

New roles and global collaboration

The fruits of international exchange

by Cynthia H. Comer and Alison S. Ricker

Changing roles, emerging trends, and international collaboration among academic libraries were the focal points of an international conference organized and cosponsored by Oberlin College, Oberlin Shansi Memorial Association, and Yunnan University in China. The four-day event, held June 3–6, 2001, brought together more than 125 librarians, administrators, educators, and information professionals from China, the United States, India, and Indonesia.

Yunnan University, located in the provincial capital city of Kunming, China's "City of Eternal Spring," hosted the conference.

The opening ceremony, in Yunnan University's new science building, was a delight for the senses, as delegates gathered in a senate-like chamber filled with the fragrance of flowers and a soft breeze from the open courtyard. The back rows were crowded with library school students enrolled in Yunnan University's Department of Information Man-

agement. He Fusheng, deputy director general in the Yunnan Provincial Department of Education, welcomed the delegates as cups of green tea were served to each individual.

Keynote speakers followed, addressing delegates in a plenary session that spanned five hours, including an elegant lunch in the

banquet hall of Yunnan University Hotel. The relatively small number of conference participants afforded the opportunity for excellent communal dining, Chinese-style, and strengthened the

camaraderie and potential for collaboration.

Seven keynote presenters gave shape to the conference theme "Academic Librarianship in the New Millennium: Roles, Trends, and Global Collaboration," and created a spirit of optimism and cooperation that carried through in the 28 presentations that followed.

The golden age of libraries

Scott Bennett, Yale University librarian, asserted that the golden age of libraries is now,



Participants enjoyed hearing presentations and exchanging ideas during panel discussions.

About the authors

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and asked, "When has it ever been a better time to be a librarian?" Libraries play a major role in transforming culture, he noted, particularly in regard to the revolutionary effect of desktop computers for "liberating the literacy of individuals" through access to information.

Bennett identified three "grand challenges" for academic libraries: access, preservation, and scalability. Librarians must help ensure and promote communal access to information, while seeking to preserve both print and digital collections, and use technology to increase productivity and reduce cost in an information economy. Finally, librarians must dedicate themselves to educating users in the mastery and wise use of information resources.

The China Higher Education Document Guarantee System

Zhu Qiang, deputy director of the Center for CALIS (China Academic Library and Information System) and professor of library science at Peking University, gave an overview of the academic resource network that CALIS began constructing in 1988.

In addition to providing access to commercial databases, CALIS has built local databases, including those for national cataloging and inter-library loan, theses and dissertations, digital resources, and specialized resources to support work in engineering, agriculture and forestry, and the arts and sciences.

Future needs for the consortium include focusing on economic sustainability and expanding the circle of access to more universities in China.

Keynote speakers continued in this vein, offering pathways for re-visioning traditional service functions in the context of a combined digital and print environment.

The ten concurrent panel sessions were organized around broadly defined themes:

- Librarianship and management of academic libraries;
- Issues in collection building and management;

- Development of library technology and automation;
- Resource sharing and collections;
- The future of library service in the Internet environment;
- Information technology and the construction of digital librarianship;
- The development of library holdings and the construction of library databases;
- Issues of preservation in archives and Libraries;
- Scholarly communication and intellectual property; and
- Academic librarians and continuing education.

A panel of six library directors focused on "Reform and development of the academic library." Library leaders responded to issues raised during the conference and offered summaries of major concerns, challenges, and achievements at each of their institutions.

Haipeng Li, reference librarian and outreach coordinator at Oberlin College, whose vision and perseverance were instrumental in organizing the conference, moderated the last segment, which



Bruce Richards (second from left), associate dean of Oberlin College, addressing conference participants at the opening ceremony.

was devoted to group discussions on collaboration. Participants were free to brainstorm and propose ideas for collaborative ventures. Joint digitization projects, shared creation and use of databases, exploration of funding and grant opportunities, and librarian exchange, particu-

larly for staff development and training, were among the areas discussed.

Many sessions provided opportunities to critique best practices and learn about successful library programs in other countries. Delegates eagerly explored ways to strengthen cooperation and the exchange of scholarly information among librarians internationally, addressing, among other issues, digitization projects and use of digital information resources, the future of library services in the Internet environment, copyright and intellectual property, collection development, and preservation.

Continuing education, staff development, and new roles for academic libraries in the

information age emerged as issues of particular interest. These themes were an undercurrent in many presentations, from the opening remarks of Wu Song, president of Yunnan University, to closing observations offered by Bruce Richards, associate dean of Oberlin College.

Song noted that libraries are at a critical juncture as they transition from traditional roles and services to key providers of information in the electronic age. Richards spoke of libraries as educational institutions in and of themselves, encouraging librarians to embrace the concept of being "in the education business, not the information business," as we strive to participate in the educational process and seek better ways to serve faculty and students.

Participating in the conference was a wonderful experience, made possible in large part by the Oberlin Shansi Memorial Foundation, established in 1908. The foundation aims to promote understanding and communication between Asians and Americans through educational programs, fellowships, exchanges of scholars, and community projects. We are grateful for their support, and for the support

provided by Yunnan University and Oberlin College.¹

Note

1. Session presenters from Oberlin College included Alan Boyd, associate director; Eric Carpenter, collection development librarian; Cynthia Comer, head of reference and instruction; Gary Kornblith, professor of history; Haipeng Li; and Ed Vermue, special collections and preservation librarian. Yunnan University Press will publish the conference proceedings later this year. ■

Correction

In the December 2001 issue of *C&RL News*, the URL for California State University's new Information Competence Initiative was listed incorrectly. The correct URL is <http://www.calstate.edu/LS/infocomp.shtml>. The editors regret the error.

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