it was introduced."

Shirley May Byrnes, DuPage Library System (2005)

After decades of failing to secure broad legislative support for library cooperation, the campaign for the Illinois Library System Act was carefully orchestrated. The library community worked behind the scenes from 1962 to 1965, building on the report developed by Robert Rohlf. The plan took into account the political realities required to secure legislative support—in Rohlf's words, "both geography and rivalry were served." The basic principles balanced local governance and limited state support, leading to more units and complexity than might have been ideal, with a belief that the structures could and would be modified over time. The immediate goal was a set of legal entities with the common goal of improving library service.

"When the systems were authorized in 1965, new technologies had already appeared in libraries, but the technologies in question were photocopying, microforms, and punched card processing."

Albert Halcli, Illinois State Library (1990)

This was just the beginning of what would become one of the hallmarks of library cooperation—sharing resources that were too costly to develop for single libraries, but cost-saving when applied across larger units. Everything from Local Library Service Automation Programs (LLSAPs) to delivery, OCLC to e-books, have become the territory of system cooperation. Early automation projects were supported by Library Service and Construction Act (LSCA) grants through the state library. By the mid to late 1980s, each system was eligible for such a grant, provided it could find enough libraries to participate, and eventually all of them did. By 2005, LLSAPs operated by eight of the state's systems had holdings of over 28 million items, and circulation in excess of 39 million. Since then, further consolidation and enhancements have increased direct patron access to a wealth of shared resources.

"As the new library systems were formed, eighteen system directors were employed. Half of these were leading public librarians in Illinois and half were from other states—Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, New York, and Tennessee. As a result, a broad spectrum of experiences and ideas from around the country were added to the Illinois mix."

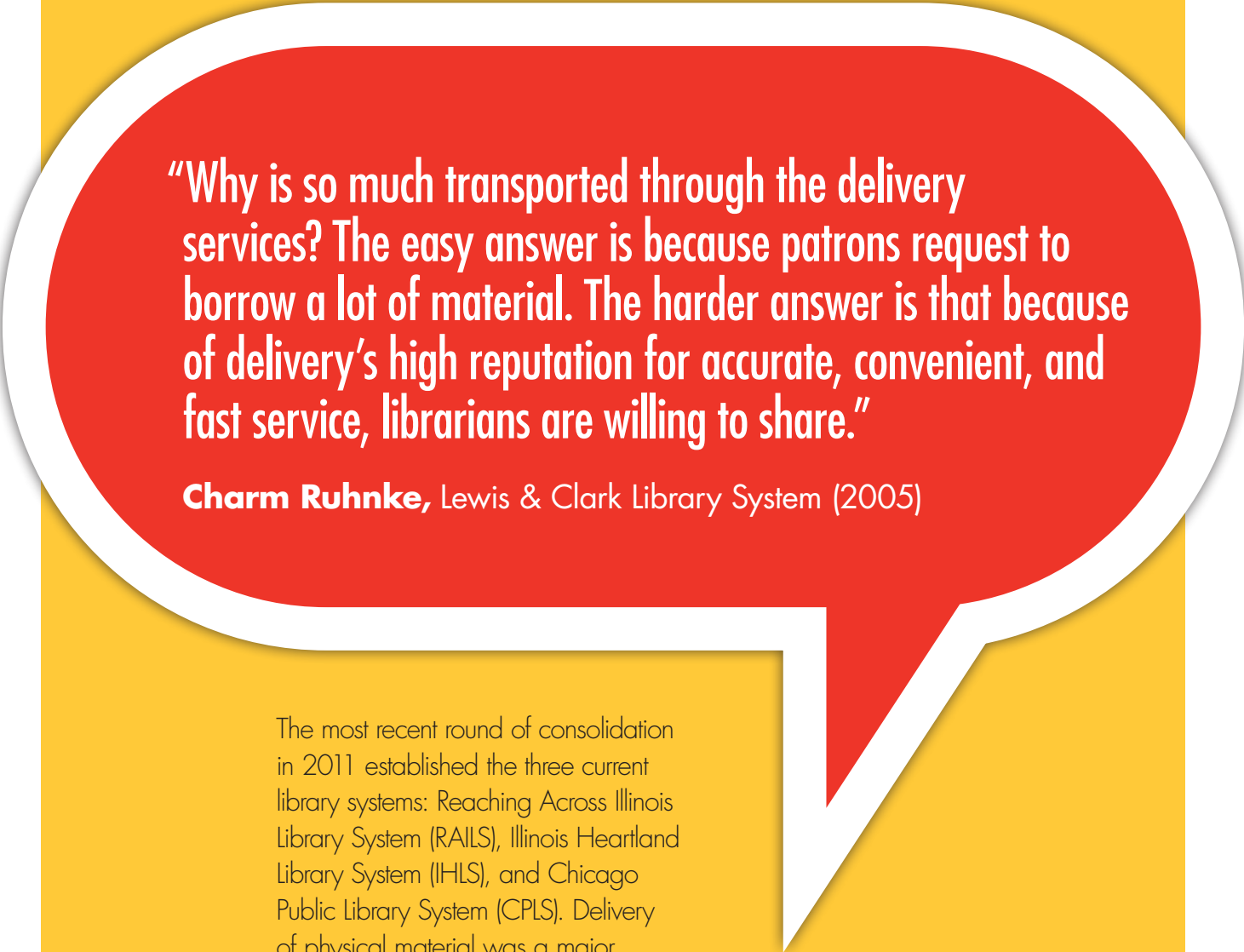
James A. Ubel, Shawnee Library System (2005)

