FEATURE: GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES

International Library Partnerships: From Shoestring Startups to Institutional Sponsorships

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abstract: This article explores international library partnerships from the basics of getting started, including identifying potential partners, non-travel partnering ideas, travel planning tips, and resources, to entering formal, institutionally supported partnerships that feature travel, librarian exchanges, and curricular tie-ins. Advice, including aligning proposed international partnerships with the mission and goals of one’s library and institution, is offered. The authors share real-life experiences of their home libraries (Penn State University and California State University, Fullerton), as well as others.

Introduction

For several reasons—including advances in global communication technologies and greater worldwide connectedness—interest has grown among United States academic and other types of libraries in forming partner relationships with libraries abroad. These partnerships typically encompass libraries sharing a common interest, curriculum, or cultural connection, and can take many forms. For example, a library may want to establish a sister library relationship or may endeavor to initiate collection and expertise sharing or librarian exchanges. For such initiatives, many questions should be addressed as the relationships are considered, established, and strengthened. The authors share their perspectives on global library partnerships, ranging from small-scale cooperation between two libraries to larger-scale university partnerships that feature library collaboration.

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Getting Started

Although international library partnerships may take many forms, including large, institutionally sponsored partnerships (discussed in the second part of this article), such university-wide partnerships may not always be available. A lack of such opportunities should not discourage you or stifle your interest. To get started on a smaller, more modest scale, consider the following steps, which can be done even on a shoestring budget.

Identify Appropriate Partnerships

Not surprisingly, identifying appropriate partner libraries is the first action. For this key step, it is vital that prospective affiliations align with your library’s goals and the reasons for seeking a global partner. For academic libraries, partnering with the libraries of universities that send large numbers of international students to your campus may be beneficial. Doing so may help you better understand the academic environment from which these students come. Such understanding, in turn, can help you to better serve them while they are on your campus.

To identify your top overseas feeder universities, work with the relevant international office or offices at your university. Partnership choices may also reflect community goals. For instance, if your city participates in the “Sister Cities” program, which promotes international cultural exchange by pairing U.S. cities with cities in other countries, the public library in the paired overseas city may be an appropriate match. The Indianapolis Public Library’s Sister Library relationship with the public library in Cologne, Germany, is an example. If the city that participates in one of these programs is also home to an academic library, a natural match would be an academic library in the sister city. Partnerships can also reflect community demographics. California State University, Fullerton (CSUF), for example, is near Southern California’s “Little Saigon” Vietnamese community, so the CSUF library established a partnership with the public library in Ho Chi Minh City.

Finally, partnership choices can also reflect curricular goals. For example, to further K–12 global awareness goals, the school library of Minisink Valley Middle School in Middletown, New York, employed videoconferencing with a school library in Haiti. This same principle of supporting the curriculum could easily be applied to any academic library of any size.

Use Non-Travel Strategies

Traveling to meet in person and to experience and observe activities in the partner library can be helpful and beneficial, but significant partnering can be achieved with no travel
at all. The following examples of non-travel approaches used in partnering are suitable for libraries in startup mode, which may have shoestring budgets, or at institutions that have not yet committed monetary support for internationalization efforts.

- **E-mail.** Although some may consider e-mail passé, it remains a viable means of communication with partnering libraries. It can be particularly useful in cases of great time zone differences, when synchronous communication is difficult or almost impossible.

- **Social media.** Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and the like all provide instant text and photo communication. A U.S. academic library with cataloging questions on Korean manuscripts, for example, can instantly send images to a South Korean partner library.

- **Videoconferencing.** Skype, Hangouts, Zoom, and other videoconferencing applications are effective means for partnering. Walk-around library tours—with phones or laptops—can provide “visual context” and enrich the understanding of the experience of the other library’s patrons and staff.

- **Instant messaging.** Programs such as Slack or phone applications such as WhatsApp, WeChat, and Line can help with partner communication. Due to time differences, the exchange of messages may not always happen in real time but can provide a useful discussion thread for specific issues (for example, Chinese character support in databases) without long, back-and-forth e-mail exchanges.

