

## **COLLABORATION BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND MEXICO: THE LEGACY OF SLA – SUPPORTED LINKAGES\***

**By Charlene Baldwin and Jesús Lau**

**Abstract:** The origins of the Transborder Library Forum, called in Spanish the Foro Transfronterizo de Bibliotecas, extend back to 1989, when librarians from Arizona and Sonora identified the need for better communication between libraries in Mexico and United States. In 1990, FORO I was held in southern Arizona. The following year, librarians in Hermosillo, Sonora, hosted the group. Subsequently, FORO conferences have taken place every year alternating between the U.S. and Mexico.

From the initial informal meetings of a few dozen librarians, attendance has grown to over 300. Participants come to hear keynote speakers and to attend a wide range of programs, breakout sessions, and "talk tables" which enable librarians to discuss their specific needs and projects of particular interest. Ongoing simultaneous interpretation and bi-lingual programs and proceedings ensure that every FORO attendee has the opportunity to participate equally across linguistic borders.

Unique to the FORO is the continuation of projects between the United States and Mexico over the past ten years. Some of these include

1. A groundbreaking agreement for Interlibrary Loan
2. The creation of state library associations in Sonora and Baja California
3. Subsidies from other organizations for border librarians to attend conferences in the other country
4. Team training and cross training between librarians across the border
5. Expert consultancies by librarians to visit each other's libraries.

The Special Libraries Association has been a visible presence since the beginning as a sponsor, as an exhibitor, and with participation by SLA Presidents and many SLA members. As SLA continues to shape its policy concerning international librarianship and international membership services, the FORO has already confronted many of these issues and can provide in a microcosm a synthesis of problems and opportunities for international library associations.

This paper, co-authored by two of the founders of the Transborder Library Forum, and both SLA members, will explore the role of SLA in the FORO and how this has led to greater understanding of international networking.

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## **Introduction**

”Viewing the information profession globally as the predominant profession of the future, it is important to emphasize that at no point in history has there been such a high level of understanding about the importance of global interdependence and the need to establish and maintain strong and harmonious international relations. It is logical to conclude that only dynamic, forward-looking and globally-oriented information professionals, aided by up-to-the minute information generated both nationally and globally, can provide quality service in the realm of continuously changing specialized information needs.” (Cveljo. 1997)

These are the words of Katherine Cveljo, professor emerita at the University of North Texas, Denton, summing up the relevance of international library associations in Information Outlook in 1997.

In this paper we will look at some of ways that information professionals in the United States and Mexico, predominately in the contiguous border regions of those two countries, with the support of the Special Libraries Association and the annual reinforcement of the Transborder Library Forum, have worked together in the past 10 years to build a solid collaborative network. We will also suggest some challenges that both organizations have to face to ensure continued success.

## **Background**

Prior to 1989, there was little exchange between libraries and librarians in the United States and Mexico border region. SALALM (the Seminar for the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials, a group of primarily U.S. academic library acquisitions personnel), and the Mexican-hosted book fairs such as the Feria Internacional del Libro and the Feria del Libro de Monterrey did offer opportunities for U.S.-Mexico collaboration.

However, there were major barriers associated with more wide-spread contact. The language barrier was a primary obstacle, but restrictive governmental policies regarding the political border for travel and exchange of personnel, and the economic border of tariffs and trade effectively prevented library materials and librarians to travel between the U.S. and Mexico and to work together.

Three pivotal events occurred in the library world in the late 1980's, which, coupled with changes in the nature of U.S.-Mexico border relations, resulted in the development of greater library collaboration. The first was the Bi-national Conference on Libraries in California and Baja California, held in 1984 and again in 1985 which established early library contacts along the border. (Ayala.1984)

The second was the Arizona Library Association's goal to reach out to its Sonoran colleagues, inviting them to attend an annual conference of the Association, which held a rare meeting in Tucson in 1989. The third was the evolving focus of the two largest U.S. library associations, the Special Libraries Association and the American Library Association, toward the need for greater connection with the Latin American world. SLA's interest was primarily generated by two factors: (1) to help its business and commerce members develop an understanding of the international marketplace, and (2) to achieve its goal of increasing membership in the association by targeting special librarians in all areas of the world, including Mexico. ALA's interest was generated more by sociological motivations to recognize the growth of Hispanic populations in the U.S., their library needs, and their connections to Mexico.