This breadth of experience contributed to expanded library services that coincided with a national mood embodied by the years of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society and its belief in public service. One of the major changes during this period was the recognition that adding academic and special libraries to the systems would enrich their resources, while the addition of school libraries would increase their reach. These libraries began to affiliate in the 1970s through the actions of individual system boards, eventually leading to amending the Library System Act in 1983 to legally recognize multitype systems.

"My point is that one should not try to reach some kind of theoretical balance or fairness, but to build a network that will provide, by its services and arrangement, the library activities that will satisfy each of the participants, although not necessarily in the same way."

Hugh Atkinson, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign
(*American Libraries*, June 1987)

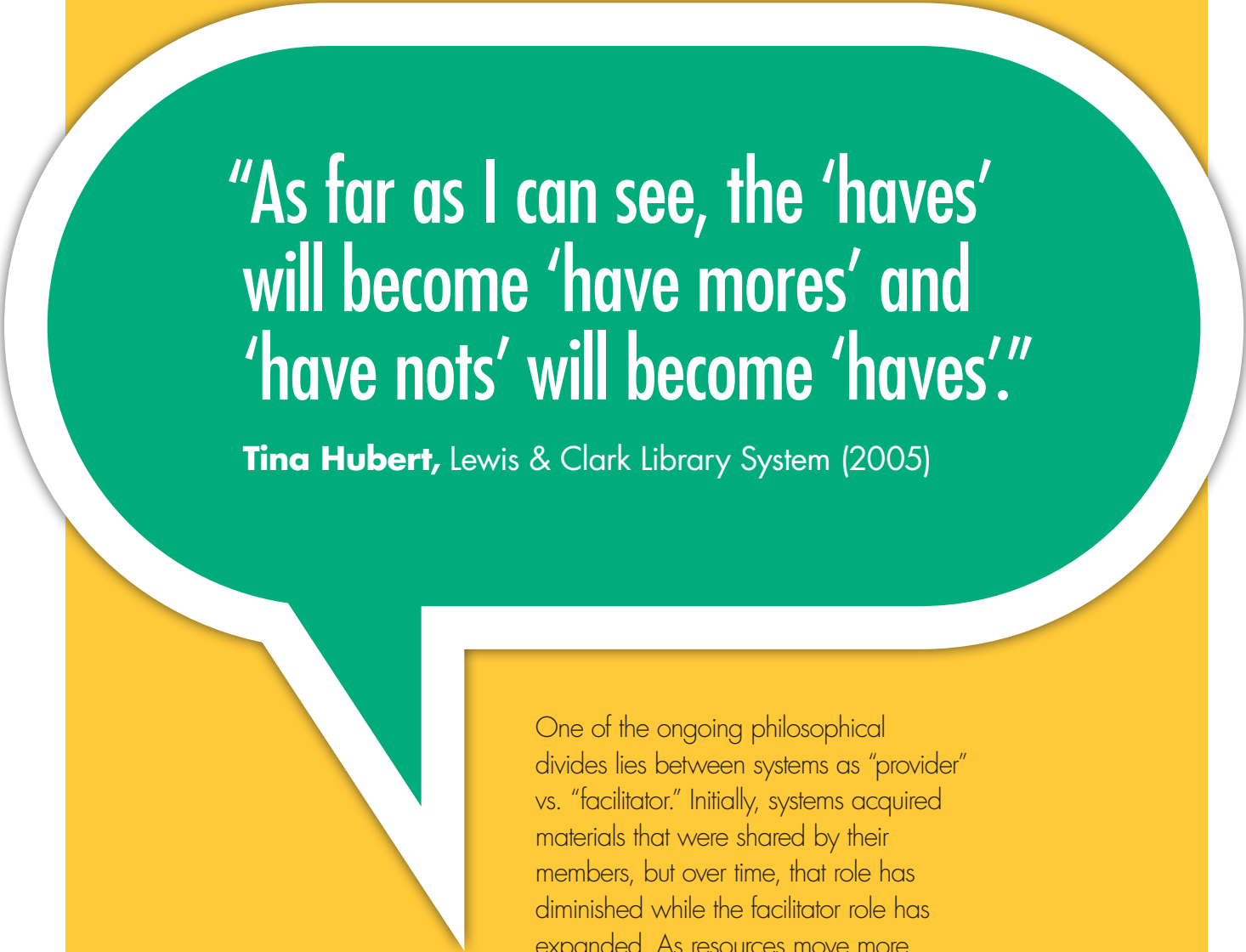
Under Atkinson's leadership, the Illinois Library Computer System (LCS) became one of the leading information sharing networks in the nation by the time of his untimely death in 1986. His belief that all libraries, large and small, had unique items in their collections created a vision that this was not just the great sharing their wealth with the less fortunate, but a productive arrangement of mutual benefit. The basic principle is to satisfy the patron, not own the resource.