- **Interlibrary loan.** Clear, pre-negotiated terms for interlibrary loans regarding what both sides expect—in terms of formats available for resource sharing, when electronic delivery is possible, and fees or the waiving of fees—are essential. An example of a miscommunication was in an early CSUF partnership in which the partner library thought access to CSUF’s online catalog for holdings identification also entailed access to the subscription databases.

### Planning for travel

Although traveling—in either direction—is not essential for partnerships, it does provide an engaging experience for the partner libraries and individual librarians involved in such interactions. However, international travel tends to be one of the most difficult aspects of international partnerships for many libraries to arrange and fund.

For academic libraries, petitioning typical funding sources is a first step. Grants—internal or external—may also be considered. Stating how your trip will directly meet library or institutional goals and providing a detailed list of deliverables, emphasizing how they add value or bring return-on-investment benefits to your campus, are essential. For public libraries, when regular budgets are insufficient, using funds from auxiliary foundations or outside sources (vendors, community organizations, and the like—when allowed) is worth exploring.

Before traveling, thoroughly acquaint yourself with the country’s culture. Reading academic works is helpful, but popular travel guides and blogs often provide more
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If Partners Travel to You

Non-U.S. library partners traveling to you is a wonderful experience, but it also has challenges. Funding may be even more limited on their side. There may also be regulatory challenges or requirements such as visas, insurance, or formal letters of invitation. Contact the appropriate office at your institution to learn about, understand, and address these considerations.

Resources to Consult

The following resources may prove helpful when starting an international partnership:

- The American Library Association (ALA) International Relations Roundtable Connections Committee Web page (http://www.ala.org/rt/irrt/irrtcommittees/irrtintlexc/international). This page has helpful tips for funding, travel preparation, and other arrangements.
- The ALA International Relations Roundtable’s Sister Libraries Web page (http://www.ala.org/rt/irrt/irrtcommittees/irrtsisterlibrary/sisterlibrary). This page—with accompanying Wiki and Google Docs pages—has sister-library set-up instructions, a checklist, a roster of existing partnerships, success stories, and more.
- Other U.S. libraries or librarians in partnerships. Advice from other United States libraries or librarians already involved in international partnerships can be extremely helpful. Besides the contact list for success stories on the Sister Libraries Web page, you can find other contacts at the ALA International Relations Office’s Cooperative International Library Projects Web page; at the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) International Perspectives on Academic and Research Libraries Discussion Group’s Web page; and by general Web searching (keywords: <country> library partnership, or <country> sister library).
- Professional literature. Although the amount of literature on international partnerships is modest, articles on the subject can be found in library literature databases. Some examples are listed in the Appendix. Web searching and exploration can also unearth blogs, notices, and other articles about the experience of international library partnerships.

Initial Goals of Global Partnerships

It is important that you articulate the goals of your intended global partnership to ensure that they match the mission and goals of your library and institution and bring value to both. For example, suppose a librarian at your academic library traveled to another country on vacation, visited a library, and became interested in partnering. Such en-
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Thusiasm is good, but without clear goals the partnership will be less likely to receive support. The goals should set out what the partnership would involve and what benefits or deliverables it would bring to both sides—and especially to the librarian’s own library or parent institution (for example, fulfilling globalization strategies or meeting accreditation recommendations). Likewise, if your institution has little or no international student population from that country, few or no curricular tie-ins to that country from teaching departments, and no institutional relations with universities in that country, support for a partnership is less likely.

As a more positive example, suppose you meet a librarian from another country at a conference and become excited at how much you have in common. You find that your institution has many students from that country, you have departments with curricular interest in that country, you have a budding study-abroad program to that country, or some combination of the three. Now you can propose a library partnership with specific goals (for example, “We will engage in e-mail consulting between both libraries’ catalogers”) and deliverables bringing institutional value (for example, “We will help build our language collection from that country, directly assisting the curriculum of our foreign language department and international studies department.”) A well-articulated statement of goals and deliverables such as these will improve your chances of gaining approval and support.

