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2001

The Intangible Benefits of International Resource Sharing

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“The Intangible Benefits of International Resource Sharing”

**Second China/US Conference on Libraries
Flushing, NY, August 2001**

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I. Introduction

In the library literature and at professional meetings such as this Second China-U.S. Library Conference, a great deal of attention is paid to reporting on various international resource sharing projects. The reasons for the interest in library cooperation across borders are well known, beginning with the fact that we live and work in a global society and that we depend upon one another to meet the needs of our users. To achieve the basic goals of access and service, librarians around the world increasingly rely upon overseas colleagues for the loan of materials and for sharing expertise. Such activity has many tangible benefits, the most obvious of which is accessibility to information resources not held locally. But there are also many intangible benefits to international library collaboration. Such advantages are rarely mentioned in formal presentations, panel discussions, or articles, yet these intangibles are real and undeniable. This paper provides an overview of these advantages, beginning with a brief background discussion including a review of the tangible benefits to serve as a baseline for comparison.

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II. Definition

What exactly is meant by “resource sharing?” The ALA Glossary of Library and Information Science (1983, p. 194) provides a useful definition: “A term covering a variety of organizations and activities engaged in jointly by a group of libraries for the purposes of improving services and/or cutting costs. Resource sharing may be established by informal or formal agreements or by contract and may operate locally, regionally, nationally, or internationally. The resources shared may be collections, bibliographic data, personnel, planning activities, etc.” This explanation implies formal activities, usually projects or institutionalized services such as interlibrary loan. A written agreement is a common feature of collaboration between two or more libraries, especially when participants are separated by geographic and political borders.

But library cooperation should not be defined solely by formal activity, but rather should be viewed in a much broader context of informal personal interaction and sharing. For example, while library collaboration is indeed all about **sharing materials** via interlibrary loan and document delivery, it is also concerned with collection building, bibliography, and knowledge of foreign language holdings, local municipal documents, and archives. Such activity occurs very frequently between individuals, librarians cooperating and sharing expertise without realizing that they are “sharing resources.” Such personal interaction may also mean **sharing expertise** on technical matters, preservation issues, and planning, assisting colleagues unfamiliar with a particular issue or problem. In this context, reference is made to free advice, not paid consulting. Professionals also generously **share experience**, helping others to learn from one’s own

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successes and past mistakes, explaining how goals were achieved and obstacles overcome. Library cooperation also means **sharing** diverse **viewpoints** so that others can benefit by seeing things differently, in a new frame of reference, of meeting the challenges all professionals face no matter where they work in the global village.

Librarians also **share methodology**, how tasks are performed in varying situations, with different, sometimes fewer, resources, frequently in the face of significant obstacles.

Lately libraries also collaborate by **sharing buying power**, by grouping together to obtain discounts on electronic resources and services.

This variety of interaction was described well by Maurice Line: “It must be said, first, that “co-operation” embraces a vast number of informal transactions. Human beings are generally willing to help one another, within limits, and a great deal of co-operation takes place between librarians every day, in person, by phone, by mail, and in other ways. This is not what we think of when co-operation is mentioned, but it cannot be ignored; it does an immense amount to oil the wheels of library operations, and its value is beyond question, if only in making everyone’s lives more livable.”ⁱ

III. New venues for international cooperation

In light of the previous statements, it is obvious that library cooperation, formal and informal, institution-to-institution or person-to-person, is not place bound. It occurs dozens of times daily in libraries, on the telephone and increasingly in cyberspace, via e-mail and the World Wide Web. Resource sharing occurs, too, at local, regional, national, and international meetings. In fact, professional gatherings are one of the most important

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venues for resource sharing because it is at conferences that contacts are made, existing ties strengthened, new ideas born, projects planned, and knowledge exchanged.

Professional conferences are often accompanied by on-site visits to area libraries, where a better understanding of local situations is obtained and where conversation can lead to further collaborative activity. Finally, the results of international cooperation are reported in the library literature where ideas can have unforeseen additional impact when librarians are inspired by the success of others and the possibilities of repeating or building upon previous work.

IV. Tangible benefits of international resource sharing

Before a discussion of the intangible benefits of working together on a global scale, it may be helpful to briefly review the concrete advantages of international library collaboration, beginning with providing users with physical access to foreign materials via interlibrary loan. The professor and student both benefit from such service which today is often relatively quick and inexpensive, at least compared to a decade ago before the advent of the Internet. This now routine international interlibrary loan service should not be taken for granted, especially when hard-to-obtain items are involved: "...to the user seeking a rare or obscure publication the value of that one item found may be infinitely greater than a whole host of journal articles supplied from well-known publishers to an information-hungry scientist."ⁱⁱ

Cooperative cataloging with libraries around the world means bibliographic access to foreign collections, especially valuable when the resulting data is placed in

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national and international databases available via the Internet. Consultation of such information in advance of a trip abroad can save time, energy, and frustration for the researcher. Once overseas, cooperative agreements can mean onsite use privileges, a distinct plus for the faculty member wanting to use overseas libraries and archives.

