

International Partnerships: Value, Benefits, and the Library Administrator's Role

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ABSTRACT. *Many libraries in the US and abroad have formed Sister Library partnerships with libraries in other regions of the world. Some have been very successful and are still ongoing; others have run their course once initial needs were met or the primary leaders retired or moved to other libraries. Few articles published on these partnerships discuss the successes and pitfalls from the perspective of the library administrator. In this article, the authors describe best practices from the point of library administration and how to develop a relationship that is long-lasting and successful.*

KEYWORDS *libraries, sister libraries, sister cities international, library twinning, IFLA, American Library Association, International Relations Round Table, White House Millennium Council Project, ABLE Project*

INTRODUCTION

Nebeyou Nunamo moved to the United States as a young man in September, 2011, and found himself in mountainous Colorado, home to many of his countrymen and not too unlike his native Ethiopia. He visited the Aurora (CO) Public Library (APL) daily to use the available resources, becoming such a fixture at APL that he was offered a position when one became available. At the same time he entered the MLIS program at the University of Denver, continuing the studies he started at a provincial university in Ethiopia. Nebeyou states that APL is where his “success story began as an immigrant.” He is now giving back to his fellow countrymen in Aurora by

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conducting computer instruction in his native Amharic (N. Nunamo, personal communication, August 25, 2015).

A chance encounter at a restaurant in Managua, Nicaragua, in 2014 brought Jane Mirandette, founder of the Hester J Hodgdon Libraries for All (HJH) program in Loveland, CO, together with Denver architect Justin Martinez. Martinez was the designer and architect of the Council Tree Library, a branch of the Poudre River Public Library District (PRPLD) in neighboring Ft. Collins, CO. Martinez, in turn, offered his services to the San Juan del Sur Biblioteca in San Juan del Sur, Nicaragua, a HJH project, and introduced Mirandette to Holly Carroll, Executive Director of PRPLD. A very robust Sister Library partnership was formed.

Nancy Bolt was state librarian in Colorado when she received a phone call from the American Library Association asking if she would accept a Bulgarian reference librarian to work at the state library for 5 months. Bolt said "Why not?", and this led to a federal grant and 18 Bulgarian/American library partnerships within the American-Bulgarian Library Project (ABLE).

These are real-life examples of what ALA President Sarah Ann Long hoped for in 1999, when she announced the American Library Association (ALA) Sister Libraries Initiative, which "builds on the idea that there is some element in every community that corresponds to a city, a school, a university, or a company in another country" (Long, 1999; Dowling, 2014).

Aurora Public Library Director Patti Bateman would tend to agree with Long. Having had great success with partnerships with the ABLE project in Bulgaria, Bateman is now embarking on a Sister Library Partnership with the Aurora Sister Cities International partnership in Adama, Ethiopia's third largest city. Bateman states "People take public libraries for granted in the United States and erroneously assume that they are the same and as readily available in other parts of the world. The Aurora population celebrates a very high diversity level with over 120 different languages spoken, and the library is gradually finding community partners to help us help newcomers find their way in their new home" (Bateman, personal communication, September 22, 2015). Since Long initiated the Sister Libraries program as part of the International Relations Round Table in 1999, other ALA presidents have further promoted the initiative, particularly Barbara Ford with her presidential theme of *Libraries: Global Reach, Local Touch* (Dowling, 2014).

At approximately the same time as the Long initiative, the U.S. National Commission on Libraries and Information Science (NCLIS) selected 51 libraries in 1999 to participate in its "Sister Libraries: A White House Millennium Council Project" (Rogers & Oder, 1999). These libraries are named by NCLIS in a press release on November 15, 1999 (President Renominates NCLIS Commissioners, 2000), and include the aforementioned Aurora Public Library (Willard, 1999). Sister Libraries was a major initiative of NCLIS and Sister Cities International, the initial focus centering on services for children and teenagers (President Renominates NCLIS Commissioners, 2000).

