

Clara M. Chu, Barbara J. Ford, and Jaya Raju

Revisiting “Libraries: Global reach, local touch” with Barbara J. Ford

Insights for academic and research libraries

For the past three years, Barbara J. Ford has served as inaugural coeditor of this International Insights column. As she steps away from this role, it is fitting to revisit her ALA Presidential (1997–98) theme “Libraries: Global reach, local touch” and ask her to reflect, 20 years later, on what it means for academic and research libraries. In a recent conversation, Ford provided an arc of her career that was shaped by the experiences of childhood, a curiosity to learn about others and the world beyond her hometown, and a commitment to social change through librarianship.

New coeditor Jaya Raju, chair of the Department of Knowledge and Information Stewardship at the University of Cape Town, and continuing coeditor Clara M. Chu asked Ford about librarianship in the Global South and Global North, and the opportunity to collaborate and learn from each other. Her insights come from seeing, doing, and leading through her professional travels, work with librarians worldwide, and leadership in international organizations. She served on the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) Governing Board, was ALA representative on the U.S. National Commission on UNESCO, and worked for ten years at the Mortenson Center for International Library Programs at the University of Illinois at

Urbana-Champaign promoting international education, understanding, and peace. True to the goal of the column, Ford’s responses provide a global perspective on issues relevant to academic and research libraries, and offer ideas and opportunities for action.



Barbara J. Ford

1. Your professional career has focused on international/global issues, how did you come to have this interest/focus?

I grew up in a rural Illinois community where the only diversity was Latin American migrant workers who picked crops. I worked with their children in the summers, and I got interested in Latin America. I then studied Spanish and got a master’s degree in international relations. I spent three years in the Peace Corps in

Panama and Nicaragua, working in agricul-

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tural and home economics extension, health education, and cooperative development to preserve and to market crafts made with local traditional skills. My interest in international issues began here. I went on to work with IFLA and the Mortenson Center, and worked with librarians all over the world.

2. Are there particular experiences that have shaped your professional worldview?

There has been a combination of experiences. I have always tried to have international projects as part of my work, even if that was not my official job. My first professional job was at the Soybean Insect Research Information Center, where I helped researchers around the world locate literature as the cultivation of soybeans became more widespread. I saw how important it was to learn from experiences in other places. Then I worked with government information and learned how governments varied in their relations to citizens. I had the opportunity to work with IFLA to exchange ideas and provide training and workshops in other countries. I then moved on to public services administrative positions in academic and public libraries in Illinois, Texas, and Virginia. In Texas, I did volunteer work with immigrants, and I do that now in Illinois.

My last position before retirement as director and distinguished professor at the Mortenson Center for International Library Programs, allowed me to combine my interests in libraries and international issues. It was a privilege to work with librarians around the world in all types of libraries to enhance their skills and expertise, and to learn from them.

3. You are the founding coeditor of this C&RLNews column focused on international insights. Do you view the term international differently from global? Why or why not?

The words tend to be used interchangeably. To me *international* has a smaller scope and often focuses on countries. *Global* has a broader scope that includes the entire world. *Global* is all encompassing and worldwide. *International* implies foreign or multinational. The use of the words can be

confusing. Maybe we should have called this column "Global Insights."

4. Has your international experience revealed a dichotomy between academic and research libraries in the Global North (developed world) compared to those in the Global South (developing world)? If so, how would you describe this dichotomy? If not, please share your view.

No. Academic and research libraries around the world have similar goals and opportunities to support students, faculty, and staff in their institutions. While resources can vary greatly, technology has made it easier to share resources and allows some libraries in the Global South to bypass those in the Global North, who often have legacy systems and practices that can be hard to change.

5. Some parts of the developing world, despite challenges, have made significant strides in academic and research library services. Are there lessons from these exemplars for the Global North academic and research libraries in their service provision, especially to the socio-economically disadvantaged?

Be innovative and look for ways to move forward even when resources and support are limited. In Africa, for instance, where the provision of electricity can be unreliable, some universities have negotiated with providers to ensure they have access to the resources they need. Some have gone outside the university to look for the services they need and for ways to make information portable. For example, for people living in rural areas where they do not have access to the Internet or online resources, mobile phones have become important for this access, and, in this context, libraries continue to look for ways to deliver services using mobile technology.

6. What multinational collaborative opportunities would you recommend between academic and research libraries to advance the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)? Would north/south, south/south or other partner-

ships be the most effective to tackle these big social issues? “Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” is an ambitious plan of action for sustainable, universal development.¹ Librarians should be aware of and advance the SDG, drawing on UNESCO resources,² including pedagogical materials, multimedia resources, and ideas to integrate education for sustainable development into teaching and learning.

Access to information is necessary for the achievement of the 17 goals. Under SDG 16 “Promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies,” Target 16.10 is implicit in recognizing the role of information: “Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements.” Culture and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) targets are also considered across the goals. In our knowledge society with much of the world’s population lacking access to information online, libraries provide access and opportunity for all. Universal literacy is a critical aspect of SDG.