“Why is so much transported through the delivery services? The easy answer is because patrons request to borrow a lot of material. The harder answer is that because of delivery’s high reputation for accurate, convenient, and fast service, librarians are willing to share.”

Charm Ruhnke, Lewis & Clark Library System (2005)

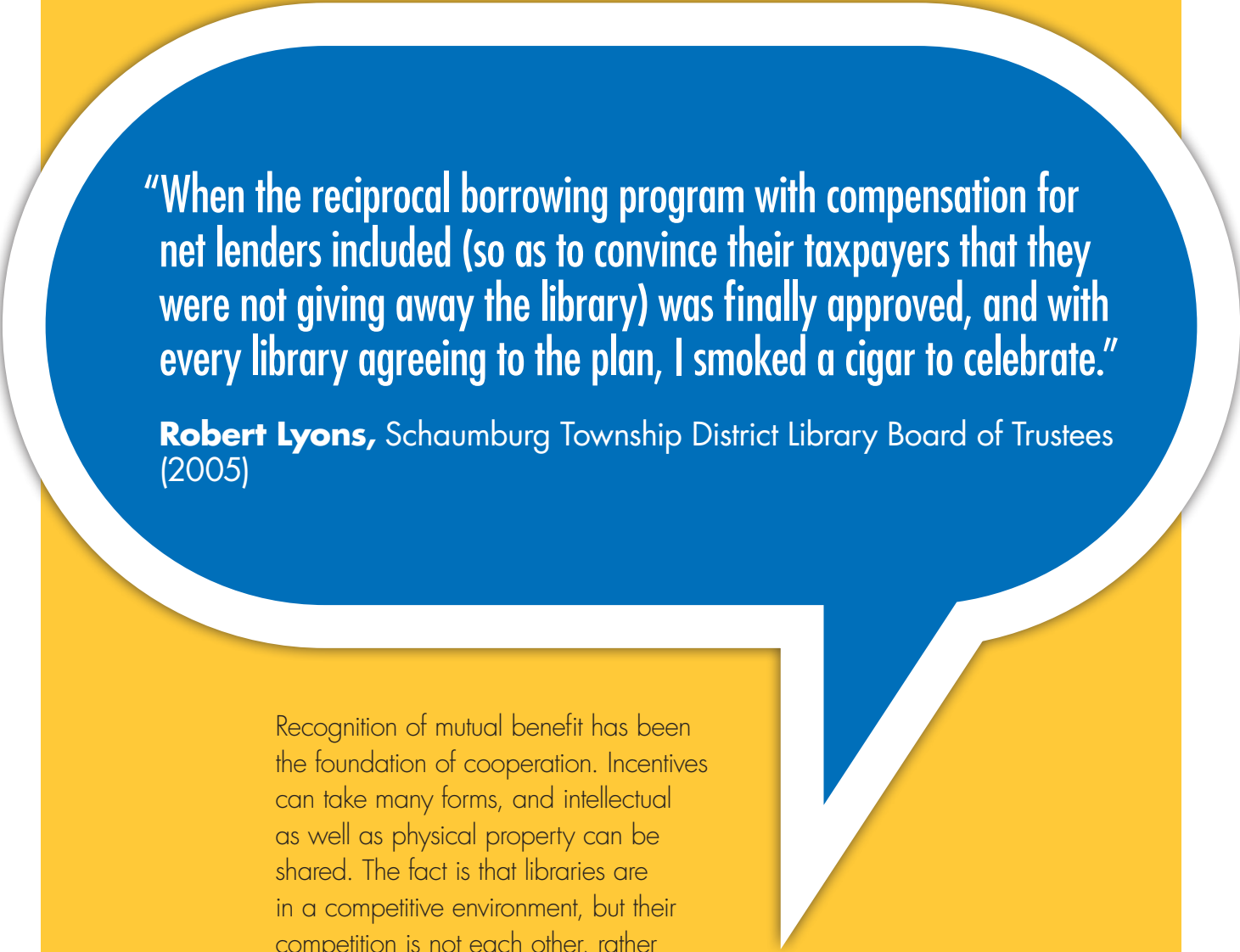
The most recent round of consolidation in 2011 established the three current library systems: Reaching Across Illinois Library System (RAILS), Illinois Heartland Library System (IHLS), and Chicago Public Library System (CPLS). Delivery of physical material was a major concern, as routes and services would require restructuring. In the wake of system mergers, delivery continues to be a significant benefit of cooperation.



"As far as I can see, the 'haves' will become 'have mores' and 'have nots' will become 'haves'."

Tina Hubert, Lewis & Clark Library System (2005)

