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Interview

Silvia Oviaño

"Leadership enables anyone at the library to take initiative in order to transform the library"

Clara Chu is the director of The Mortenson Center for International Library Programs, an institution whose initial vision is "Librarians sharing information is one of the shortest and surest roads to world peace." With that starting point, over 1,300 librarians from 90 countries have passed through their programs and applied their teachings in their workplaces.



Association President (1997-98) Barbara Ford was named the second Distinguished Professor. I am the third Director of the Center to hold the Mortenson Distinguished Professorship. The founding vision for the Mortenson Center, the only center of its kind in the world, is "Librarians sharing information is one of the shortest and surest roads to world peace."

What's the mission of the Center nowadays?

The mission of the Mortenson Center for International Library Programs is to strengthen international ties among libraries and librarians worldwide for the promotion of international education, understanding, and peace.

How can libraries participate or contribute to promoting peace?

The Libraries for Peace (L4P) website, (LP4, <https://librariesforpeace.org>), and social media provide resources for libraries and others. First, to learn about what libraries are doing to promote peace, how they can initiate their own efforts, and where these actions are taking place; second, to discuss and share ideas of libraries and peace building; and third to serve as an information hub for an international library celebration and action day for peace. The Libraries for Peace (L4P) Day calls on libraries and librarians around the world to

The Mortenson Center for International Library Programs is an institution created by Gerda B. and C. Walter Mortenson. What was their aim with this Center?

The Center <https://www.library.illinois.edu/mortenson/> was established in 1991 by a generous gift from the Mortensons who had

provided an earlier gift in 1986 to establish the Mortenson Distinguished Professorship. At the time it was established, the professorship was the first named academic position of its kind in the United States. Marianna Tax Choldin was appointed the first Mortenson Distinguished Professor. In December 2002, Former American Library

annually observe International Day of Peace on September 21st, and to pledge to act to advance peace. This international web portal supports and promotes libraries and librarians to collectively promote, support, build on and celebrate our peace building efforts. I invite libraries and other stakeholders to add their peace building activities to our asset map to share their best practices and develop our professional community.

And what have been the Center's main programs?

The Center's four programs promote education, understanding and peace across the globe: Associates Program, Partnership Program, Visitors Program and Lecture Series. The Associates Program is the signature program of the Mortenson Center. Originally, it was a two-month, on-site, professional development program. Today, it is 3.5 weeks, still offered at the University of Illinois, and typically hosts 12-25 librarians from around the world so they have an opportunity to create a network, learn from each other and develop long-term connections. It offers individuals working in a library setting outside the United States an opportunity to explore current issues, trends and emerging technologies in the library field, develop leadership skills and engage with US librarians implementing cutting-edge programs and services. More than 1,300 librarians from 90 countries have attended. Through its Partnership Program, the Center engages with or supports the needs of library and information institutions from around the globe. The Center has raised more than \$2.5 million dollars in grants from multiple foundations and agencies which have allowed the staff to travel all over the world to work with librarians in different types of libraries and settings. Through the Visitors Program, the Center organizes seminars, tours, discussions or hosts visiting

When libraries embrace the value of being a welcoming place, then the appropriate knowledge and skills can be learned and much needed services provided

librarians or scholars in the United States. The Annual Mortenson Distinguished Lecture Series, promotes international understanding and intellectual freedom, and has featured many world-renowned leaders and authors, including the former Librarian of Congress James Billington, Pulitzer Prize winner and scholar Viet Thanh Nguyen, and IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions) Presidents Robert Wedgeworth, Alex Byrne and Ellen R. Tise. The Center's impact is enduring according to the 2013 Arabella Advisors' independent evaluation of the Center's previous five years of programs and it shows that over 70% of alumni introduced a new tool, service, or resource in their library within five years of training. More than 79% of the participants believe that their library is more prepared to serve their users' needs and 80% of them feel better prepared to take on leadership roles or additional responsibility in their libraries.

The Center also focuses on librarian leadership. Why is it important for a librarian to have

leadership skills? How does this affect the role of the library in the community?

Leadership empowers anyone at the library to take initiative in order to transform the library, whether it is their specific area of work or the library as a whole. Leadership is the ability to influence people to take action, first by embracing their ideas or changes, then implementing them. Rather than associate leadership with a job title, education or management of resources, we advance the notion that anyone can develop the capacity to lead, regardless of their position in an organization, and that it is incumbent on each member of the organization to lead at some time or another, if not constantly.

