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Librarianship and the Fulbright Fellowship: Challenges and Opportunities for American Librarians and Polish Libraries

Abstract

This article reports on personal observations and experiences gathered while teaching, working and consulting with librarians, students, and faculty during the author's Fulbright Senior Fellowship in Poland. It discusses multiple opportunities and rewards for American librarians willing to serve as Fulbright Fellows including professional growth, knowledge sharing, meeting new people, experiencing new library cultures, traveling, and increasing the appreciation and visibility of librarians to the academic world. Additionally, it presents a short history of Polish academic libraries and the challenges they are currently facing.

Introduction

Libraries all over the world provide well-organized access to information sources and services. However, from the international perspective, each library is different because of its specific institutional background, history, mission, position in the national culture, and approach to meeting users' information needs. Detailed characteristics of libraries may vary from one country to another, but for most librarians it is rather easy to find common conversation topics, issues, and problems.

The author was able to verify the above assertion after spending eight months as a Fulbright scholar in Poland where she led two assignments to teach and consult at different academic libraries in Poznan, a city located in the western part of Poland. In 1946 the U.S. Congress created the Fulbright Program, named after Senator J. William Fulbright of Arkansas, to promote international understanding through teaching, research, culture, and peaceful relationship between the United States and other countries around the world. The Council for International Exchange of Scholars (CIES) administers the online application process. The application includes a project statement, proposed teaching curriculum, resume, three professional references, plus a letter of invitation from a library interested in hosting the candidate. The U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs sponsors the program, making it possible for almost 800 researchers, teachers, students, librarians, and professionals to travel to 140 countries for lecturing, research, studying, and working on various projects.⁽¹⁾

According to the Fulbright discipline indexes for the years 2003 through 2006; eighteen librarians participated in the Fulbright Programs for U.S. scholars.⁽²⁾ The Fulbright Scholar Program provides extraordinary opportunities and rewards. This article discusses the

application process, content, organization, and benefits of participating in the Fulbright Scholar Program. The main goal of this article is to encourage more librarians to apply for the Fulbright Fellowship.

Application process

In the first stage of the competitive review process, the United States peer review committee screens all applications. To prepare a competitive application one has to arrange for professional contacts in the host country and receive a support letter from a potential host library. Opportunities for making contacts with fellow librarians from foreign libraries can be found at international conferences or through simple e-mail exchanges.

The list of recommended candidates from the initial screening is presented to the J. William Fulbright Foreign Scholarship Board. The final selection is made by Fulbright Commissions in the host countries participating in the Fulbright Program. In the author's case it was Polish Fulbright Commission in Warsaw that administered, supported, and coordinated the entire program in Poland. The program began with an orientation, which started in Warsaw – the modern capital of Poland, and continued in Cracow – the historic capital. During the ten-day orientation the entire group of American Fulbrighters, including twenty-two scholars and eleven students, learned about Polish history, culture, and literature, and the structure of higher education in Poland. The orientation also incorporated trips to renowned institutions of culture and historic sites, including the 600-year old Jagiellonian Library, Auschwitz – Birkenau Memorial and Museum, and the Wieliczka Salt Mine Museum. The orientation program was a time to get familiar with the culture of the host country, learn basic language skills, to meet elected officials, and to get acquainted with peers. For the author, being the only librarian in the group was challenging but also rewarding since she could use and demonstrate her knowledge at cultural sites such as the Jagiellonian Library, which is rich with such rarities as the original of Copernicus work *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium* from around 1520-1541 and Frederic Chopin's editorial autograph from 1842.

Experiencing new economy, politics, and freedom of information

For the author, traveling to Poland was an old and a new experience at the same time. Old, because she was born and raised there. New, because she never had an opportunity to live and work in an independent Poland after the Solidarity Movement-led transformation of the political and economic system in 1989. As a post-war baby boomer, the author had a chance to observe the dissolution of old regimes in the former East Block countries and the formation of new democratic states, and kept abreast of changes through short visits to the region.[\(3\)](#)

Thanks to the Fulbright grant, she was able to experience, for the first time, living and working in an independent and democratic Poland.

Transformation processes to a free market economy and to new political and social system in Poland removed the restrictive control of information dissemination, which was prevalent throughout the Eastern Block, and created demand for new information resources. Countless materials never available before to the public (Solidarity's documents, large-scale topographic maps, church materials, former socialist party documents, and various Western publications) became available and are accessible today in print and digital formats. These materials are essential to scholars, researchers, students, and the public studying the rise and fall of socialism, history of resistance movements, and transformations in the region that, once a part of the Eastern Block, has been a part of the European Union since 2004.

