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A Global Leadership Context for Librarians

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The increasing effects of globalization on societies and institutions everywhere and the increasingly interconnected and interdependent world mean that librarians need to have a global perspective in order to best serve their users. Libraries are natural organizations to encourage global collaboration because they can serve as repositories for large quantities of reliable information. The founding of global communities across international and cultural boundaries empowers people, insofar as groups can share and organize information when and how they choose.

Global perspectives can allow local unique cultures to thrive and be protected. To accomplish this goal, there must be the right balance between global and local needs. Librarians must develop cross-cultural communication skills including the ability to listen, learn, exchange ideas, and understand local needs in a global context to work successfully in a global context and find the balance between global and local perspectives.

Since 1991 the Mortenson Center for International Library Programs at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign has been a center for continuing education for international librarians from over 80 countries. We value the opportunity to learn from and share expertise with colleagues from a variety of countries and cultures. Over the years we have received a number of requests to offer a leadership institute for librarians in an international context.

Library Leadership in a World Community

“Thinking Outside the Borders: Library Leadership in a World Community” was conceived as a way to engage librarians in the discussion and understanding of global issues. The grant funded by the United States Institute of Museum and Library Services aimed to meet the needs of a diversified audience of United States and international librarians through the development of

leadership institutes. With our partner the Illinois State Library, the Mortenson Center for International Library Programs at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, prepared the proposal and developed four institutes and two pre-conferences. Institutes were developed with the Arizona and Nebraska State Libraries and presented as pre-conferences at the American Library Association and Illinois Library Association as well as in Illinois. We drew upon partners from around the world for assistance and advice in developing and presenting the leadership institutes.

Defining library leadership and its characteristics is a difficult task especially in an international context. Drawing on research and personal experience, Mortenson Center staff developed leadership institutes aimed to navigate across cultural and linguistic differences.

Focusing on content is not always the best strategy when working with an international audience. Concentration on the journey is critical to the success of professional development events, and in many cases the journey is the destiny. The Mortenson Center staff used several guiding principles to develop the journey for the Thinking Outside the Borders Institute.

Guiding Principles

The principles drove the selection of the content of this institute and weaving the various pieces together was at times messy and difficult. There were many lessons learned from each institute and those lessons were used to hone future institutes.

Global Leadership Qualities

There are leaders in every culture, in every country, in every organization. The identification of the most important characteristics depends on context and culture. Leadership in this institute is defined broadly, looking at it from various viewpoints. Here are three definitions that help set the context for this institute.

“Leadership is the relationship of influence between at least two people, not necessarily related to position, who strive towards a shared purpose which results in meaningful and substantive change.” Mary Ann Mavrinac, Chief Librarian, University of Toronto Mississauga, 2007

“A person with ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed.” Archbishop Desmond Tutu, 1999

“Multicultural Awareness: be experienced and comfortable working with individuals and managing organizations across different geographic, demographic, and cultural borders.” Campbell Leadership Descriptor, 2002

International Leadership in Action

The Thinking Outside of the Borders Institute is firmly grounded in the practical and daily application of leadership. Experts with international library leadership experience

were invited to speak about leadership from their own perspective. Hearing individuals from different countries reflect on their work moves a theoretical discussion of leadership into a realm that is closer to the lives of the participants, and therefore more easily attainable. Their presentations also served to highlight similarities and differences amongst leadership styles.

A Space, a Place, and a Time

The Mortenson Center hosts many librarians from around the world every year. As part of their program, the visiting librarians tour United States libraries and hear presentations from United States colleagues. Over the years the Mortenson Center has also worked to create a voice for the visiting librarians in United States activities, for example, every year the Mortenson Center visiting librarians attend the Illinois Library Association conference and present a session where they describe the work in their home libraries.

Giving a voice to each participant at the institute was at the core of this institute. To create that opportunity, careful consideration was given to the space (meaning the context of the institute), to the place and to the time. The list below illustrates the strategies that were used.

- *Moving Outside of the United States Context*

Given that all the institutes were located in the United States, the organizers intentionally moved from a traditional United States experience into a more loosely delineated experience, one that took participants outside of their comfort zone. Speakers from different countries, using languages other than English, and presenting content that was not always considered to be “leadership-related” were all strategies used in this institute.

- *A Level-Playing Field*

In an international professional development context, participants from developed countries can at times dominate a discussion because they have had more exposure to recent trends and technological tools. The goal in this institute was to create a learning environment for everyone. The topic of disaster preparedness is an excellent example of using content to create a level-playing field. All libraries can experience disasters, few librarians are prepared to handle a disaster. Everyone approached this part of the institute in a learning capacity.

- *Time and a Place*

Developing an environment of trust and inclusion cannot be rushed, cannot be forced, cannot be taken for granted. To create that space, one must allow time and opportunities for participants to gather together in informal and formal settings. Meals were organized so that participants could come together and talk. Presentations often offered opportunities for small group work; even time for individual reflection was part of one of the institutes. The venues of the institutes were chosen because they were welcoming. Attention to these small details helps create an environment where trust is established and inclusion is practiced.

Connecting Though Local Touch and Global Reach

One of the goals of the institute was to establish relationships that would continue after the institute. Another goal was to learn to use technology to create a larger international presence on the World Wide Web. The development of partnership projects was one strategy used to give participants a platform for future collaborative projects. In addition, sessions

on digitization and the Web 2.0 were offered as a means of making local content more widely available.

The institutes provided opportunities to develop a deeper understanding of the variety of perspectives to be found in our global library world. We learned a lot. We had fun. We developed and practiced new skills. We saw the importance of adaptability, engagement, and dynamic cross-cultural discussions. We continue to think about the colleagues we met and the experiences we had together. We hope that the materials presented here will allow others to develop their own international library leadership programs.