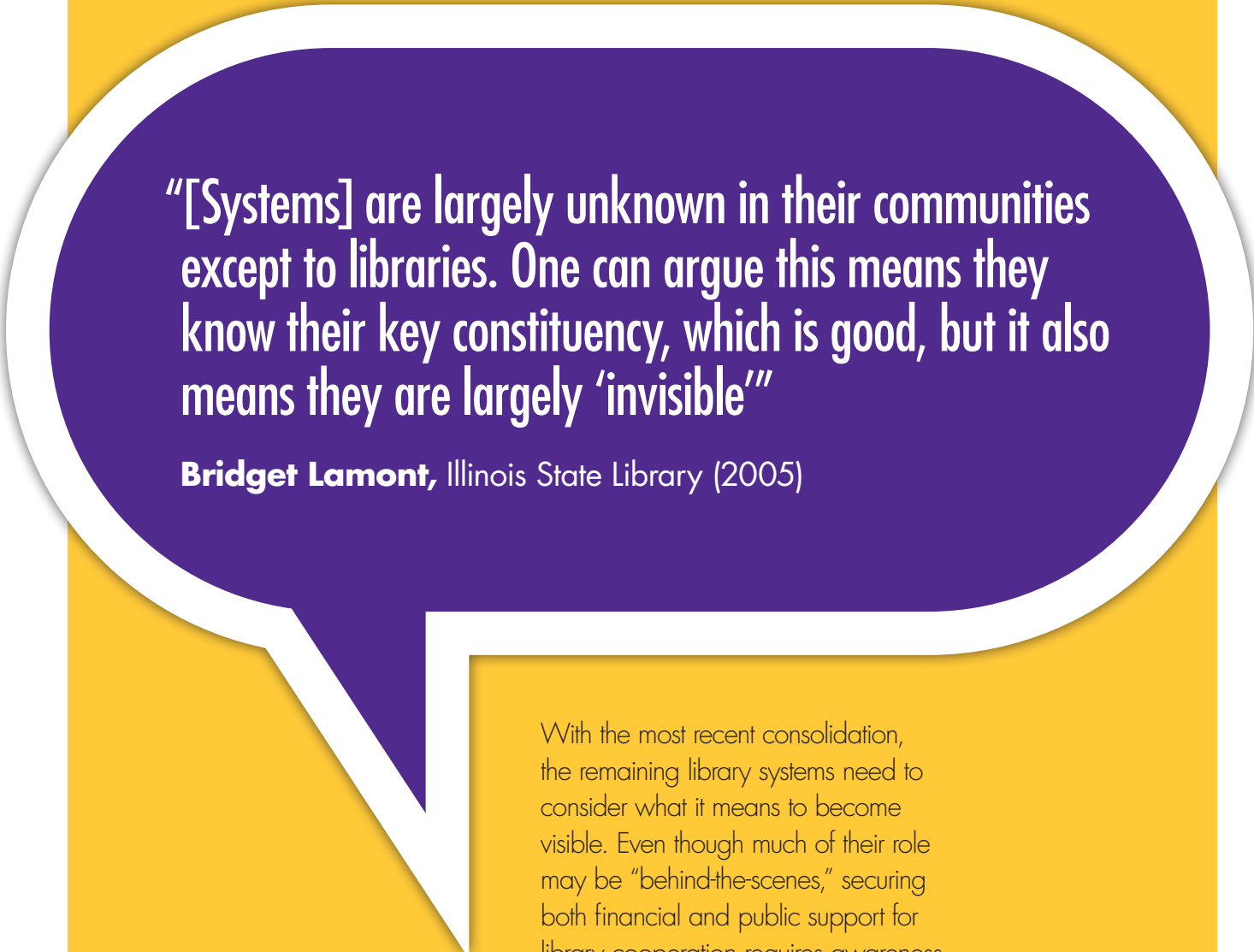
One of the ongoing philosophical divides lies between systems as "provider" vs. "facilitator." Initially, systems acquired materials that were shared by their members, but over time, that role has diminished while the facilitator role has expanded. As resources move more and more from physical or electronic, the role of facilitator becomes even more important. Whether negotiating contracts for e-resources, developing protocols for direct patron access to shared catalogs, exploring new platforms and services, envisioning content creation as well as distribution, the need for collaboration remains. Any single system member can provide ideas, leadership, and innovation that will benefit the whole.



"When the reciprocal borrowing program with compensation for net lenders included (so as to convince their taxpayers that they were not giving away the library) was finally approved, and with every library agreeing to the plan, I smoked a cigar to celebrate."

Robert Lyons, Schaumburg Township District Library Board of Trustees (2005)

