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Preparing Global Citizens: Librarians Connect Students with a Learning Service Opportunity in Nicaragua

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Introduction

Many universities are encouraging study abroad and international service-learning opportunities to provide their students with the necessary knowledge and skills to operate successfully in an increasingly global environment. Academic librarians have unique opportunities and perspectives which enable them to participate in the educational mission of the University. During a trip to Mexico, two librarians from the University of Maryland recognized an opportunity to engage students in a learning service opportunity in Nicaragua. Using their knowledge of the university community and their campus connections, they formed a partnership with a faculty member in the University's College of Information Studies to develop and offer the College's first study abroad course.

Americans take for granted that they can walk into a public library and, with minimal identification, borrow a book, videotape, or compact disk to take home for a period of weeks or months. Until recently, such was not the case in Nicaragua. Nicaragua did not have a public lending library until 2001, when Jane Mirandette, a transplanted Colorado native, opened the San Juan del Sur (SJDS) Biblioteca Pública.¹ She subsequently extended library services to the surrounding rural community with the San Juan del Sur (SJDS) Mobile Project.²

Two University of Maryland (UM) librarians learned about these projects at a book fair in Mexico and realized that the projects would provide a unique opportunity for

UM librarians to connect the UM faculty and students with a service-learning experience in Nicaragua . The eventual partnership resulted in a transformative educational and service experience through the creation of the UM College of Information Studies' first study abroad course. This article documents the history of the SJDS library projects and the ensuing partnership with the University of Maryland.

The San Juan del Sur Library Projects

Nicaragua, the largest country in Central America, is bordered by Honduras and Costa Rica on the north and south, and the Caribbean Sea and Pacific Ocean on the east and west. 50% of the people of Nicaragua live below the poverty line and the country is the second poorest in the Western Hemisphere.³ The country's GDP is derived primarily from agriculture, fishing, and the service industries, including banking, transportation, trade, retail, and tourism. For many years Nicaragua's education system was inadequately funded. In the 1980's free access to education was introduced and with it came an improvement in the educational level of the population.⁴ According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, the Nicaraguan government spends 15% of its budget on education; 90% of Nicaraguan children are enrolled in primary school; between 40% and 47% of adolescents are enrolled in secondary school; and the literacy rate for adults is 80.1% and for youth is 88.4%.⁵ There is still much room for improvement and free access to books and reading materials is still a critical factor in raising the education and literacy rates of the people.

Nestled in the southwestern corner of the country, about 150 miles north of the Costa Rican border, is the town of San Juan del Sur, with a population of about 18,000. For many years the residents relied on the fishing industry for their livelihood. In recent years, however, many of the town's people have transitioned to working in the tourist industry. The beautiful beaches that surround the area have brought in a number of American and Canadian ex-pats who have purchased homes and now live in or near the town.

After vacationing in San Juan del Sur in the late 1990's, Jane Mirandette, a retired nurse, and her partner, Mike Iacobini, returned to the town that had captured their hearts. There they purchased a small hotel and began their new careers as innkeepers of the Hotel Villa Isabella. Ms. Mirandette's grandmother had instilled in her a love of books and reading, so it was natural for her to set up a small leisure reading library in the lobby of her hotel for the enjoyment of her guests. While the idea, originally, was to provide reading material for the hotel patrons, very soon locals were coming by to look at and read her books.

It became apparent that there was a great need for books and information in the community, which Ms. Mirandette resolved to fill. After doing research and developing a borrowing system, she met with local community leaders and educators and laid out her plans to create the town's first public lending library. Her idea won local support and the planning and development of the San Juan del Sur (SJDS) Biblioteca Pública began.

From its modest beginning on the hotel patio, the SJDS Biblioteca Pública has grown to more than 12,500 books and now occupies its own building. The collection contains materials one would expect to find in a well-stocked public library: nonfiction, popular fiction, and literary classics, as well as books for children and young adults. Since most students cannot afford to purchase their own textbooks, the library provides curriculum materials for them to use in the library after schools have closed.