As a result of the conference of the Arizona State Library Association (ASLA then, AzLA now), a group of Arizona and Sonoran librarians worked together to found the Transborder Library Forum/Foro Transfronterizo de Bibliotecas to provide opportunities for border librarians to get together annually. The history of the FORO itself has been published in many sources. It has become a success story for the development of grass roots, secretariat-free, dues-free, volunteer solutions for professional connections. (Milam, 1990; Baldwin, 1991; Neugebauer, 1992; Baldwin, 1997.)

The successes of SLA and ALA are numerous. SLA has expanded its membership throughout the world, adding in the last decade a large and active chapter in the Arabian Gulf, increasing membership in Asia and the Pacific, re-vitalizing the European Chapter, and hosting this global conference on special librarianship in the U.K. ALA has fulfilled its mission as well, with several recent ALA Presidents focusing on international connections. The latest have been Barbara Ford's Global Reach Local Touch and the 2000 conference in San Antonio, presided over by President Sarah Ann Long, featuring successful programming which included librarians from Mexico and Latin America.

SLA and the FORO have been intertwined from the beginning, with SLA providing financial support, exhibiting at the conferences, publicizing its association through the translation into Spanish of its membership brochures and publications, and offering programs and special conferences on Latin America and the information resources of the region. SLA, however, has not played a vital leadership role in the FORO phenomenon, nor has SLA been able to extend its membership base in Mexico. Reasons for this will be discussed later in this paper. U.S. and Mexican bi-national collaboration can be described by looking at the following opportunities that library leaders in the two countries have taken

advantage of to benefit of their library clientele and add to their professional development:

- Collection Development
- Information Exchange
- Vendor Support
- Governmental and Non-Governmental Organizational Support
- Professional Development
- Professional Association Affiliations

### **Collection Development**

A common goal of librarians is to expedite the loan, exchange, or transfer of materials (information) between countries. Prominent among the projects which can be directly related to the FORO are book exchanges, collection building, and interlibrary loan agreements.

After the successful first and second FORO conferences, AzLA began a cooperative project with the Sonoran State Library to provide professional library materials to develop its collections. Under the leadership of Dora Biblarz in Arizona and the late Carlos Salas Placencia in Sonora, this project resulted in the creation of a collection specializing in librarianship. The development of the Chihuahua-ana collection at UACJ is another example of book exchange that has been expedited because of increased contact between UACJ and content producers and suppliers in the U.S. Another example is the collection exchange between the U.S. National Library of Agriculture and the northern agricultural libraries of Mexico such as the Universidad Agraria Antonio Narro. American public libraries with Spanish-speaking communities have benefited from exchanges of Mexican elementary school books and media from Mexico.

One of the most enduring success stories of cooperation facilitated by the FORO is the interlibrary loan agreement established by librarians of the University of Texas at El Paso, the United States Information Agency's Biblioteca Benjamin Franklin in Mexico City, and the Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México. The project leaders were Bob Seal, who is an active FORO member and was the host of FORO III and Daniel Mattes from Mexico City. This cooperation scheme offers interlending between several American university libraries and institutions from Mexico City. The lending of materials has benefited users on both sides of the border and promises to involve more libraries now that the initial trial period has proven successful. The FORO has become the venue for the interlibrary loan committee and it meets every year during the conference, often hosting programs about its cooperative program. his Interlibrary Loan project has been described in

several publications, notably a 1996 article in Advances in Librarianship. (Seal, 1996).

### **Information Exchange**

A second activity fostered by the FORO involves the development of standards for the recording of bibliographic data to ensure greater use of library cataloging between the two countries. Two examples are OCLC and the United Nations databases such as CDS/ISIS. OCLC had been, and still is, a long-time sponsor and exhibitor of United States library conferences including SLA. While working to increase its presence in Mexico, it was natural for OCLC to become a major supporter of FORO conferences. As a result, since 1996, six libraries in Mexico now are members of OCLC and contribute original cataloging to this important world catalog.