University-Sponsored International Partnerships: The Case of Penn State

The first part of this article focused on the establishment of international library partnerships directly between individual libraries. The second part examines the development of international library partnerships within the larger framework of institution-wide partnership initiatives. Using the Penn State University Libraries as a case study, this article will discuss some of the approaches, strategies, structures, and lessons learned during the formation of an academic, international sister library program. Processes, plans of action, and arrangements in these types of initiatives will vary by institution, based on the focus and international strategies of the library’s parent institution. There are many possibilities for how a library can participate in its own unique institutional context to support—and, in some cases, lead—global campus initiatives.

In 2016, the Penn State University Libraries responded to the opportunity to actively support the global engagement goals of the university by creating a three-year, fixed-term position for a global partnerships and outreach librarian. The libraries partnered with the Penn State Office of Global Programs and the Penn State Office of the Executive Vice President and Provost to fund the creation of the position. The jobholder was tasked with establishing a formal libraries liaison to the Penn State Office of Global Programs, working cooperatively in support of faculty and students working abroad, “develop[ing] knowledge of current and emerging trends in international education, . . . hold[ing]
workshops on international information, . . . [ and] identify[ing] opportunities for the Libraries to collaborate with national and international higher education institutions,” among other duties.12 During the last two years, the Penn State University Libraries worked to build such a library program within the broader institutional framework in order to support the internationalization goals and initiatives of the university.

This new librarian position is closely tied to Penn State’s broader international initiatives, especially the Penn State Global Engagement Network. The university created the Global Engagement Network as “a network of strategic partnerships with peer institutions around the world who share Penn State’s commitment to solving the world’s most pressing challenges through multi-layered engagement of research, faculty, and student collaboration.”13 The program stands, the university says, “at the core of Penn State’s strategy for building a Global Penn State.” Accordingly, Penn State Libraries established an ambitious international sister library program to contribute to the success of the Global Engagement Network as well as to benefit from its existing framework.

Penn State created both the University Libraries’ sister libraries program and the global partnership and outreach librarian position in response to its university-wide strategic goals for 2016 to 2020 of increasing global engagement and diversity. The university’s mission statement, which speaks of promoting “global understanding,” and its strategic plan, which commits Penn State to “fostering and embracing a diverse world” and “enhancing global engagement,” are especially relevant to guiding the University Libraries’ efforts in this area.14 Further, the creation of sister library partnerships aligns with the Penn State Libraries’ vision to be “a world-class research library with a global reach”15 and contributes to the primary goals outlined in the Office of Global Programs 2014–2019 strategic plan.16

To best serve the needs of both the Penn State Libraries and the university, the libraries worked with the Global Engagement Network office to ensure that the selection of possible sister library partners was strategically oriented toward the greatest impact by choosing associates with the most diverse engagement across the university’s many departments, colleges, and academic units. The University Libraries’ goal was to ensure a wide geographic range while holding to a manageable number of partnerships within the portfolio. The libraries decided that establishing six “official” sister library partnerships would allow for geographic diversity while providing an opportunity to create substantial and sustainable relationships. The Penn State Libraries chose to explore relationships with the following countries (in alphabetical order):

- Australia: Monash University in Melbourne (in process at the time of writing)
- Croatia: University of Split
- Germany: University of Freiburg
- Peru: Pontifical Catholic University of Peru in Lima
- South Africa: University of Cape Town
- South Korea: Sungkyunkwan University in Seoul.

One of the main benefits of working within an established institutional framework when creating academic sister library partnerships is that many infrastructural needs
One of the main benefits of working within an established institutional framework when creating academic sister library partnerships is that many infrastructural needs are in place and available to the academic library. The Global Engagement Network office made initial inquiries with their contacts at each potential partner institution and then provided an introduction between the two libraries. Further, framing the proposed sister library relationship within the larger institutional partnership is an effective tool for articulating to potential partners the benefits that the relationship can provide. Additionally, the creation of library relationships was easy to navigate because there was no need for additional legal processes. The libraries could move forward with establishing a relationship under the overall institution-to-institution memorandum of understanding.