Soon after establishing the successful SJDS Biblioteca Pública, Ms. Mirandette realized that the need for books extended beyond the town, into the outlying rural communities. In 2003, with approval from nearby schools, Ms. Mirandette launched the SJDS Mobile Project. This project brings books as well as arts and crafts enrichment activities to primary and secondary schools in the surrounding rural areas. The Library staff and volunteers select books, pack them into plastic bins, and place them in the library pickup truck (their version of the traditional bookmobile van). The bookmobile brings over 5,000 books to 35 rural schools and has over 3,800 registered users, primarily children and young adults, as well as their teachers and parents.

In 2003, to support the SDJS library projects and to promote other lending libraries in Nicaragua and Central America, Ms. Mirandette established the *Hester J. Hodgdon Libraries for All Program*, a non-profit organization which provides ongoing financial support through its "library in a box" program. This program "has helped service groups, church groups, and individuals to establish more than 27 new lending libraries in Nicaragua, Guatemala, Honduras, and Costa Rica. The significance of these efforts lies in the fact that historically libraries in Central America do not loan their books and there is little or no access to books and information for any but the very wealthy. The program has established relationships with publishers, book wholesalers, library associations, graduate library programs, and others in the library field with the aim of providing the most important literacy tool of 'books in the hands of children and adults' to increasingly larger populations in Central America."⁶

The authors, Lily Griner (UM Business Librarian) and Patricia Herron (UM Librarian for English, Spanish, Latin American & Latina/o Studies), met Ms. Mirandette at the Guadalajara (Mexico) Book Fair in 2005, where she gave a presentation about her SDJS library projects and their impact on the community of San Juan del Sur. She

also described her collaboration with the library school of Simmons College in Boston, for whom the SJDS projects had become an international learning service venue. During her presentation, Ms. Mirandette extended an invitation to the audience to visit her library and volunteer in any way possible. She was especially interested in finding ways to connect her SJDS library projects with other universities.

Ms. Mirandette's invitation captured our interest. We wanted to be a part of the changes she was making in the lives of the people in San Juan del Sur, but we were not sure how we could make it happen. Over the next few years we continued to think about her invitation and in the fall of 2007 we decided to investigate the possibility of linking UM faculty and students with the SJDS community.

Lobbying for Support

Librarians at the University of Maryland have faculty status and are encouraged to be involved in service activities where they share their expertise and knowledge with others in the library profession and the campus community. To support these endeavors, the Libraries' administration offers professional development funds to defray the cost of travel to conferences and other such venues where these exchanges occur.

When we decided to accept Ms. Mirandette's invitation to visit her library and investigate the possibility of connecting our University with her SJDS projects, we set up a meeting with our Dean of Libraries to talk about our plans and to make sure it would be appropriate to use our professional development funds to cover our travel expenses. At the meeting our Dean voiced concern about how our proposed involvement with the SJDS project related to our work as academic librarians and how it served the educational mission of the Libraries and the University.

We articulated the following benefits to the University, the Libraries, and to us, as professional librarians:

- establishing partnerships between the Libraries and the University community through a service-learning experience in a developing country
- introducing the University of Maryland to the people of Nicaragua, and acting as good will ambassadors for the University
- learning about other cultures so that we could better serve our international students
- participating in cross training among professionals and non-professionals

We saw our project as a unique opportunity for the UM Libraries and the larger UM Community to embark on an outreach activity which would offer much needed

expertise to a library project in one of the poorest nations in the western hemisphere. It would help advance the University's strategic plan, which states, "teaching, scholarship, and outreach activities at the University will reflect the reality of global interdependence. Students and researchers will be prepared to live, work and thrive in the current and future world environment and the University will be recognized as a world-class, world conscious international leader."⁷

Furthermore, we cited the message and vision of C.D. Mote, Jr., President of the University, who states in one of his Presidential Initiatives: "For any university to be great today, it must be engaged globally. The entire world must be our subject matter, obviously. But more than that, we best serve our own society in the Information Age by ensuring that we have the tools, knowledge and understanding to share with people and institutions in different lands and different cultures."⁸

Our request to use professional development funds to go to Nicaragua to work with Ms. Mirandette's lending library and bookmobile was approved, but with some skepticism. We felt challenged to prove that our vision would actually result in something tangible, something that would not only provide a service to our fellow librarians and Nicaragua, but would establish a lasting connection between the SJDS community, the UM Libraries, and the UM campus community.