The ALA Sister Libraries Committee is under the umbrella of the International Relations Round Table (IRRT). The mission of the IRRT Sister Libraries states that it “promotes Sister Library relationships with libraries and librarians throughout the world. It develops guidelines and other activities, and helps libraries to connect with each other” (IRRT Sister Libraries Committee, 2014). The IRRT Web site provides current committee co-chairs and members and links to a detailed list of resources and benefits of partnerships. The site also provides a sister libraries brochure in English, Spanish, Arabic, Russian, Ukrainian, and Chinese.

Prior to these ALA initiatives, the International Federation of Libraries and Institutions (IFLA) supported library partnerships, called “twinning.” In 1994, Doyle and Scarry prepared “Guidelines on Library Twinning” under contract with IFLA for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Doyle & Scarry, 1994). Although dated, these guidelines present a wealth of information for those who are exploring library partnerships, whether they are called sister libraries or library twinning.

In 2009, the IFLA Sister Libraries program, an initiative of the IFLA Libraries for Children and Young Adults section, was launched, enabling children’s librarians to find library partners around the world (Rankin, 2013). Like Sister Libraries in the US, these relationships may be formal or informal paths to an exchange of ideas, services, or materials that are mutually beneficial to the libraries involved.

Most recently, in 2012, the authors, working with interested librarians in Colorado, formed the International Library Cultural Exchange Interest Group (ILCE-IG) within the Colorado Association of Libraries. It has two stated goals: Support individual and library partnerships and activities that enhance cultural understanding, and support cultural programming and activities that celebrate diverse ethnic and immigrant cultures in Colorado (<http://www.cal-webs.org/?page=IntLibCulturalExcIG>).

In this article, the authors will discuss the best practices that a library administrator should consider before embarking on what can be a long and fulfilling relationship between libraries located in different regions of the world.

Library directors, library deans, and school librarians have a myriad of pressures and responsibilities. They have obligations to their boards, trustees, provosts or principals. Scarce budgets, increased technology, reduced staffing, and internal and external pressures pull the library administrator in many directions. Why would an administrator pursue an international partnership? To answer this question, a few definitions and examples of successful partnerships are in order.

What Is an International Partnership?

A sister or partner library is a formal or informal relationship between libraries in different countries. A formal partnership will have a contract, agreement,

or memorandum of understanding between the two libraries, their parent institutions, and/or their communities. The advantage of a formal relationship is that an agreement is signed by the officials in both libraries and that the libraries can involve the parent institutions or communities and many library staff. This agreement can bring a stronger commitment and prestige to the partnerships. In some cases, a formal agreement comes as part of a larger partnership arrangement such as Sister Cities or IRRT's Sister Library Program.

What Are the Benefits of an International Partnership?

There are many benefits to international partnerships. Here are a few:

Increased Cultural Understanding Between Countries. US communities are built on immigrant populations—some very old and some very new. US public libraries seek to meet the cultural and information needs of their user populations and contact with a home country is one important way to do this. International and immigrant students are attending colleges, universities, and schools in greater number. In today's world, cultural understanding is increasingly important. Partnerships allow the library staff to learn more about countries represented by immigrant groups in their communities. This may lead to new positions being created or former positions being converted to serve these emerging populations with members from these immigrant groups with specialized language skills. In turn, libraries can promote activities between the user populations of both libraries, frequently online, increasing this cultural understanding.

Greater recognition as a community partner. Many communities have projects that reach out to other countries. Sister libraries are often used to encourage economic development between two countries. Civic clubs such as Rotary have international goals to improve lives and enrich cultural understanding. Libraries demonstrate that they are community "team players" when the library seeks to participate in these activities. Many academic institutions have "service learning" programs that involve international travel. A library partnership is often the impetus for service that may begin with the library but develop further to literacy projects, environmental projects, or business development. International partnerships can bring recognition from the community and community leaders that the local library reaches beyond its own borders to get information, resources, and understanding. Community leaders may increasingly include library administration in planning initiatives, make the library a destination spot for international leaders, and use the library as a meeting space for top-level discussions.

