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## Erasing Boundaries: Global Resource Sharing in the 21st Century

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## **ERASING BOUNDARIES: GLOBAL RESOURCE SHARING IN THE 21ST CENTURY**

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### **1 Introduction**

Academic libraries have long been accustomed to participating in cooperative ventures with neighboring institutions as well as with those in other regions of their country. In large part, such activities have grown out of a desire to reduce or control costs, as well as to provide users with a broader base of materials for research, study, and teaching. Because not even a well-developed national library is able to fulfill all its users' needs all the time, today's university libraries must depend upon one another to fulfill those needs. For many decades, the resource sharing tradition has been particularly strong among academic libraries in the United States, Canada, Great Britain, and Western Europe. Rising costs, increased user demand, and enhancements in technology, has all contributed to a steadily growing interest in sharing collections, services, and expertise. Indeed, as the end of the century approaches, resource sharing programs continue to grow in number and scope, now often extending beyond one's own national borders to the world at large.

The focus of my paper today is to explore some of the important issues related to international resource sharing and to underscore why it is so vital to the academic library community.

### **2 Why Library Resource Sharing Programs?**

The most common reason that academic libraries participate in resource sharing activities is to provide their users with access to additional books, periodicals, documents, and other items in many formats. This objective is accomplished most often through interlibrary loan or through reciprocal borrowing agreements in which patrons have direct access to external library collections. By participating in such programs, the university library greatly compliments its local collection in response to its patrons' needs and demands for information.

Additional common objectives of cooperative ventures among academic libraries are (1) to provide improved bibliographic access to the collections of many libraries by creating union catalogs and union lists of serials, especially useful to interlibrary loan staff and scholars; (2) to speed up the processing of materials as well as to reallocate technical services staff through cooperative cataloging; (3) to respond to increasing user demand for information resources while reducing costs of access by group purchases of electronic data bases, including full-text periodicals, newspapers, and other documents; (4) to solve problems or carry out projects when local expertise is insufficient or non-existent through staff exchange programs; and (5) to preserve and make accessible important unique collections by pooling staff and fiscal resources with other institutions.

Other reasons for university library resource sharing are less tangible but just as important: (1) goodwill in helping libraries with inadequate collections and/or staffing; (2) political pressure by

one's own institution or area consortium; and (3) increased emphasis on serving distance education students. These and other factors play an important role in determining whether or not a university library is actively involved in cooperative ventures. One might say that it is almost impossible *not* to participate in resource sharing at some level in today's world, even if the desire is lacking.

### **3 Importance of International Resource Sharing for Libraries**

While academic library cooperation most often occurs among institutions in one's own city, state, region, and country, increasingly there is a need to work with colleagues across borders or around the world. But why is that so? Why is it vital that college and university libraries cooperate internationally? The answer is that we librarians operate in a global society, one linked both by traditions and now by electronic networks. We have tremendous needs and we have much to share, both in a concrete and intangible way, whether it be information or expertise. By regular and proactive interaction and by the exchange of ideas and experiences, we have much to offer and much to gain.

While there are many reasons for international cooperation, I would suggest that the most common need is quite basic: to acquire information for one's patrons. In the U.S. and other developed nations, information needs are most often related to scholarship and research, while in developing countries with very limited library resources, needs are sometimes much more basic, for example to support economic development, address social issues, improve health care, and so on. We see, then, that in the global context, library resource sharing can have both educational and political implications and benefits. These needs are met most often by interlibrary loan, the core program of all library collaboration including international efforts.

The study and resolution of mutual problems is another area in which librarians can cooperate on an international scale. Whether an automation project, service issue, or preservation concern, we can learn a great deal from one another by sharing experiences and expertise, by looking at old problems from a different viewpoint. Beyond practical, everyday problems such as these, there are much larger issues which demand attention of the profession worldwide. These include censorship, copyright, freedom of expression, equal access to information, and so on, all topics which transcend borders, cultures, and political boundaries. Organizations such as IFLA are addressing these topics, as are many national library associations. Ultimately, the resolution of such issues will require the involvement and input of librarians around the world. We can and must share our thoughts, concerns, and experience to begin to resolve these critical problems.

Finally, in addition to the advantages of working together on practical problems and broad international issues, professional librarians have much to gain in yet another sense. I am speaking of achieving a better understanding of other cultures, values, and viewpoints, of gaining a mutual respect for philosophies and beliefs much different from our own. Understanding the framework in which an international colleague works, the political environment, the influence of religion, cultural attitudes, the economic situation, and so on, will contribute to the success of cooperative efforts, improve relations, and result in better service for our clientele. In fact, this may be the most important reason of all to work together. This is why conferences such as this one in Beijing are so important for all of us to gain a better understanding of the world library scene.

