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The CUNY-Shanghai Library Faculty Exchange Program[1]

By

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Abstract

The librarian exchange between The City University of New York (CUNY), Shanghai University, and Shanghai Normal University took place spring 2010-fall 2011. Eight faculty from each country participated. Discussion and dialogue with Chinese visiting faculty prompted inquiry and reflection among CUNY faculty. The Chinese universities secured instruction from CUNY visiting faculty related to librarianship and library science. Participants from both countries engaged in comparison between their library systems. The exchange built relationships and strengthened collaborative intent between the Chinese and American libraries, enabling CUNY's Baruch College to design a second phase of the program, which will launch in September, 2012.

Keywords: academic, library, librarian, faculty, international, exchange, Chinese, American

With the last of the residents back in their home countries, City University of New York-Shanghai Library Faculty Exchange Program participants and coordinators continue to share warm memories. Five City University of New York (CUNY) campuses have taken part in the exchange with Shanghai University (SHU) and Shanghai Normal University (SHNU). Eight faculty members from each country have participated. The exchange has built new relationships and strengthened collaborative intent between the Chinese and American libraries. Discussion and dialogue with Chinese visiting faculty prompted inquiry and reflection among CUNY faculty. The Chinese universities were able to secure instruction from CUNY visiting faculty related to librarianship and library science. Participants from both countries engaged in comparison between their respective library systems.

Although generous support from the CUNY Center for International Service made possible CUNY's participation, a difficult funding climate in the wake of the global economic crisis forced program coordinators to conclude the program at the close of its second year. Baruch College, a committed and enthusiastic program participant, has designed a second phase of the program that will roll out in this fall.

Program Development

CUNY's first comprehensive international librarian exchange is rooted in an existing 30-year faculty exchange relationship between CUNY and Shanghai University. Library faculty did not participate in the exchange until Bronx Community College librarian Zuwang Shen proposed a library-focused exchange in 2009. CUNY's University Dean for Libraries and Information Resources, Curtis Kendrick, embraced the idea and invited Kenneth Schlesinger, Lehman College Chief Librarian, a two-time Fulbright Fellow and veteran of many international residencies, to take the lead in establishing the program. The CUNY-Shanghai Library Faculty Exchange was launched in Spring 2010 with the participation of CUNY's Baruch, Lehman, Queens, Staten Island, and York Colleges.

Sister Cities

Schlesinger likens CUNY and the Shanghai universities to academic peers. Similar to CUNY, the Chinese universities are large urban public institutions operating in one of the world's greatest cities. To CUNY's 23 schools, Shanghai University has 28 and Shanghai Normal 16. A teeming, ultra-modern city with nearly 18 million people in its urban areas, Shanghai is a leading global city and major financial hub. Schlesinger says that the two universities chose to partner with CUNY rather than renowned private universities New York University and Columbia University. "CUNY and both Shanghai universities are developing allied programs and are committed to serving an urban student population," he says. Through the 30-year relationship between SHU and CUNY, the successful library exchange, and current planning for a second stage, the institutions and their faculty have become true colleagues.

The Chinese Libraries See an Opportunity for Knowledge Transfer

Academic literature from both countries suggests that United States academic libraries and practice of librarianship are more advanced than their Chinese counterparts. Chinese academic libraries, which date to the beginning of the 20th century and were well established by midcentury, underwent decline during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1979). However, during the economic development of the past two decades, China has devoted significant attention to developing its academic libraries.[2] Technology, including database and Internet utilization as well as library facilities, are among their areas of strength. Areas needing further development, as identified in Chinese and American scholarly literature, include user services,[3] instruction,[4] librarian education, and librarianship as a profession.[5]

The Shanghai libraries evidently viewed the arrival of the CUNY faculty as an important opportunity for knowledge transfer: During their negotiations for establishing the program, they stipulated that CUNY faculty spend significant time teaching and presenting. Subjects, selected by the Shanghai libraries in discussion with individual CUNY faculty members, included information literacy, assessment, digital collections, emerging technologies, and technical and public services. In their interviews with the author of this article, CUNY exchange faculty said they appreciated their teaching experiences, that classes and presentations were well attended, and that students and faculty were engaged.

The American visitors were able to teach and present in English because the majority of faculty and students at the two Chinese universities read and write English. Although several CUNY exchange faculty attempted to learn some Mandarin in anticipation of their residency, only one exchanging CUNY faculty member, Sheau-yueh Janey Chao (Baruch to SHU), is fluent in the language. Given that English speaking skills of many of the Chinese visiting faculty were somewhat less advanced than their reading and writing, CUNY did not request that they teach library and information science courses. Instead, Chinese visiting faculty observed classes, met with subject specialists, contributed to CUNY library projects, and offered presentations about their universities and library systems.

A Window for Comparison and Analysis

CUNY faculty and their Shanghai counterparts frequently reached for comparison in order to better understand and discuss their work as librarians and their respective library systems and practices. At times unexpected -- even paradoxical -- these comparisons proved instructive and invigorating.