Distance education, frequently conducted today via the World Wide Web, is aided by joint efforts that provide documents and books as well as onsite use privileges at cooperating institutions. Yet another tangible benefit is providing access to formerly inaccessible rare or brittle materials thanks to collaborative digitization projects and online access.

V. Intangible benefits of international resource sharing

In addition to the aforementioned concrete advantages of international library collaboration, there are also many intangible rewards for the participants. Academic libraries, for instance, receive many benefits from supporting their college or university's international programs. Whether assisting with faculty research by providing overseas interlibrary loan, developing foreign collections, helping arrange research visits abroad, providing library instruction for international students, or creating Web sites which offer access to the world resources, the library can be a key player in the achievement of the university's global mission. Such activity benefits the library by raising its visibility on campus and underscoring its importance as a vital partner in the achievement of the institution's goals.

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The academic library also benefits from the tremendous goodwill it creates within the professional global community by assisting libraries with limited collections and human resources, sharing knowledge and providing access to information to those institutions in developing or underdeveloped nations. By sharing local information resources with sister libraries abroad, the academic library not only meets immediate needs of users overseas but also contributes in a small but important way to the success of worldwide research. A willingness to share and work with colleagues abroad also lays the foundation for future international cooperative projects.

An academic library's parent institution benefits significantly, too, from the library's involvement in international collaboration as such activity supports the university's international programs and vision. As the school often does not think of the library as support for its international activities, it is necessary for the library director to be proactive and to communicate what the library is doing globally as well as to offer support for the university's international mission. Further, if librarians are active in international library associations and present papers at overseas meetings, the visibility of the institution is likewise increased with potentially very positive results.

There are many advantages, too, for the librarian who is active in the international resource sharing arena. Perhaps one of the most noteworthy benefits of working with overseas colleagues is learning new ways of doing old things. It is tempting to think that there is nothing more to learn and that current methods are best. Nothing could be further from the truth, of course. Indeed, librarians have much to learn from colleagues in other countries where the work environment may be quite different and challenging, and where

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resources are in short supply. Further, new ideas may emerge, often unexpectedly, as the by-product of an international resource sharing program.

Working with colleagues in underdeveloped and developing countries provides a totally new perspective for librarians in the so-called First World, especially in terms of appreciating the availability of financial and human resources. Libraries in many countries, for example, often have no book budget at all and must depend entirely on gifts of materials and exchanges. Yet they successfully provide information to their users with a variety of innovative techniques, relying heavily on the World Wide Web and upon local resource sharing agreements. Librarians in the developed world cannot relate to such a situation because they usually have adequate book budgets and relatively good financial support. Yet even wealthy libraries sometimes face budget reductions and therefore can learn from the experience of international colleagues who routinely cope with minimal resources.

By making personal contacts and developing friendships with colleagues abroad, one can more easily pave the way for the use of foreign collections by students and faculty, as well as be able to ask occasional favors, for instance the interlibrary loan of an item that might not normally circulate. Close relationships will result in the trust and confidence needed for the establishment of formal cooperative projects in which ideas, materials, and experience may be freely shared. Personal contacts are extremely important in many countries and often are the only way to accomplish objectives. Such relationships are often initiated at international conferences and during travel abroad. But personal interactions do not only result in collaborative projects. The internationally

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active librarian often also makes new, lifelong friends in the process of gain a broader perspective on the profession.

So apart from the very real and important professional benefits of world library partnerships, there are significant intangibles for one's personal life. Through travel abroad for professional reasons, one expands one's horizons and gains an appreciation of other peoples and their cultures including, but not limited to, history and politics, music and folk dances, international films, art and architecture, cuisine, holiday customs, and so on. Librarians returning from conferences abroad become much more aware of news and events in the countries just visited. Interest in foreign languages may be reawakened, especially after encountering colleagues who are fluent in several tongues. Lives have been enriched many times over from the sometimes unexpected intangible benefits of contacts with overseas librarians: new perspectives, new understandings, and new discoveries.

VI. Summary

In addition to serving patrons better, solving mutual problems, and achieving common goals, international library cooperation has many intangible benefits for libraries, colleges and universities, and librarians. Working together expands personal horizons, exposes one to new ideas, and results in fruitful cooperation. One of the most important intangible benefits of all is breaking down the barriers of ignorance, misunderstanding, bias, and fear. The more one knows and the more experience one has, the less reluctant one will be to try something new, to take risks, to cooperate

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internationally for the improvement of libraries, users, and universities. Global library resource sharing means empowerment for all participants, often in both tangible and intangible ways.

ⁱ Maurice B. Line, "Co-operation: the triumph of hope over experience?" Interlending & Document Supply 25(2) 1997.

ⁱⁱ Graham P. Cornish, "Empowering society through the global flow of information," Interlending & Document Supply, 28 (1); 2000.