#### **4 Obstacles to Resource Sharing in the U.S. and Internationally**

Despite the desire to cooperate with foreign library colleagues, in spite of the benefits of international resource sharing, the actual act of collaboration is sometimes easier said than done because of a number of barriers. These include (1) the simple problems of distance and multiple time zones which can hinder communication; these have been overcome to a great extent through fax and electronic mail; (2) inadequate human resources to carry out international projects; educating staff and re-ordering priorities are required; (3) insufficient funding, a major difficulty that can sometimes be resolved with foundation and/or government support; (4) inadequate technology, incompatible computer systems, or poor telecommunications infrastructure; additional funding and planning are needed to mitigate these potentially serious difficulties; (5) a lack of international standards for bibliographic description, record format, and exchange of data are all limiting factors; only concerted efforts by influential international organizations such as IFLA can someday resolve these obstacles.

Other factors hindering international library cooperation are (1) language differences; (2) insufficient information about foreign resources and methods of access, regulations and policies; (3) negative attitudes or mistrust by potential participants; (4) lack of a resource sharing tradition; (5) an unwillingness to share limited resources; (6) a fear of loss of materials, for example with interlibrary loan or reciprocal borrowing; (7) a reluctance to share based on past experiences or failures; and (8) political differences. Whether any of these can be overcome will depend upon a willingness to compromise, a sincere desire to cooperate, and hard work and perseverance.

#### **5 Impact of Technology: Enhancement of Efforts and Removal of Barriers**

The technological developments of the last two decades have had a tremendous impact on breaking down many of the barriers cited above: communication difficulties, problems of access to information, and slow transmission of interlending requests and documents. Powerful desktop computers, networks, telefacsimile equipment, e-mail, document scanning and transmission systems such as Ariel, and the World Wide Web have all enhanced library resource sharing equations in ways previously unimagined. We can now communicate rapidly and effectively with colleagues around the world, consult online catalogs and databases, and send and receive information with ease. Such developments have brought librarians throughout the world closer together in a relative short period of time.

#### **6 Other Factors in the Fostering of International Resource Sharing**

In addition to technological change, there are other factors at work today which are helping to promote international library collaboration. These include international conferences such as this meeting in Beijing where librarians gather to discuss mutual concerns, exchange ideas, and plan cooperative ventures. International organizations such as IFLA also have a critical role to play, not only by bringing library professionals together, but also in addressing broad and common issues and concerns. National organizations such as the American Library Association have a major international component which facilitates and supports member participation in the "global library." ALA's International Relations Committee, International Relations Roundtable, and various other units, provide many opportunities for collaboration with foreign colleagues.

In addition, new forms of communication greatly facilitate academic library cooperation.

These include (1) Internet discussion groups, listservs, which address a wide variety of issues of interest to professionals everywhere; (2) Web pages which both serve as sources of information as well as tools for promoting cooperative programs; and (3) electronic mail for fast, one-on-one interaction with colleagues worldwide. Multi-national library periodicals, many now available in electronic format, are providing a forum for debate and cooperation.

National libraries like the U.S. Library of Congress, the British Library, and others have long been involved internationally, through their aggressive programs of worldwide collection development, support of international interlending, involvement in important global issues like intellectual property rights, and so on. The national library as an entity plays a key role, too, in ensuring the free flow of information between nations through programs of collecting, processing, and preserving their own country's publishing output and making the bibliographic information as well as many of the materials themselves available.

## **7 Future Directions**

There are a number of areas in the international arena in which librarians can and should focus their efforts. Perhaps the most benefit could be gained through efforts to promote interlending, in particular between developed countries and Third World nations. Recent successful interlibrary loan projects involving the U.S. and Mexico as well as Denmark and Ghana are excellent examples of what is possible when colleagues approach potentially challenging situations with innovative thinking and mutual trust. The advent of e-mail, telefacsimile, the Internet, and Ariel have made the process of interlibrary loan not only more viable but perhaps imperative.

Another area suggested for a greater level of international collaboration is the preservation and conservation of rare, fragile, or deteriorating library collections. This is a problem of truly international proportions, one in which mankind faces the loss of invaluable information, artifacts, even cultural heritage. There are many examples of such activity, including a major project to microfilm historical records in Mexico by U.S. librarians in the 1960's and 1970's, and the massive international effort to restore thousands of rare volumes damaged by the floods in Florence in 1966. Much more can be done in the future utilizing a variety of techniques including microfilm, deacidification, digitization, etc.

Standards is a third area in which great progress has been made but for which much remains to be accomplished. Cataloging practice, bibliographic record format, subject headings, data exchange, preservation, and more are all being addressed in a process requiring many years, often decades, on an international scale by organizations such as IFLA. Other areas which require continued international cooperation include research, twinning, library education, training, exchange of publications, materials donations, and exchange and/or visits of personnel.

Academic libraries have long had a strong cooperative tradition, one which other educational and non-profit organizations could imitate. Such activity has benefited our users in innumerable ways on countless occasions. As we approach the next century, let us be resolved that library collaboration reach beyond our own borders to the world at large and that we strive to work together as one profession, as one global village library.