In their reports of the exchange, the CUNY faculty visitors noted the Shanghai libraries' impressive database systems and skillfully deployed technologies, including Internet resources. They observed that the library spaces are capacious and architecturally significant inside and out. Chinese exchange faculty were impressed with CUNY faculty's commitment to library service, which Schlesinger notes is a "highly advanced and important priority at CUNY." This is less the case for Chinese libraries, a fact that has been related to sociopolitical upheavals of the 20th century, entrenched library traditions such as restricted stack and reading room access for students, and most recently, a tradition of reverence toward knowledge that prevents wider access.[6]

Chinese institutions and visiting faculty admired the instructional practices of CUNY libraries, and were particularly interested in information literacy, a topic on nearly every CUNY librarian's teaching agenda in China. One visiting faculty member noted that Chinese libraries focus more on providing information and less on instruction and guidance. This observation is corroborated by an article about the Appalachian University - Fudan University librarian exchange (2009-2011). The authors trace instructional differences to the practices of Chinese universities, where factual learning is emphasized and instruction is lecture-based; in contrast, the American system focuses on critical thinking and problem-solving, and is more discussion-based.[7]

Several visiting CUNY faculty wrote about differences in reference services and reference desk strategies at SHU/SHNU. Mark Aaron Polger (College of Staten Island to SHU) observed that as opposed to CUNY where most reference questions are asked in person, at SHU questions are often asked online.[8] "Each service desk provides directional information, but not in-depth research help," he writes.

The unmediated SHU online Bulletin Board Service (BBS) reference tool was a focus of much discussion and interest among CUNY faculty. Functioning in peer-to-peer fashion, it permits not only librarians, but anyone logged into the system to respond. Ellen Sexton (John Jay to SHU) was fascinated by the BBS system and how it shared comments with everyone. "There it was on the homepage of the library with people using it in real time and getting answers in real time," she says. Several CUNY observers noted that the system allowed library visitors to communicate about other topics as well, from discussing library faculty to scolding loud reading room users. Schlesinger comments, "Ironically, theirs is a more democratic style of communication than we'd expect here." Arthur Downing, Baruch College Chief Librarian, says, "Their willingness to allow complaints that include the names of librarians to be posted and remain in public for several years challenged our preconceptions about the openness of Chinese institutions." For Chinese native Kachuen Gee, Head of Acquisitions at CUNY's Lehman College, the BBS system illustrates differing communication styles between Chinese and Americans. "Chinese students don't feel comfortable approaching and asking questions. They do it online, while we put an emphasis on face-to-face," she says.

Reflections on the Discipline of Librarianship in China

Several CUNY faculty observed that the discipline of librarianship is less structured in the Shanghai libraries than in the United States. While CUNY library faculty are required to hold a degree in a subject specialty as well as library science, many librarians at SHU do not have library science degrees. In his report of his residency at SHU, Polger writes that many librarians have subject degrees and add a few library science courses, a tendency increasing among newer Chinese librarians.[9] In his report of his residency at SHNU, Ryan Phillips (Baruch) suggests a twofold cause of this subject emphasis: a desire to increase the library's value among SHNU faculty and a trend in library education toward adapting a core curriculum to qualify students to work in the information industry, where many are migrating for better pay.[10]

Looking Ahead

Although CUNY participants agree that the one-month period of their residencies was too brief to support in-depth study and research, the program has laid groundwork for a research-focused second phase beginning in September, 2012. Seeking to continue the program in a more financially sustainable form, Baruch College is planning a successor program. Arthur Downing and Baruch library faculty are applying lessons learned to create a blueprint for the new program. Capitalizing on rich institutional and faculty ties established during the 2010-2011 exchange, the planned program will focus on collaborative, project-focused research projects, and will be conducted through goal-oriented interaction of committees and working groups. This second phase will be virtual, with information exchange conducted through a private blog. Removing the need for participants to physically exchange at partner institutions will reduce costs and eliminate the need for faculty to take leave in order to participate (this was a significant obstacle for CUNY faculty in making in-depth commitments to the program). "The architecture of the program's proposed next phase is not confined by time or space," says Downing. Program research topics, gleaned from areas of collaboration during the 2010-2011 exchange, include digital reference, information commons design and operations, and information literacy. This answer to the question, "What's next?" is satisfying to Dean Kendrick. "When we started this program, we didn't have a clear sense of how it was going to evolve. I'm glad to modify it to have more focus, and am delighted that one of CUNY's colleges is making it possible to continue."

Notes

1. Statements attributed, summarized and quoted in this article are taken from interviews with and unpublished reports of program coordinators and participants.

2. Wu, J & Huang, R. (2003). The Academic Library Development in China. *Journal of Academic Librarianship, 29* (4), 249-253.

3. Liao, J. (2004, March). The Root Cause for the Underdevelopment of User Services in Chinese Academic Libraries. *Journal of Academic Librarianship, 30* (2), 109-115.

4. Johnson, M., Shi, W. & Shao, X. (2010). Exploring library service models at Fudan University and Appalachian State University: Experiences from an International Librarian Exchange Program. *The International Information & Library Review, 42*, 186-94. The authors discuss library instruction on *p*. 188.

5. Shen, Y. (2006, June). Chinese academic librarianship in transition: A comparative study between China and the United States. *The International Information & Library Review, 38* (2), 89-100.

6. Liao, "Root Cause," 109-115.

7. Johnson, "Exploring," 188.

8. Polger, M. (2011). *CUNY-Shanghai Library Exchange Program at Shanghai University*. Unpublished report, *p*. 7.

9. Ibid.

10. Phillips, R. (2011). *CUNY-Shanghai Library Faculty Exchange: Spring 2011 Residency Report*. Unpublished report, *pp*.4-8. In this instance, Phillips cites: Jingli Chu, "The renaming of library schools in China and the effects." *New Library World, 102* (7/8), 274-277.

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