To extend the leadership capacity building efforts of the Center, and share our experience and expertise, the freely-available leadership training program *Strengthening Innovative Library Leaders* (SILL) has been developed under the direction of past Associate Director Susan Schnuer. (<https://www.library.illinois.edu/mortenson-leadership/>). SILL is an innovative 2-day leadership training program for public and community librarians worldwide. The curriculum was developed with great assistance from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and library training providers around the world.

Project Welcome provides guidance for library staff to assist refugees and asylum seekers in their resettlement and integration process. What best practices in American libraries can be exported to other countries?

Project Welcome is a project in partnership with the American Library Association, funded in part by an Institute of Museum and



2019 Associates at TechHub (U. Illinois) - Serious and playful moments captured by 360 degree camera

Library Services (IMLS) Planning Grant, to understand the information needs and gaps in library services by learning from US and international librarians, international and national governmental agencies, and domestic resettlement and social services in order to develop recommendations and resources needed to support the resettlement and integration of refugees and asylum seekers in the United States. Given the international approach to this work and the number of resources available through our website, the most important takeaway from this project is that staff in any type of library and in any part of the world, should adopt the mindset that their library offers welcoming spaces and services to their communities, including the newest members of society, especially refugees and asylum seekers. When libraries embrace the value of being a welcoming place, then the appropriate knowledge and skills can be learned and much needed services provided.

We advance the notion that anyone can develop the capacity to lead, regardless of their position in an organization

What can the libraries do for refugees and immigrants?

One of the results of Project Welcome was the creation of the Project Welcome Guide (a quick guide and a full guide) that offers an integrated service approach that engages refugees and non-refugees and promotes multilingual, inclusive, and engaging services. It is made up of four actions: learn, that means know your target audience, their needs and interests. Collaborate, partner with community leaders and members, organizations, and government agencies for collective impact

to enhance your potential to meet refugee needs. Connect, build community connections to create awareness of refugees, and foster inter/intra/cross-cultural and intergenerational relationships. And the last one, support, provide resources and services to support refugee communities, individually and collectively, to have the agency to flourish in the process of resettlement, integration, and lifelong learning.

As a library professional, what does your work at the Mortenson Center give to you?

Prior to joining the Center, I was a library and information science (LIS) professor at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and then a Department Chair at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro so my background is as an educator, researcher and administrator. Thus, at the Mortenson Center I have the opportunity to draw on my experience in teaching, conducting research and leading an organization, and my expertise in multicultural and international



2019 Associates team spirit



CLIA conversation with market vendors at Biblioteca Santa Cruz (Miraflores, Peru; November 2017)



Co-developing CLIA in Bogota, Colombia; June 2017



2018 Associates visiting the American Library Association (Chicago, June 2018)

library and information science to advance the mission of the Center. I was drawn to the position because the Center's mission allows me to work directly with librarians around the world to address their needs, develop leaders and dynamic user-centered libraries, and be engaged in working with them to address society's grand challenges and the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. I was especially drawn to the possibility of advancing one element of the mission: "advance peace", that wasn't as prominent at the time of my hiring.

What would you like to have achieved at the Center when you leave your position?

I would like to leave the Center stronger in its ability to advance its mission by continuing the existing programs, leveraging technology to optimize our reach, using research to tell our story and impact, and being identified as a leader in engaging libraries to work with and empower communities. Our motto