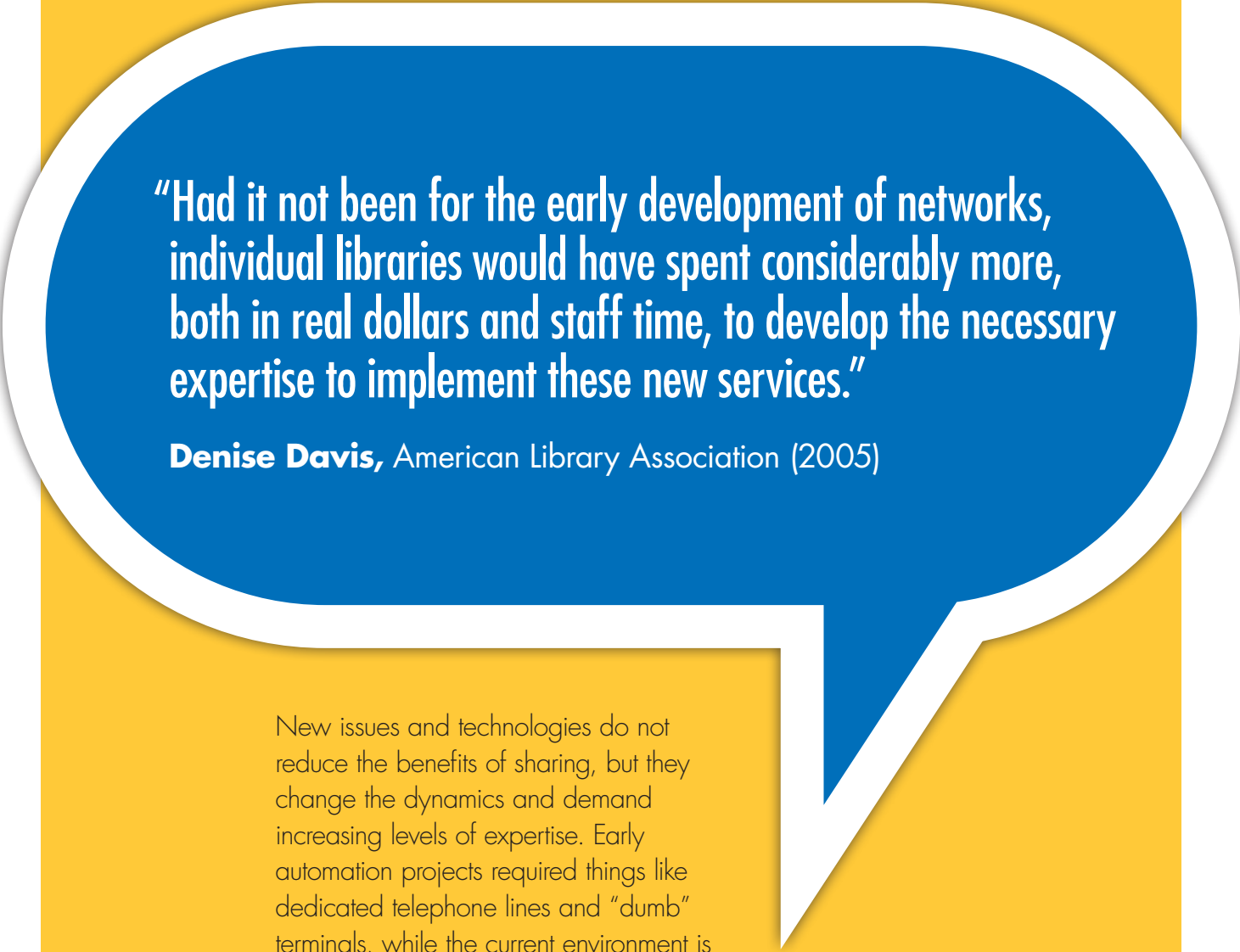
Recognition of mutual benefit has been the foundation of cooperation. Incentives can take many forms, and intellectual as well as physical property can be shared. The fact is that libraries are in a competitive environment, but their competition is not each other, rather other purveyors and providers of information and entertainment—in short, content. Only by sharing their collective skill, even more than their collections themselves, can libraries compete effectively.



“[Systems] are largely unknown in their communities except to libraries. One can argue this means they know their key constituency, which is good, but it also means they are largely ‘invisible’”

Bridget Lamont, Illinois State Library (2005)