Connecting the SJDS Library Project with the UM Community

As our next goal, we identified those campus schools and colleges that would most likely be interested in connecting with Nicaragua and the community of San Juan del Sur. From Ms. Mirandette's talk, we knew that Simmons College in Boston had a history of offering volunteer service programs and study abroad courses in Nicaragua centered on public health issues. Following Simmons's cue, we decided to contact UM's School of Public Health. The School of Business was also a natural fit because of its program on social entrepreneurship. And since we would be linking with the SJDS library projects, our College of Information Studies (iSchool), was another obvious choice. During our trip to Nicaragua we would offer to act as "scouts" to see what service and educational opportunities might exist for their students. We would bring back information and names of potential contacts who could help facilitate a service learning or study abroad experience. Our investigative skills as research librarians would serve us well in this endeavor.

As a new institution on campus, the School of Public Health is interested in establishing collaborations with other units on campus. Knowing that access to clean drinking water is a major health issue in the rural areas of Nicaragua, and that the students from Simmons had been involved in clean water projects in Nicaragua, we thought the School of Public Health might be interested in similar work. We met and

discussed this idea with the school's associate dean and a professor who teaches courses on global health. Even though they showed interest, they were not ready to commit to an international experience in Nicaragua at the time. They did, however, give us a list of questions for Ms. Mirandette and the San Juan del Sur health community, signaling that a future collaboration was possible.

Next we met with the Director of the Center for Social Responsibility at the R.H. Smith School of Business and once again, found limited interest. The Business School had established many international collaborations, so they were not actively looking for another one at the time. However, they did not say no, so we had hope for the future.

We found more success when we met with Professor Ann Weeks from the iSchool, whose research interests lie in school library media programs and who, unbeknownst to us, was already working on establishing a study abroad course, a new venture for the iSchool. She had already applied for and was awaiting approval for a study abroad "umbrella" class which was broad in scope, but could be tailored to meet the needs of a particular class and a specific location.

Professor Weeks was excited to hear about the possibility of her students traveling to Nicaragua to learn about issues related to the development and sustainability of library services in developing countries. When we related our ideas about connecting the iSchool students with the SJDS library projects, she immediately saw it as an opportunity for her students, most of whom were enrolled in the school library media track, to gain practical experience in providing children's library services in an international setting.

Professor Weeks was sure that the SJDS library projects would be an ideal education venue for her students. We were delighted that we had found a professor who was enthusiastic about our proposal. Not only did she love the idea of students going to Nicaragua, she wanted them to go as an official study abroad class, not as volunteers. It was a perfect match.

After much discussion with Professor Weeks, we generated a list of questions for which we needed to gather answers when we traveled to Nicaragua. This information was to lay the foundation and structure for the class that eventually developed. We were now closer to our goal of establishing a connection between the SJDS community and the UM campus community. As a result of our outreach, we had also broadened our connection with three units on campus, met and talked with high level administrators, and proposed how the Libraries could be involved in international venues.

Visit to San Juan

All along, we had been communicating our ideas about possible campus collaborations to Ms. Mirandette by email, so she was well-aware of the task ahead of us. She had given us valuable information about the town, the community, and what to expect in terms of weather, living conditions, appropriate clothing, and other vital information. On March 2, 2008 we boarded the plane to Managua, the capital of Nicaragua, and by that evening we had traveled to the town of San Juan del Sur.

We spent most of our first two days with Ms. Mirandette, obtaining answers to Professor Weeks' questions. We talked and brainstormed ideas for a potential course, and outlined a draft class schedule for a ten day stay in Nicaragua. We also developed ideas for readings, speakers, student projects, and cultural activities and discussed details related to costs, housing, logistics, and transportation for a class of up to twelve students.

In order to develop firsthand knowledge of what might become part of the students' learning experience we toured the SJDS library, met the library staff, and volunteered on the bookmobile. We visited schools in five rural communities, San Antonio de Bastón, Papaturro, Bernardino, Las Parcelas and Carrizal, where we helped children select books to check out, read to them, helped with craft activities, and met some of the teachers and parents. Traveling into the rural communities gave us the opportunity to see more of the countryside and to witness firsthand the living conditions of the people. Our experiences with the Nicaraguan children were the most rewarding and we speculated that such an experience would be of great interest to our UM iSchool students.