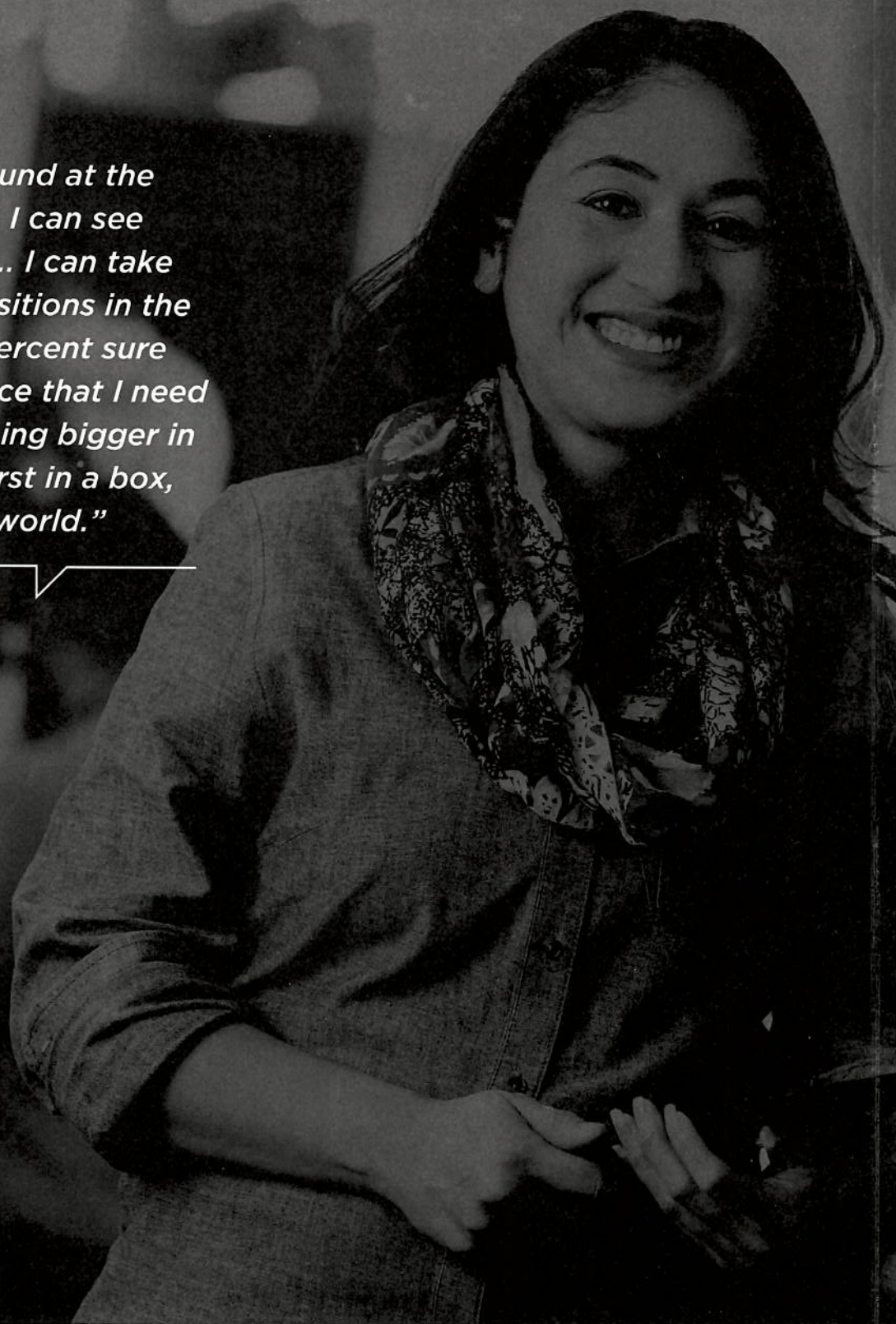
is "developing librarians worldwide" and in the spirit of our benefactors, I would like to reimagine the Mortenson Center for International Library Programs as "developing librarians, strengthening communities worldwide". It is vital that the work of the Center and librarians sustain libraries that connect with their communities in order that they thrive and benefit the individual constituents and/or the collective.

If you had to do a review of the past years, what would be the project that makes you feel proudest?

I am most fortunate to be able to contribute to capacity building of librarians around the world and at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. It has been rewarding and an honor to develop the Libraries for Peace Initiative and its associated projects that address C. Walter Mortenson's belief that "The more tolerant the people of the world become, the more peace there will be in the world. With an international cooperative effort among libraries of

the world, pitched to educate people toward tolerance, we'd all be working toward a common goal—namely, peace." More specifically, I wish to highlight the Community-Library Inter-Action (CLIA) Project (<http://librariesforpeace.org/clia>), co-developed with Zoraida Mendiweso-Bendek of the Take Part Research Cluster in community-based research at the University of Lincoln (UK). (<https://www.takepartresearchcluster.org/>) CLIA is a mindful practice, co-designed internationally, for libraries to facilitate community dialogue and action of, by, and for the community, that leads to social transformation. Practicing CLIA strengthens any library's role as community anchor by working WITH, not just FOR communities, and enables communities to re-imagine the library as a community catalyst. Libraries practicing CLIA contribute to collective action and impact that advance peaceful and sustainable communities worldwide, and reduce conflicts, inequities and other challenges communities may be facing.

"With my background at the Mortenson Center, I can see something bigger... I can take on more senior positions in the library. I am 100 percent sure after this experience that I need to look for something bigger in my career. I was first in a box, now I've seen the world."



MORTENSON CENTER

@ THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS LIBRARY

developing librarians worldwide

Promoting education, understanding and peace across the globe through:

- _ **Leadership development**
- _ **Partnerships that matter**
- _ **Experiential learning**
- _ **Promoting global understanding and intellectual freedom**

Allow us to make a difference in your professional life or to transform your library.

See <https://www.library.illinois.edu/mortenson/> email: mortenson@illinois.edu or call 217-333-3085

MORE THAN 1,300 LIBRARY LEADERS TRAINED FROM OVER 90 COUNTRIES SINCE 1991