Increased access to published information and artifacts in both countries.

Libraries can draw on their partnership to improve their own collections and can offer their own language resources to libraries in other countries. This

exchange no longer needs to be limited to print resources but can include increased development of multi-lingual and multi-cultural Web pages, Web guides, and blogs. Librarians could partner in research and publication on topics of mutual interest and assist each other in identifying venues for publication.

Learn new library services and technologies. Many partnerships involve travel between the library staff in the two countries. These visits allow library staff to learn how libraries in different countries address similar issues and problems. New ideas cross international boundaries and can be adapted for implementation. Community members who serve on library committees may join in these exchanges, providing an added dimension of increased awareness and may also serve as language interpreters.

Broaden the view of the library profession in both countries. Attendance at library conferences and online interaction allows staff in both libraries to learn the issues that are important in the other's library. One library's solution to a professional problem can sometimes be of use to a library in another country.

Share information, expertise, and training between libraries. All aspects of library service can be discussed and shared. Online and on-site training programs can bring new skills to library staff. The library may become the hub for English as a Second Language (ESL) training or computer training in languages of the new immigrant populations.

COMMENTS FROM PARTNER LIBRARIES ABOUT THE BENEFITS

"Indianapolis Public Library (IPL) formed partnerships with the eight international cities that are part of Indianapolis's Sister City Program . . . Participating in global efforts strategically places IPL as a leader in the globalization of our city. Indianapolis is becoming not just the crossroads of America but the crossroads of the world. This year, because of the extreme popularity in Cologne of Indianapolis-born author John Green, IPL organized a program featuring Green that will be Skyped to viewers at the Cologne Public Library. In October, IPL CEO Jackie Nytes will travel to Hangzhou to deliver an address at a conference for Chinese librarians (Cairo, 2015).

"The Sister City initiative is a critical aspect of Indianapolis Mayor Greg Ballard's efforts to help IPL welcome global visitors and new residents and to celebrate the richness of their culture. For the library it has been a way to make new friends and share information that bridges differences, creating citizen diplomacy and new partnerships" (Cairo, 2015).

Biblioteca Th'uruchapitas, Bolivia, and Appalachian State University, North Carolina. "The original intent of the partnership was to get sorely needed children's books to Bolivia, but it soon became clear that the program offered additional benefits to both Th'uruchapitas and Appalachian

State. In 2001, a group of study-abroad students from Appalachian State's Department of Human Development and Psychological Counseling agreed to carry books to Bolivia in their backpacks, eliminating the need for costly postage. Upon their return, the students were markedly impressed and transformed by their experience with Biblioteca Th'uruchapitas. They were deeply moved by the dedication of [Gaby] Vallejo and the Mujeres Peligrosas, who often take public buses to local schools, transporting boxes of books to distribute to teachers. The students developed a new understanding of the importance of reading and literacy when they witnessed the tears of Gaby and other Th'uruchapitas founding members upon receiving so many new and beautiful books" (Cramer, Vallejo Canedo, & Veltze 2015).

Holly Carroll, Executive Director of the Poudre River Public Library District (Colorado) and the San Juan del Sur Biblioteca (Nicaragua) wrote: "Many exciting, mutually enriching, and low-to-no cost opportunities for sharing between libraries are possible, including Skype-style conversations between our staffs, and our respective patrons, including children, utilizing the communications capabilities of our Old Town Library collaboration room. Also possible are exchanges of children's artwork and exchanges of poetry" (Carroll, 2014).

