



# **Librarians Connecting Scholars Through The American Culture Center Program In China**

**By: Xiaorong Shao, Ph.D. and Allan Scherlen**

## **Abstract**

The authors discuss how librarians from a medium size academic library can build a major international partnership through their successful leadership of an American Cultural Center in China. The authors describe bringing together scholars from their home institution and China and building cultural understanding among students at both institutions. This multi-year program is evolving into an ongoing international relationship in which future collaboration and knowledge sharing on opposite sides of the globe continues to grow.

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**Abstract:** The authors discuss how librarians from a medium size academic library can build a major international partnership through their successful leadership of an American Cultural Center in China. The authors describe bringing together scholars from their home institution and China and building cultural understanding among students at both institutions. This multi-year program is evolving into an ongoing international relationship in which future collaboration and knowledge sharing on opposite sides of the globe continues to grow.

## **Librarians Connecting Scholars through the American Culture Center Program in China**

### **Changing Roles of Librarians- New International Perspectives**

Academic librarians in the United States are rapidly evolving as their role and scope of activities within the university is changing beyond those traditionally associated with librarians such as reference desk help, selecting materials, teaching library research skills, and building online resource guides and tutorials. Librarians are increasingly becoming aware of their broader connections outside the library walls, with scholars and students across campus and beyond. We are increasingly seeing librarians actively participating both nationally and internationally in issues such as new directions in scholarly publishing, author's rights, sustainability of knowledge systems, and sharing information across international borders. These expanding roles of librarians are evident from the expansion of librarianship into such areas as journal publishing and the hosting of institutional repositories and data management programs. All these efforts demonstrate librarians' substantial contributions to library and information science literature (Sugimoto, et al., 2014).

Further developments in academic librarianship in recent years include the changes brought about by the intersection of online technology with the increasing importance of internationalization in higher education, as well as international knowledge exchange (Wang & Tremblay, 2009). Increasingly, our library constituents -- students, scholars and community users have become more diverse. They may reside in or originate from other parts of the world.

According to the Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange, the number of international students at colleges and universities in the United States increased by seven percent to a record high of 819,644 students in the 2012/13 academic year, while U.S.

students studying abroad increased by three percent to an all-time high of more than 283,000 (Institute of International Education, 2013).

The rapid internationalization of higher education institutions around the world calls for academic librarians to explore new opportunities for international leadership, collaboration, and partnership among local faculty and global partners, as well as to expand their professional networks and outreach efforts in meaningful ways. Library schools are already recognizing the need to prepare the next generation of librarians to be better connected not only technologically but internationally as well (Bird, Chu, & Oguz, 2011). No longer is physical distance an obstacle to obtaining information or meeting with colleagues and constituents. Information itself is becoming internationalized and globally interdependent. As noted in the preface to *Global Librarianship*, “by observing how libraries in other countries serve their patrons, librarians gain new insights into solving the problems that face their libraries and enhancing cooperation and dialogue among colleagues.” (Kesselman & Weintraub, 2004, x).

Are academic librarians ready to take a more proactive role in today’s internationalization of college campuses? Are they able to focus a little more on leading rather than supporting when the opportunity comes? Where do they need to go to seek opportunities for such projects? The experience the authors gained from leading a series of international grant projects to develop an American Culture Center (ACC) in China described in this paper provides some positive answers to these questions.

### **American Cultural Centers in China**

The establishment of American Cultural Centers in China was initiated by the U.S.

Department of State in 2011. The program, which partners a U.S. and Chinese educational institution in setting up a cultural center, aims to foster mutual understanding between the peoples of the two nations. The U.S. Government declared that building mutual understanding is a cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy abroad (Public Diplomacy Programming, U.S. Department of State, 2012).

The areas of programming at American Centers may include (but are not limited to):

- Invited public, private, and academic speakers to engage audiences on U.S. culture, society, government, language, law, economy, etc.;
- Cultural programming representing a broad range of U.S. visual and performing arts;
- Information resources, such as books and films, on U.S. culture, society, government, language, law, economy, etc., in print and/or electronic form;

(Public Diplomacy Programming, U.S. Department of State, 2012, p 4).

The mission of American Cultural Centers in China is to educate the next generation of citizens and leaders in China about American culture, history, values and beliefs. The ACCs create programs, outreach activities, exhibits, lectures, performances and information resources that foster a deeper appreciation for American society and values by thoughtful exploration of the nuances and complexities of American life (American Centers for Cultural Exchange, 2012). The network of American Cultural Centers in China, called the American Centers for Cultural Exchange (ACCEX), started with 11 ACCs in 2012 and grew to 24 in 2015.