In addition, we had the opportunity to engage with several groups of San Juan del Sur residents, mostly in their twenties and thirties, when we assisted in several English language classes that were offered in the evenings in the SJDS Library. The classes were taught by a Canadian volunteer who has been doing this for several years.

We also visited a health clinic in San Juan del Sur, where we took lots of pictures to document how the building was organized and what equipment they had. Ms. Mirandette introduced us to several people she thought would be good contacts for future collaborations with the UM School of Public Health. We met with a local doctor who runs one of the rural local health clinics and with the field director for Global Health Cares, a nonprofit organization that provides health care in Nicaragua. They answered many of the questions from the School of Public Health.

To have firsthand experience of the cultural offerings to share with Professor Weeks, we visited the old colonial city of Granada, the pottery town of San Juan del Oriente, and Mombacho, an active volcano.

The Course Becomes a Reality

Upon our return to Maryland we had a debriefing meeting with Professor Weeks and presented her with a possible class schedule, ideas for student projects, answers to most of her questions, and a large collection of photographs which documented our activities in San Juan del Sur and on the bookmobile. Both Professor Weeks and Ms. Mirandette had planned to attend the American Library Association meeting in Anaheim that summer. They arranged to meet there and subsequently developed the syllabus for the iSchool's course: *LSBC 708S: International Opportunities in Information Studies: Destination Nicaragua*.

Finally, all the hard work paid off. A class was developed and opened to enrollment. The course filled quickly and went on to generate a waiting list. News of the course spread beyond campus, and the final roster included students from the University of Kentucky and San Jose State University.

The class became part of the University of Maryland winter term program. Winter term is a three-week mini semester in January when many study abroad classes are offered. The week before our trip the class met for four sessions. Discussions centered around assigned readings on international library development fund raising, and sustainability issues, as well as Nicaraguan history and culture. A guest-speaker gave a lecture on cross-cultural communication and taught the class some key Spanish phrases. Since the students were going to be working on the bookmobile and visiting rural schools, they worked together to design projects in which they could interact with the Nicaraguan children. Each student also had to choose an individual project, such as developing a class website, creating a class blog, or acting as the designated photographer. The major group project for the course was to organize and run a street fair for the children in San Juan del Sur. In preparation for the fair the students decided on activities, identified materials needed for these activities, and purchased, packed, and shipped those supplies to Ms. Mirandette in San Juan del Sur. The class was ready for Nicaragua.

Our ten days in Nicaragua went by very quickly and were full of activities. During the three day stay in Managua, that began the trip, through Ms. Mirandette's contacts and some University of Maryland networking, we enjoyed meeting a variety of interesting people and learned a lot about the country. One evening we had cocktails at the private home of an American anthropologist who has lived in Nicaragua for more than 20 years and whose home was filled with priceless pre-Columbian artifacts. That

same evening Nicaragua's former Minister of Finance, Mario Flores, gave our group a talk about the state of Nicaragua's economy and then joined us for dinner. Another night we listened to a presentation by, and had dinner with, Sergio Ramirez, the country's former vice president and one of Nicaragua's foremost literary figures. We joined Nicaraguan librarians at a Nicaraguan Library Association (ANIBIPA) meeting and participated in workshops, some of which were presented by our students as class projects. We visited government and special libraries and the American Corner library, which is supported by the American Embassy and used by the local population to learn about the United States.

On day four we boarded a van and set off for the town of San Juan del Sur via the well-constructed Pan American Highway. Our six days there were filled with educational and cultural activities. The highlight of our stay was going on the bookmobile with Ms. Mirandette's library staff and meeting the children it serves. The youngsters were very excited to read and do crafts with our students. They also enjoyed a puppet show, which two of the students had written and performed in Spanish. After the activities the children selected and checked out books.

The street fair was a resounding success, with lots of fun for all involved. Face painting, making bubbles, decorating bookmarks, and masks were just some of the fun activities the students organized for the children of the town. One of our students, who teaches hip hop as a hobby, taught the dance to the locals. Even the local priest got involved by setting up loudspeakers in front of the church. Representatives of Libros Para Ninos, a well-known children's book publisher in Nicaragua, came as invited guests, as did a famous children's author. They entertained the children with music, singing and storytelling. As the closing activity, one of the UM students dressed as a character in the *Cat in the Hat* and read the story in Spanish to the children.