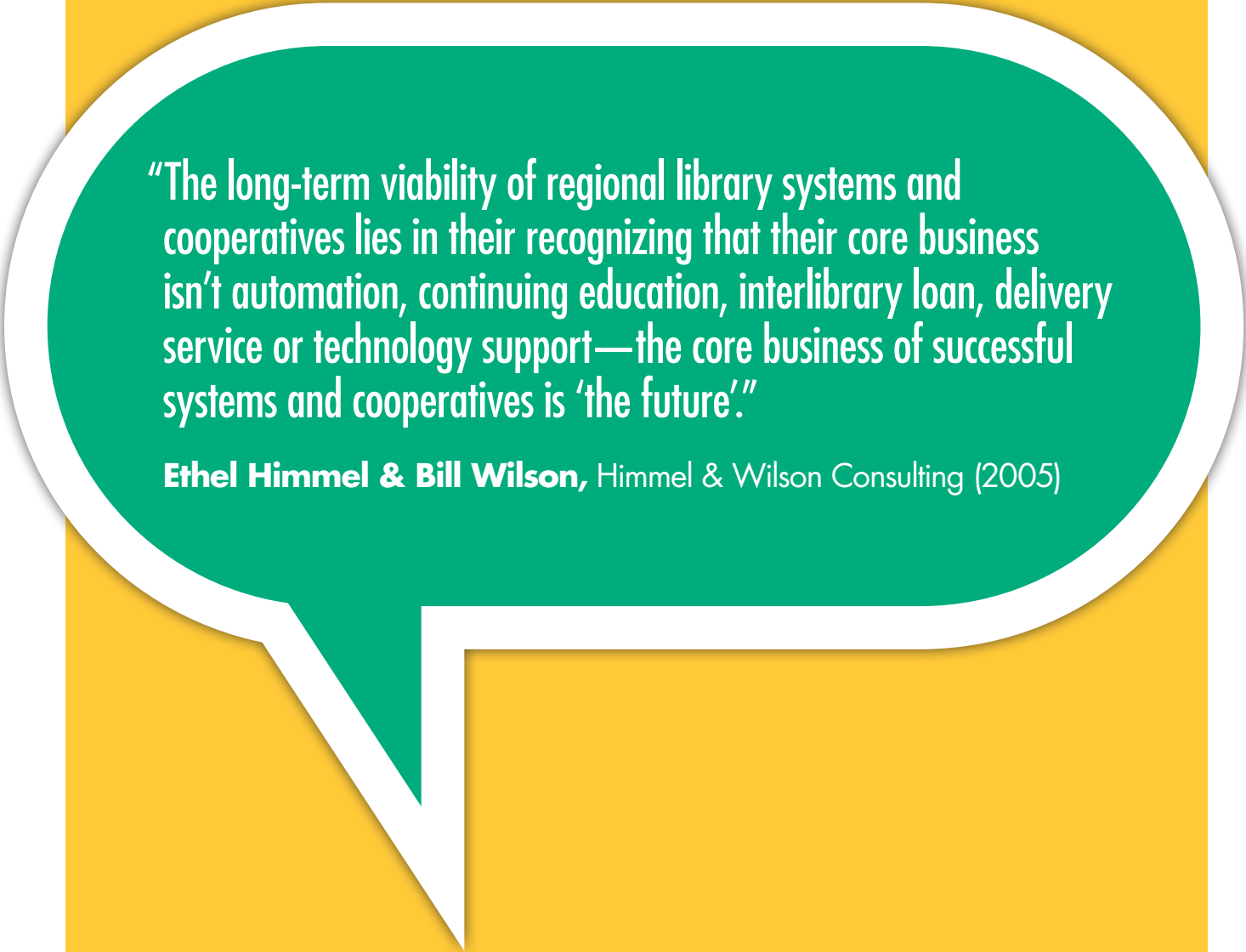
With the most recent consolidation, the remaining library systems need to consider what it means to become visible. Even though much of their role may be “behind-the-scenes,” securing both financial and public support for library cooperation requires awareness of the benefits. These benefits are not insignificant and are best expressed by those who do, in fact, benefit—patrons, of course, but also local businesses, partner agencies, units of government. Advocacy needs to appear on a broader stage, and appeal to wider audiences.



"Had it not been for the early development of networks, individual libraries would have spent considerably more, both in real dollars and staff time, to develop the necessary expertise to implement these new services."

Denise Davis, American Library Association (2005)

New issues and technologies do not reduce the benefits of sharing, but they change the dynamics and demand increasing levels of expertise. Early automation projects required things like dedicated telephone lines and "dumb" terminals, while the current environment is based on mobile devices, small screens, licensing, and downloads. The pace of evolution will increase, but the principles remain the same—economies of scale and knowledge sharing are the only means for current funding levels to stretch to meet patron demand. A library culture and community that honors its history in extending access is one we can all be proud to join.



"The long-term viability of regional library systems and cooperatives lies in their recognizing that their core business isn't automation, continuing education, interlibrary loan, delivery service or technology support—the core business of successful systems and cooperatives is 'the future'."

Ethel Himmel & Bill Wilson, Himmel & Wilson Consulting (2005)



Illinois Library Association

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