### **Data Collection Methods**

The data used in this paper were gathered from various sources, including personal

experience, interviews, email communications, surveys, ACCEX conferences, project reports, and published literature. The paper is intended to summarize that data and reflect on the authors' experience in managing the ACC projects. A survey about the first year ACC program conducted by the authors in 2013 was to learn about the ACC program participants' experience and to document their ideas concerning the future ACC programming focus and project management issues for future improvement. The authors also conducted a thorough literature review about librarian roles in higher education institutions' internationalization efforts and the approaches for working with international partners. In addition, the authors interpreted and analyzed their communications with administrators, faculty members and students involved in the ACC projects at both Appalachian and NEU in order to encourage others to embark on similar projects and to help others already working on international projects to improve their results.

### **The Appalachian State University and Northeastern University ACC Program**

*The Librarian-Led American Culture Center Project – The First Year:* Appalachian State University in 2012 was not new to establishing partnerships with institutions in China. It had, for example, a relationship with Northeastern University (NEU) in Shenyang dating back to 1981 when former chancellor, John E. Thomas, initiated an exchange program with Northeast Institute of Technology, now Northeastern University. Appalachian, in fact, was the first university in the United States to develop a bilateral relationship with a Chinese university that was not initiated at a government level following China's Open Door Policy of the late 1970s. That relationship waned over the years with little exchange activity until 2011 when a librarian at Appalachian applied for and was awarded a \$100,000 grant from the U.S. Department of

State to create an American Cultural Center in partnership with Northeastern University in Shenyang, China.

The American Cultural Center organized between Appalachian State University and Northeastern University was dedicated May 10, 2013 on American Culture Day at NEU. It included an office and a reading room containing books, films and other materials about American culture. NEU also installed video conference equipment, computers, and other educational materials for the center.

During NEU's 2013 spring semester, six professors from Appalachian presented topics about Shenyang's and the Appalachian region's coal mining industry, the sustainable development program at Appalachian, information technology ethics and e-commerce, the history and music of the Appalachian region, slavery in the U.S., changing U.S. demographics, and American cooking and gardening – all topics requested by educators and students at NEU.

During the spring semester and summer session of 2013 each institution sent an exchange professor to conduct teaching and research at the partner university. The grant also sponsored a student leaders program that spring in which students from both universities participated using email and Skype to communicate about their projects.

The first year grant also supported outreach to the general public in Shenyang. Activities included music performances by Chinese and American musicians, a lecture series presented by professors from other NEU partner universities in U.S., and a model UN student conference from universities in Shenyang.

*The Librarian-Led American Culture Center Project – The Second and Third Year:*  
Appalachian and NEU have both demonstrated strong commitment to sustainable development.

Two librarians at Appalachian applied for and received a \$50,000 supplementary grant from the U.S. Department of State in fall 2013 to focus on the topic of sustainability for the ACC program in 2014, which was titled: *People and Nature for a Sustainable Future Program*. The goal for the program was to host lectures, film showings and book discussions as well as to build the ACC's book and film collection on topics related to American approaches to sustainability.

Both universities found the first year ACC sustainability program a great impetus to learn about and develop new perspectives on sustainable development. Therefore, the two Appalachian librarians who had successfully partnered with NEU the previous year, proposed to continue the sustainability-themed program for the year of October 2014 to October 2015 and received the \$50,000 supplementary funding from the State Department. During the third year, the program shifted the focus of the previous year's program from the literary and philosophical roots of sustainability in American culture to social, economic, and technological aspects of sustainable development in American society and to further develop students and citizens' understanding of other aspects of sustainability in the U.S.

The establishment of the ACC at Northeastern University in May 2013, followed by a thematic focus on sustainability for the Center's second and third year program in 2014 and 2015, tied in well with both Appalachian's five-year Quality Enhancement Plan "Global Learning: A World of Opportunities for Appalachian Students," as well as sustainability aspects of the university's strategic plan. The Appalachian's 2014 Strategic Plan was themed on "Envisioning a Just and Sustainable Future." Therefore, the library and university administration at Appalachian enthusiastically offered their support to these ambitious ACC projects which helped to make them much more successful.



## **Benefits**

The Appalachian-NEU ACC program showed that two librarians could not only lead and partner with faculty members at their home institution, but could also collaborate internationally and build a scholarly relationship among professors and librarians in several Chinese universities. The collaborations involved in the ACC projects went beyond basically installing an American Culture Center with materials in China. It also built international scholarly connections to share knowledge about critical global issues that leads to a better world. The successful implementation of ACC projects demonstrated that librarians can be the logical central players in connecting human scholarly resources (speakers) and tangible resources (books and film documentaries) with communities in different countries. And experience learned by the librarians from leading the ACC projects suggests that librarians can act more proactively in embracing their growing role in the broadening international environment of higher education.

The ACC projects offered opportunities for faculty members from both Appalachian and NEU to not only share their knowledge but also to personally learn about their partner country's culture first hand and to make professional friendships that may develop into other future cooperative projects and teaching opportunities.