The students also spent time with Ms. Mirandette in her library, learning from her what is involved in setting up a library in an international setting, what tools are needed, and how to work with the local community. She outlined her "Seven Aspects of Sustainability For Lending Library Projects In Nicaragua and Other Developing Nations"² which forms the basis for her successful library projects in Nicaragua. The sessions with Ms. Mirandette were priceless. The students were talking to the person who single-handedly introduced the concept of a lending library to a country. She has been doing this for almost ten years and has had an incredible impact on the town of San Juan del Sur and the nearby rural communities.

Ms. Mirandette has connected with librarians all over the country through her work with the Nicaraguan Library Association (ANIBIPA) and is a beloved figure in San Juan del Sur and elsewhere. Children stop at the lending library after school, to study, to play games, to read. It provides them with a safe and fun place and gives them the

opportunity to grow intellectually. Our students were actually living and experiencing, firsthand, the results of her work. As one of our students, Caitlin Rolston, so aptly put it: “In Nicaragua, I witnessed how much can be done to improve a community's access to information, even with the most minimal resources. One of the most interesting things I learned there was that one person, one organization, can change a country's prevailing attitude toward books and libraries.”

In a final class session, back on the University of Maryland campus, Professor Weeks asked the students to reflect on the course and their experiences. The students unanimously testified that the most memorable and inspiring experience came in seeing firsthand how “one person can empower the powerless; how one person can make a difference.” For one student the trip sparked an interest in the politics of other countries. For others who had never been to a developing country, the course opened “their eyes to what the lives of others are like.” One student wants to use what she learned in the course as a model to start a lending library in another Latin American country. All students agreed that the course and trip had been a transformative experience. Dr. Weeks expected the course to change the students’ lives and she thinks it really did. “It changed perceptions of what is possible, and the students found that people of goodwill can really make a difference in seemingly small ways.”

Lessons Learned

Reviewing the process, events, and outcomes of our involvement in this project, we see four traits crucial to making this and similar ventures successful

1. Intellectual curiosity

Willingness to explore new areas and situations, including those that are outside of our normal interests and subject areas is essential. We had no particular interest in Nicaragua when this effort began, but attending Ms. Mirandette’s presentation led us to areas whose interest to us we would never have foreseen.

2. Openness to opportunities

We saw an opportunity and seized it. We were optimistic and persistent despite being unsure of exactly where the pursuit would lead us.

3. Networking skills

The connections we made on campus with administrators, faculty members, and others in trying to find support for our project were often due to existing relationships we had made on campus in faculty and committee meetings, at social gatherings, even at the gym. One link led to another until we found the right person to work with.

4. Willingness to share

Much of our success in getting others to support us and collaborate with us has stemmed from our willingness to share the knowledge and benefits of this project with anyone who showed interest. People seemed so much more willing to be involved when they saw tangible advantages for themselves, their students, or the campus community.

Next Steps

Dr. Weeks felt that our contribution to the course was substantial and that she could not have done it without us. She invited us to accompany her next class to Nicaragua in January 2010. We have agreed and are looking forward to working with her and the students once again. We have met with faculty in the College of Education and are talking about possible programs for their TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) students in Nicaragua. We have come up with the idea of developing an interdisciplinary class, possibly composed of business students and iSchool students, which would combine the students' varied expertise and get them to look at issues such as sustainability for the SJDS library from different perspectives.

Conclusion

A chance meeting with a dynamic speaker at a Mexican book fair started us on a path which brought many benefits to all involved:

- the students in transforming their career goals and visions of library opportunities
- the University Libraries, as we explored opportunities for partnerships with the University community, networked with faculty in different departments, promoted the Libraries and showed the campus community that librarians are integral to the educational mission of the University
- the university in promoting the goals of the university strategic plan to have students become more knowledgeable and understanding of other lands and other cultures
- our profession as we met and shared knowledge with members of the Nicaraguan Library Association
- the children and community of San Juan del Sur, as we shared books, crafts, and games promoting the idea that reading is fun
- our country, as we became goodwill ambassadors to our neighbors to the South

We saw an opportunity and took advantage of it, and the results have exceeded expectations. There are many opportunities to connect, collaborate and partner with

faculty and students. We, as librarians, must be receptive to all the possibilities and take advantage of every opening that comes our way.

Notes

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