International collaboration is also a priority for Denver Mayor Michael Hancock. Denver has Sister Cities with ten countries. When approached by the Colorado Association of Libraries International Library and Cultural Exchange Interest Group, the executive director of Denver Sister Cities International wrote all ten of their partners asking if any would like to add libraries to their partnership. Libraries in Takayama, Japan, and Brest, France, enthusiastically responded. The Denver Public Library, with the support of the mayor, matched their interest. In discussing their future cooperation, Benedicte Jarry, Deputy Director of the Brest Public Library, expressed interest in sharing information about library services, building new libraries, and involving staff. Jarry said, "Let's just get started and see what happens" (B. Jarry, personal communication, July 2015).

The ABLE project had four goals: create 18 partnerships between Bulgarian and US public libraries; train Bulgarian libraries to advocate for their library locally and Bulgarian libraries nationally; help libraries become community information centers; and finally, for a core group of Bulgarian librarians to train other librarians with the core advocacy message. The ABLE evaluation showed all of these goals to be achieved. Eighteen partnerships were created and prospered throughout the grant. Individual libraries advocated and received additional staff and computers. Eleven trained librarians provided workshops for 1,100 librarians across the country, and a national Web site with national information for Bulgarian citizens was created and access provided to all libraries for use by their citizens. The success of the ABLE project also resulted in a sizeable Global Libraries grant from the Bill

and Melinda Gates Foundation to continue and extend the effort begun by ABLE.

Role of the Library Administrator

The role of the library administrator is critical in a successful partnership. Often, individual staff members develop individual relationships with libraries in other countries. Unless there is institutional support of this activity, it is difficult for such a relationship to be sustained. The library administrator can sanction the relationship, either formally or informally, allow multiple library staff to participate in the partnership on library time, and share resources as appropriate. The library administrator can also reap the political, social, and service benefits of the international partnership. Mayors who support local economic development through international contacts can welcome the libraries' support of this effort. Partnerships often celebrate the culture of the country of the partner library, bringing a positive attitude toward the library by immigrant populations.

The library administrator must decide what is wanted from a Sister Library Partnership and how much time, effort, and resources are available to commit to it. Will resources from another country meet the needs of a specific population in the local community? Would participation in a broader cultural exchange program such as Sister Cities be attractive or feasible? Are library staff interested and willing to help a developing library in a third-world country? Would a partnership with a Sister Library advance the library's strategic plan, the strategic plan of the academic institution, or the municipality? Would it be seen as a drain on existing resources or as a natural vehicle to outreach? Could it support the curriculum of the academic institution? Are there student groups or community groups who could serve as volunteers? Many schools and academic institutions have a service-learning component.

The endorsement of the project by the library administrator allows the library to draw on the various talents of library staff. At the Denver Public Library, the library exhibit manager planned and presented an exhibit of photographs from Brest, France; the rare-books librarian took responsibility for older books sent by Brest; the young adult librarian welcomed teenagers from Brest visiting DPL; and librarians who speak French ease the communication problems between the staff of the two libraries.

It is the library administrator's role and responsibility to decide the extent of the partnership; the degree of formality in the agreement; and the amount of staff time and library resources to be devoted to the project. The activities below are just suggestions that may or may not be appropriate for any specific library and library staff can be creative in developing their own ideas.

What Kind of Activities Do Partner Libraries Do?

The range of activities partner libraries can engage in is limited only by the creativity of the library staff. Here are some typical activities:

EXCHANGE LIBRARY INFORMATION

- maintain regular contact among library staff;
- share basic information about each library;
- share long range plans, public relations documents, and programming ideas;
- exchange staff newsletters;
- send a scrapbook, slide presentation, CD, or link to a YouTube video to your Sister Library;
- set up an evaluation mechanism to help both libraries celebrate their successes and learn from their experiences.

EXCHANGE LIBRARY RESOURCES

- genealogical information if appropriate;
- local newspapers, cultural materials, bibliographies, artifacts;
- books based on a profile of what the Sister Library wants;
- agree to answer relevant reference questions for each other;
- agree to provide free searches and electronic document delivery to your partner.

SHARE LIBRARY TRAINING PROGRAMS

- share access to Web-based, online training programs;
- share training materials, syllabi, handouts, workbooks.