Encountering old archives and a new library culture

Polish culture is over 1,000 years old with a history full of tragic wars and momentous events. Poland was eliminated from the map of Europe during the 18th century when it became partitioned by Prussia, Austria, and Russia. The Second World War began in Poland and the post-war movement toward emancipation from the Soviet regime also started in Poland. The origins of Polish libraries are closely tied to Christianity that was introduced in Poland in the early 10th century. The first libraries were organized in monasteries and cathedrals and the materials they collected included early Christian literature, Greek and Roman literary works as well as resources on Polish history, literature, and society. While monastic libraries served mostly priests and monks, the cathedral libraries were more secular and served scholars. The oldest cathedral library was established in Gniezno and its collections go back to the 9th century.⁽⁴⁾ Around 1364 the first college library was opened at the Cracow Academy which became later the Jagiellonian University in Cracow.⁽⁵⁾ Currently, major academic libraries have many unique incunabula, manuscripts, maps and materials in Polish, Latin, Yiddish, Lithuanian, German, Belarusian, and Ukrainian covering the alternating periods of growth and decline of early European states. The biggest collection of documents and works in Poland covering the European intellectual history and civilization has been housed in the Collegium Maius Museum of the Jagiellonian University in Cracow since 1518.

At present Polish library collections offer not only rare and unique items, manuscripts, archival holdings on Polish, Slavic and East European history, civilization, and society,⁽⁶⁾ but also temporary resources serving academic communities. Today, 989 academic libraries are serving more than 1,657 000 users.⁽⁷⁾ Students, faculty, and researchers have the opportunity to choose between researching primary sources of more than 19,000 rare books, manuscripts, old maps, and music scores originating between the 16th and 19th century or accessing rich, hybrid print and digital collections on the modern era. However, big academic reading rooms that serve as quiet study areas are still full of print materials and studious patrons. Computer terminals, in most of Polish academic libraries located outside the reading rooms, are always in high demand.

Due to automation of libraries and the introduction of a variety digital resources, the Polish model of librarianship is changing rapidly and becoming more open toward user needs.

However, limited funding from the government, absence of a strong professional library association, lack of a common structure for information and communication literacy programs, and limited resource-sharing models are still the main obstacles to bringing libraries closer to the users' growing information needs.

Fulbright professional activities and challenges

Fulbright awards are almost 80% in the lecturing category, 20% in research, and a small fraction in seminars category. The author's award was in the lecturing category. In her project proposal she concentrated on user-centered library services in the technologically challenging information environment. Her proposal offered four courses on the topics of:

1. Users services and information literacy,
2. Information sources on the Internet,
3. Assessment model of library services,
4. Changes in scholarly information and communication process.

With dual appointments located in Poznan - the third largest academic center in Poland (only the centers in Warsaw and Cracow are larger) the author spent the first four months in the Poznan Agriculture University Library and the rest of the time in the Poznan Technical University Library. In both places her main duties were centered on teaching librarians, students and faculty; lecturing; performing short training courses; providing consultation to the directors of both libraries; and working with librarians on creating teaching and promotional materials for their libraries. In courses offered, the author covered American and Polish materials related to traditional and digital models of libraries, assessment of users' information needs, reference interviews, library management issues, the decision-making process, copyright law related to digital information, and the general trend toward the open access of scholarly communication. She stressed the importance of multimedia resources in reference services, which have drastically changed the style of reference assistance to students, faculty, and the general public. By combining print and electronic resources, the reference transactions have become more directed toward teaching users how and where to find the best solutions to their inquiries and how to think critically about different information sources. Using her background in economics, the author also stressed assessment procedures that measure not only outputs but also outcomes of library services. In the time of shrinking budgets, libraries all over the world are looking for qualitative methods to measure their services in order to justify their importance.

Outside the two host institutions, the author presented eight lectures in academic libraries located in central, southern and northern Poland. The lectures gave the author the opportunity to visit small and large academic libraries, meet many Polish librarians, learn about their collections, services, exchange information on improving public access standards, see and browse extraordinary archival materials, and enjoy traveling and sightseeing. All these visits helped the author to better understand library services in an international context.