Another benefit of working within a larger institutional partnership is the possible availability of funds from your institution or the partner institution in support of the sister library partnership. In the case of Penn State’s international library partner program, permanent funds are allocated to facilitate the sister library partnerships themselves. There are also university-supported grant and award opportunities for funding in support of the libraries partnerships. Within the last two years, the Penn State Libraries have successfully applied for three globally focused university funding opportunities (and one external funding option) by linking the initiative to the university’s strategic goals. The libraries were awarded two partner-specific funds, one to facilitate travel to an institution-wide partnership summit and the other to provide geographically targeted project seed funding. A third award allows for more flexibility in distribution. This third award, the Global Programs Transformational Travel Grant, is particularly useful because it provides “renewable support for the creation of sustainable academic programs with significant international focus” for up to three years.17

Planning for Partnerships

The Penn State Libraries sister library portfolio is still in early stages of development, but progress has been made toward the goal of substantial and sustainable partnerships. Initially, multiple “get-to-know-you” meetings were held via Zoom to explore interest in partnership and learn about the partners’ similarities, differences, strengths, needs, and interests. The partnerships have now progressed to a stage of initial “state visits” to four of the six international library partners, and Penn State has hosted the director of the University of Split Library. Additionally, plans are under way to host visits from other sister library representatives and to travel to the two remaining partners soon. Earlier, we mentioned the advantages of face-to-face meetings. In Penn State Libraries’ experience, the greatest progress toward developing partnerships has come during face-to-face visits.
While the sister library program at Penn State is new, we have moved forward with several initiatives while taking a strategic and thoughtful approach to establishing the relationships. Examples of recent partnership initiatives include sharing Penn State Libraries news with partners, inviting partners to participate virtually in professional development and cultural programming hosted by the Penn State Libraries, and featuring sister libraries (including materials provided by the partners) in an Academic Libraries Around the World exhibit. One of the largest and most ambitious international library partner initiatives to date was a weeklong University of Split Library workshop focused on library-based teaching. Penn State librarians were invited to participate in the workshop and planning, and Penn State sent three librarians to Split, Croatia, to participate and present in person. Further, the partners facilitated online presentations from four Penn State librarians via Zoom during the workshop. Plans for the Penn State Libraries international sister library program include further knowledge sharing, staff and faculty exchanges, and joint programming and research.

Though the partnerships have produced tangible benefits over the last two years, most of the advantages have been limited to the libraries themselves and have only indirectly benefited the larger institutions. Therefore, once robust library-to-library relationships are established, another goal of the partnership program is to serve the larger research, global citizenship, and student mobility agendas of the wider institution-to-institution partnership. In addition to improving the library itself, a sister library arrangement may provide value to the university in the collaborative service to the larger partnerships.

The overall outlook for the future of the Penn State Libraries international sister library program is positive. With strong institutional support, both financially and through established infrastructure, the program has made great strides within a short time. Evidence of this success is demonstrated by the recent decision of the Penn State Libraries to transition the position for the global partnerships and outreach librarian from a renewable, three-year fixed-term appointment to a permanent tenure-track position. This change acknowledges the need for such a position and the success of the proof of concept. It is the authors’ hope that Penn State’s successful proof of concept can encourage other institutions to support international sister library partnerships that can benefit both the library and the institution more broadly.

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Conclusion

International library partnerships, regardless of scale, are rewarding and beneficial. They allow libraries and those working in the library to learn innovative practices and new skills, to see our profession through a new lens, and to provide their patrons with a rich opportunity for global engagement in a local context. Many challenges must be addressed in launching an international partnership, including cultural differences, language barriers, and limited funding. However, these challenges may, in fact, ultimately serve as mechanisms for cross-cultural learning and expertise sharing. Therefore, whether your library is small or large, we encourage you to seek productive exchanges across national borders.

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Appendix

Selected Resources on International Library Partnerships


Mattson, Mark. “International Library Partnerships Profile: University of Freiburg (Germany) and Penn State University (USA).” International Leads 31, 4 (2017): 18.


Notes