The ACC projects, led by librarians, provided an added opportunity for the librarians of the two institutions to meet, discuss library issues, and begin thinking about possible future library cooperation. This library connection was incidental to the ACC project that was actually organized between Appalachian's library and NEU's Foreign Studies College.

The ACC projects provided benefits not only in supporting Appalachian's strategic goals of global learning and sustainable development but also in fulfilling the university's

international outreach efforts in sustainability. No doubt, the linkage between the ACC projects and Appalachian's strategic goals helped in getting administrative and university-wide support for the projects that assures support in the years ahead. It is hoped that a long-range benefit is that ACC will serve as a continuing channel of scholarly communication and as a mechanism for collaboration among institutions in both China and the U.S.

### **Challenges**

The successful implementation of an ACC project, like any long-distance partnership, does not come without challenges. The following are a few challenges encountered by the librarians who sought the grants and led the Appalachian ACC projects:

*Finding Time and Patience:* Finding time to work on a big grant project like the ACC can be difficult for librarians who have other core library duties such as teaching and collection management. But with some time management skills, adding this kind of international project is not impossible. One must be creative and willing to work during breaks and off hours. Finding faculty experts, getting commitments from them, then shepherding them through the process of obtaining passports, China travel visas, university travel authorizations, and other travel preparations requires some organization, persistence, and patience.

Working with partners on the other side of the globe can also be challenging. Planning cultural events, getting invitation letters, consulting about book lists and sharing quarterly grant reports through email and phone calls 12 to 13 hours apart can be--depending on the technology, bureaucracy and individual personalities on both ends--frustrating to say the least. But, again, persistence, patience, and courtesy will do wonders in seeing the project through.

*Language Barriers:* Many American librarians may initially feel apprehensive at the

prospect of getting involved in any project that entails working with partners in a distant country, many of whom may not speak English. Certainly, including a person who speaks the language of the partner country in the team can provide help in communication but is not essential. The institutions in China that are interested in developing such partnerships with institutions in the West are well aware of the lack of Chinese speakers in the U.S. and of their need to employ English speakers in these dealings as the authors discovered. Learning some common phrases of the international partner's language, such as "hello" and "thank you," however, can have positive effects. If one can speak, even just a few words of their language to show one's interest in their language and willingness to learn more from them, people of the partner institution will be appreciative (Sharma, 2012).

*Cross-Cultural Communication:* Cross-culture communication can be difficult for those unfamiliar with or new to a culture, but this barrier is not insurmountable if the participants are willing to learn, exercise patience and seek assistance from colleagues who either originated from the partner country or are familiar with the culture. Most universities in the U.S., for example, have faculty who originate from China and would happily accept a librarian's request to become involved in a project that enhances connections with their home country. International students from China can also be invited to assist with the project. Incorporating a person from the same culture as the partner institution, someone who has a better understanding of the culture and the language of the country, will be a valuable asset to such a program (Adkins & Espinal, 2004).

Finally, the project organizers must remain open and flexible concerning the partner's priorities, calendar, and preferences. The Appalachian librarian organizers discovered that many compromises had to be made during the months of planning and even after arriving in

China, with some plans possibly changing at the last minute: extra lectures added, schedules changed, impromptu events announced. When working with an international partner--the librarians discovered--one needs to be flexible and go with the flow, ready to adjust to plans that were not anticipated in order to accommodate unforeseen wishes of the partner.

### **Conclusions**

The ACC program at Northeastern University in Shenyang, China, since its inception in 2012, has successfully implemented 15 major programs and more than 60 activities-- some in collaboration with faculty, students and staff at Appalachian State University as well as some with other groups such as Ping Pong Productions, the Fulbright Scholars Program, the U.S. Embassy in Beijing, the U.S. Consulate General in Shenyang, and other ACCs and universities in China and U.S. The Center has acquired a growing collection of American studies books and films for the Center's reading room that is well appreciated. This collection of materials, the proven success of three years of well-attended cultural events, and a growing number of scholars who have met one another from the participating institutions have laid a foundation for the continuation of future projects. And the librarians who were at the heart of the ACC project have brought the libraries of these distant universities much closer together in finding mutual cooperation. The ACC activities have provided opportunities for many young students, faculty and staff members at the participating institutions to interact and learn about each other's culture. Thousands of students and citizens in both China and America have benefited from the American Cultural Centers.

Leading an international project can be both challenging and rewarding but certainly within the logical role of librarians in higher education. If the project management team on both sides can build a shared vision on the project, can collaboratively develop a detailed and realistic

project plan, are willing to deal patiently with bureaucracies of organizations and governments involved (Youker, 2015), and are dedicated to open communication when problems arise, then it is very likely success can be achieved in an international project.

The librarians of the Appalachian-NEU ACC program are proud of having taken part in such a worthwhile effort in bringing Chinese and American people together to learn about one another's culture. It is hoped that the experience learned from leading the ACC program will help other librarians understand that they too can and should get involved in similar international projects in the future.

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