IFLA has been working on how to support these goals through the International Advocacy Program (IAP).³ IAP supports and promotes the role that libraries play in the planning and implementation of SDG, making them essential partners for development. Academic and research libraries can learn from and partner with others around the world at many levels and in different contexts. These include lessons from initiatives from the Global South and campaigns for raising awareness of the SDG among libraries and their users. IFLA’s website provides guidelines and best practices to support global efforts to advance the SDGs.

7. Based on your varied experiences with UNESCO over your career, such as cofounding the UNESCO Center for Global Citizenship⁴ in 2013 with colleagues from the University of Illinois, in which way does UNESCO advance the work of academic and research libraries worldwide and vice versa? Like many international collaborations and organizations, UNESCO offers

incredible opportunities, many of which can be found on its website. UNESCO’s focus on building peace and support for education are essential for a sustainable future. The United Nations General Assembly has declared 2019 the International Year of Indigenous Languages, which creates an opportunity for academic and research libraries to preserve and promote diversity and cultural preservation and world heritage. Libraries can provide information on topics like best practices in mobile learning, and focus on education and gender equality and the role of education in transforming lives. Activities like World Radio Day celebrate dialogue, tolerance, and peace and showcase how an older technology—radio—helps listeners understand current events. UNESCO makes promotional jingles and provides other ideas for celebrations.

8. Twenty years on from your ALA Presidency (1997–98), what does your presidential theme “Libraries: Global reach, local touch” now mean for academic and research libraries? It is still very relevant. Despite articles like the recent one in *The Economist* about “Slowbalisation” saying that the golden age of globalisation was 1990–2010 due to the protectionist approach of nation states, there is still a need to view local and regional issues from a global lens that unscours their interconnectedness.⁵ The development of information and communication technology industries are subject to geopolitical rivalries that restrict academic and research libraries’ ability to provide equitable and open information services. Hence, libraries need to continue to be bridges between the global and local—connecting community to global resources while meeting local needs.

9. For academic and research librarians, what does international insight mean for practice? It means being aware of what is going on in libraries around the world. Recognizing that we can learn from anyone anywhere. Reading broadly and being certain our research and knowledge includes international perspectives. Reading journals from

around the world. Looking at websites from a variety of academic and research libraries worldwide. Reaching out to international colleagues to learn from them. Cultivating a broad perspective.

10. For academic and research libraries, what does international insight mean for services? Would there be a different approach for different sizes of libraries? It is being aware of how those seeking services may have different cultural backgrounds and need to be approached and served in culturally appropriate and different ways. Sometimes it may be helpful to expand the perspectives of those seeking information to include a more international perspective. We have an opportunity as we interact with library users to expand their horizons and perspectives. Larger libraries may have area specialists who can provide expertise on various parts of the world. Smaller libraries may need to rely on reading the literature and scanning the web. We can also learn from those who seek services in our libraries and ask them what they want and need.

11. For academic and research library education, what should the curriculum include for it to have international insight? Library and information science (LIS) education should include information about libraries and information services from around the world, and not just favoring examples from the Global North. LIS education should promote awareness of international issues like the SDG, which are more widely known outside the United States, international organizations like UNESCO, and international library associations like IFLA. This international knowledge should be embedded across the curriculum and not just covered in an international librarianship course.

Conclusion

After a long career of contribution to global information work beginning with local immigrant communities, and growing to in-

clude work with international bodies such as UNESCO and IFLA, Ford (ACRL President 1990–91) continues to influence the world of academic and research libraries. Her passion for connecting different parts of the world through her work demonstrates the value for academic and research libraries to share and learn from lessons from across the world for enhancement of service provision.

After all, according to Ford, “academic and research libraries around the world have similar goals and opportunities to support students, faculty and staff in their institutions,” despite resource differences in different geographic and other contexts.

For her, being innovative and creative/ingenious in responding to resource challenges is critical in driving forward academic and research library services in a technology-driven and highly digitized information environment. Ford believes this places academic and research libraries in a strategic position to contribute to the United Nation’s 2030 Agenda for sustainable development, especially among the goals requiring information provision. It is for this reason that she appeals for LIS education to embed across the curricula, exemplars of LIS services from across the globe so new professionals attain a global mindset. Hence, for Barbara J. Ford “Libraries: Global Reach. Local Touch,” is as relevant today for libraries as it was 20 years ago.

Notes

1. Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld>.
2. UNESCO, <https://en.unesco.org/sdgs>.
3. International Advocacy Program, <https://www.ifla.org/ldp/iap>.
4. UNESCO Center for Global Citizenship, <https://publish.illinois.edu/iaslibrary/2013/04/24/new-to-campus-unesco-center-for-global-citizenship/>.
5. “Slowbalisation,” *The Economist*, <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2019/01/24/the-steam-has-gone-out-of-globalisation>. ❧