Additionally, the Fulbright program gave the author professional insight into the Polish network of academic libraries and the Polish higher education system. By being a part of this network, the author had the opportunity to understand its role in the academic community and to understand users' demands on its services and resources. Polish academic library services are clearly divided between serving students and fulfilling the needs of faculty members. While students are coming to libraries mostly to check out textbooks and use the Internet for pleasure and research, faculty members are more interested in accessing electronic journals and databases. The Polish higher education system and teaching environment are different from their American counterparts by being largely faculty member-centered. The teaching environment in Poland endows an instructor with more authority than is customary at American universities. Although the basic teaching formats (lecture, learning-by-doing, lab, seminar, group work) are the same in both countries, the teaching style in Poland is, on average, more formal than in the United States and there is a greater distance between a professor and a student. At the same time, due to various educational exchange programs between Poland and the European Community and the increasing mobility of Polish students and academic faculty, the teaching environment in Poland has been poised to embrace a more interactive and student-oriented style of pedagogy, characterized by increased student participation and supported by multimedia technology in the classroom.

Participating in international library collaboration

The idea of applying for a Fulbright fellowship in order to understand similarities and differences between American librarianship and other library models might be considered as

an interesting project. However, such a project is possible to accomplish only if one is genuinely interested in learning other models of librarianship, including their conditioning factors, and willing to use a broader set of comparison criteria than those developed by and for American libraries. Libraries in each country are an integral part of that country's culture, history, and its political and social structures. All these conditions create unique demands for libraries' missions and their users' information needs.

The teaching assignment in Poland required the author to design lectures that effectively bridged the cultural and educational barriers between the Polish and the American cultures. The experience gained abroad was useful for the author's research on users' changing information needs during the transition period from a centralized to a market-based economy. This knowledge might help to evaluate and reorganize American services to respond to patrons' increased need for multicultural-driven searches for information.

Participation in the Fulbright program is viewed by the author as a two-way opportunity for international and cultural collaboration. While the author taught Polish librarians how to be ready to face the challenges of the new technologically-driven information environment, she conveyed to American librarians, upon her return, how they could learn from Polish librarians. Polish history provides a good example of how a nation deprived of its sovereignty could survive many events that challenged its existence, in large part, due to its rich traditions and culture, which were documented and preserved by Polish librarians in the nation's libraries and archives. During the Second World War, twenty-two and a half million books were destroyed in Europe. Fifteen million of these books were from Polish libraries.⁽⁸⁾ Even with this huge loss of original national documents, Polish libraries survived. Today their content stores rich national and historical values and serves as a good example for American libraries to promote their cultural missions and understanding of library services in an international context.

Notes

¹. Council for International Exchange of Scholars (CIES), Available online from http://www.cies.org/us_scholars/. [Cited 20 March 2007].

². According to the Fulbright discipline indexes from the 2003/04, 2004/05, and 2005/06 years totally, eighteen librarians participated in the Fulbright Programs for the U.S. scholars. CIES, Available online from http://www.iie.org/cies/schlr_directories/usdir04/discipline.htm. [Cited 20 March 2007].

³. The process of formation of new democratic states included Czech Republic, Slovakia, Russia, Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, and Ukraine; and the dissolution of East Germany, USSR, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia.

⁴. Smith, Elizabeth, "The Development of Polish Libraries: A Historical Perspective," *Journal of Educational Media & Library Sciences* 29, no.1 (Fall 1991): 28-45.

⁵. Bzinkowska, Jadwiga, "The Most Valuable Cartographic Items From the Collection of the Jagiellonian Library and Their Impact on Scientific Research," *The LIBER Quarterly* 2(1992) 1. Available online from <http://liber-maps.kb.nl/articles/bzinkowska6.html>. [Cited 20 March 2007].

6. Lewanski, Richard, *Guide to Polish Libraries and Archives*. Columbia University Press, 1974. p.ix.

7. Dorfert-Wolf, Lidia, Gorski, Marek, and Marzena Marciniak, "Quality of academic libraries - funding bodies, librarians and users perspective: a common project of Polish research libraries on comparable measures." Available online

<http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla71/papers/080e-Dorfert-Wolf.pdf>. [Cited 20 March 2007].

8. Smith, Elizabeth, "The Development of Polish Libraries: A Historical Perspective," *Journal of educational media & library sciences* 29, no.1 (Fall 1991):38.