SHARE LIBRARY PROGRAMS AND EXHIBITS

- create a bulletin board display with photos of your Sister Library, its staff, and users;
- hold real-time discussions or participate in each other's programs through Skype;
- organize a cross-country "read the same book" discussion for teens or adults;
- pick a specific topic to focus on such as health or art and share resources and programs;
- exchange children's artwork and do displays in both countries with photographs of the children.

SHARE CULTURAL EVENTS

- celebrate each other's national holidays and displays and programs;
- schedule native speakers who are living in the partner country to give in-person presentations and slide shows;
- sponsor displays of quality arts and crafts or historical documents from your local community.

ASSIST IN LIBRARY DEVELOPMENT

- agree to provide free searches and electronic document delivery to your partner;
- offer to purchase resources that are difficult to purchase in your Sister Library's country;
- assist with solving a library or community problem such as health care or art preservation by donating your library's resources and expertise.

BRING RECOGNITION OF THE PARTNERSHIP THOROUGH PUBLICITY

- publicize your Sister Library status via your library newsletter and at speaking engagements at non-governmental organizations like Rotary, the Chamber of Commerce, and library association meetings;
- give interview and photo opportunities to media and share these with your Sister Library.

DEVELOP PERSONAL CONTACTS

- organize a pen-pal (now key-pals) for library staff and users to learn about each other as individuals;
- arrange for exchanges between library staff;
- organize a delegation of staff and community members to visit the Sister Library.

How to find a Sister Library (or one finds you)

Many libraries have large immigrant communities and having a Sister Library from the home country of some of these immigrant groups could provide a close connection with home. Frequently a request to become a partner library comes from a staff member who has had extensive international travel, has lived abroad, or has newly immigrated to your area. Careful consideration needs to be examined to ensure that this partnership is not only doable but is sustainable. We provide tips later in the article to do just that.

There are several ways to find a Sister Library, to build allies to ensure the partnership is sustainable, and to gather support to seek approval from upper administration or boards.

One way is to go through the American Library Association's International Relations Round Table, Sister Libraries Program: http://wikis.ala.org/sisterlibraries/index.php/Main_Page. These connections need not always include a US library. Sister Libraries was created in 1999 to encourage partnerships across country lines. Over time, a database has been created and kept up to date by the Committee. The current wiki includes the following information:

- Success stories with ideas of how libraries formed their partnerships, an indication of some partner activities, and a contact name for the partnership
- Reasons why you might want to be a Sister Library
- An advance planning checklist to help you get started
- Suggestions on how to find a Sister Library
- A directory of libraries seeking a Sister Library and how to submit your request to be a Sister Library
- Suggested activities and a list of resources

Another way to find a partner is to participate in an existing partner program such as Sister Cities International (www.sister-cities.org). Many municipal administrations around the world have formed partnerships with Sister Cities in another country. There are already 29 Sister City partnerships between communities in Spain and the US. There are many advantages to building on this relationship. First, a relationship with a municipality in another country already exists. All that is necessary is to add the library to the existing activities. Second, there are other municipal functions that are already cooperating so that information is available about the other country's partner. Third, the librarian may be part of a delegation that visits the Sister City and thus the Sister Library. Funding opportunities (grants, staffing, shared activities) may be available that would not occur for either library on its own. Finally, participating in a municipal activity can bring positive attention to the library. The US State Department sponsors an American Corners program. These Corners, created in libraries around the world, feature US resources and offer programs for the people in the international community. These Corners are looking for partners and have the advantage of English-speaking staff.

More ways of finding a partner include:

- Find people or NGOs in your community that have relationships with other countries
- Visit libraries in your travels and meet their librarians and staff
- Meet with immigrant groups and service agencies

- Make contact with international students and visitors and international visitors to library conferences

HOW TO GET YOUR SISTER LIBRARY PARTNERSHIP UP AND RUNNING

A formal Sister Library Partnership involves getting permission from the library governing authorities and possibly municipal authorities. Ensure the Sister Library initiative is supported by more than one library staff member and that library staff are excited about the possibility. To the extent possible, identify the financial resources available for the Sister Library Partnership either from the library, from the partner institution, or through fundraising activities. NGOs and other organizations that represent the interests of the partner library are often willing to provide some financial support.

Ten Tips for a Successful Sister Library Partnership: Helpful Hints and Pitfalls

1. Each library needs a primary contact who is excited, enthusiastic, willing to commit time to the partnership, and who enjoys spending time working with people from another country. This is usually not the library director. While the director needs to be supportive of the program, he/she usually does not have time to personally devote to the partnership.
2. Frequent communication is the most important ingredient in a Sister Library Partnership. The primary contacts and other members of the library staff should be in frequent contact. Sometimes one partner is reluctant to communicate with someone in another country, particularly when the partnership is between a library in a developed country and one in a developing country. Persistence in pursuing the partnership is critical. Don't wait months for your Sister Library to respond; send another message. Try to e-mail your partner at least once a month. Talk about anything, even if it is just about the weather! Frequent communication builds a strong partnership; like any friendship, it will grow with the small steps.
3. A common language needs to be determined and used. With languages as prevalent as English and Spanish, this is not usually an issue, but it can be if one of the countries has a less common language (such as Bulgarian or an Arabic language) where there might not be library staff members who can communicate.
4. Time is often cited as the reason for lack of communication. Both partners should get in the habit of communicating regularly, even if there

is nothing really important to communicate about. Short messages about library activities, or the weather, or personal events can sustain the partnership. Schedule online meetings in advance, taking into consideration the variance of time zones.

5. Sister Library Partnerships need to have a feeling of equality even if the resources of one library are more abundant than the partner's. Less-funded libraries need to contribute to the partnership, even if it is less than the more developed library. Sometimes libraries in developing countries also expect more than their Sister Library can deliver, such as equipment and significant print/electronic resources. The scope of the partnership should be clear.
6. It takes money to make the partnership work. Funding is needed for sharing resources and ongoing program activities. Funds can come from the library, partner institution, donations from interested NGOs, and fundraising activities. If the project is of a large enough scope it may be eligible for a grant.
7. Trust may build slowly. There may be some doubt that one of the partners is truly interested in the partnership. This is why ongoing communication is so important.
8. More than one library staff needs to be involved. Sister Library Partnerships have failed when the primary contact finds a new job or takes an extended leave for health reasons.
9. Put together a formal agreement that includes: goals of the Sister Library Partnership; primary and secondary contacts; some indication of activities (though this should grow over time); and, expected reasons or benefits of the Sister Library Partnership. Take care not to promise more than can be delivered. Provide frequent updates to the library's governing body through reports, emails, and inclusion in newsletters. Be visible.
10. Face-to-face visits promote understanding and friendship, and these visits can bond partners in a way e-mail and postal mail cannot. Of course, the best way of connecting is visiting in person, but the costs of traveling can be expensive for both sides. However, with the modern ease of video telephony, such as Skype and other virtual conferencing apps, the world of "face-to-face" communications has changed dramatically. Children, young adults, and other library patrons, not to mention librarians themselves, have become much more accessible to one another. Try it, it's almost like being there!

CONCLUSION

With careful planning and clear goals and objectives, a Sister Library Partnership will develop into a lasting relationship that will reap benefits for both library partners and the institutions that they represent. Libraries from around

the world have benefited from Sister Library Partnerships. They bring information, recognition, a sense of accomplishment, and global understanding.

RESOURCES

ALA International Relations Round Table Sister Libraries Committee
http://wikis.ala.org/sisterlibraries/index.php/Main_Page
 Find a partner, view success stories, and get helpful tips.

Sister Cities International
<http://www.sister-cities.org/>
 Discover if your city has a Sister City.

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