The U.N. databases such as CDS/ISIS, originally developed by Canada and later distributed by the U.N. at no charge throughout the world, have made possible cooperative cataloging and the integration of library catalogs. Not utilized to any great extent in the U.S., nevertheless, the vision of CDS/ISIS was to provide a software to facilitate library work such as circulation and cataloging thus facilitating record exchange and union catalogs. Planners of the FORO have usually included programs related to cooperative cataloging, subject headings in Spanish, and other topics of concern to library database builders.

The growth of the Internet and the world wide web have provided new technologies to neutralize the political and economic border as a barrier to information exchange. The 1997 Foro, held in Cd. Juarez, Chihuahua., featured a program on this topic (Lau, 1997). It was fortunate timing that this phenomenon of an alternative method for the transfer of digital information coincided with the increased interest in U.S. and Mexican library partnerships. In fact, by the time the program was presented in Juarez, the power of the new technologies was a "given" among library professionals in both countries. The Internet was already accepted as an email medium offering barrier free (and fast) communication contact between librarians. The only limitation was the telecommunication infrastructure which was problematic on both sides of the border, but which has become better and better in the ensuing years. The establishment of the listserv Foro-L facilitated this interconnection. See Foro-L in the References for information on how to subscribe.

## **Vendor Support**

Library vendors have exploited the new Internet technology to the benefit of all librarians. To market new products required remaining visible at important library conferences. EBSCO is one company that has been a strong supporter of both SLA and the FORO. With their products EBSCO Online and EBSCO Host, full text data can be searched and transmitted electronically. The larger Mexican libraries subscribe to these services, making it part of their digital library service goals of "24/7" availability. DIALOG, SilverPlatter, Ovid, and other vendors of fee-based databases now provide that information over the world wide web. The ongoing economic limitations of many libraries on both sides of the border prevent full participation. However, increasingly, libraries are developing web pages, mounting them on local servers, and accessing the rest of the world wide web through local satellite dishes to provide a network of free information transfer. Some good examples of academic library sites are those of UACJ, ITESM, INFOMINE at the University of California, Riverside, and the University of Texas at El Paso. (See URL addresses in the References section.) ITESM (Monterrey, Mexico) and UTEP (El Paso) offer their web sites in both English and Spanish.

The FORO, thus, like SLA, has become a key conference venue for vendors. Since its origins, the FORO brought the presence of vendor information services from both sides of the border. The positive impact of the trade show that goes along with the academic program of the conference has not been researched, but one can easily guess that FORO exhibits have enabled librarians to learn about the wide availability of information products and services that otherwise it would have been difficult to learn about by librarians, especially about those from smaller companies. The FORO relies on vendor support to help underwrite expenses. FORO organizers talk directly with vendors at SLA Exhibit Halls, greatly facilitating knowledge about the FORO by potential vendor/sponsors and in fact, SLA itself has been a vendor at several recent FORO conferences.

## **Governmental and Non-Governmental Organizations**

The role of governmental and non-governmental organizations cannot be overlooked in the support of the FORO, which in turn has helped these organizations to fulfill their cooperation/collaboration mission in both countries by furthering each others' knowledge. The best example is the former United States Information Agency (USIA) now merged with the U.S. State Department and its Office of International Information Programs. USIA has helped the FORO sponsor speakers and promote the conference. The Biblioteca Benjamin Franklin in Mexico City, known in Mexico as the BBF, has contributed to most of the FOROs.

Its staff has always been a visible, strong link between the FORO and libraries in Mexico, especially in its host city of Mexico City, where a very important number of Mexican libraries are located. It has to be said that the BBF, established in 1942, was the first library that the U.S government set up abroad. It has been one, if not the best, cultural export from the U.S to Mexico and it has been modeled in other countries as well. The United States Information Agency, through the BBF, has played a pivotal role in Mexican information development by training library staff, promoting public libraries, distributing library literature and bringing some of the best American librarians on visits to Mexican libraries and Mexican librarians on study tours to the United States.

The FORO began before the historic North American Free Trade Agreement was signed between the U.S., Mexico and Canada in 1993. NAFTA has made border relations easier from the economic and political point of view. NAFTA has promoted new laws and regulations to facilitate the commerce of information of sides of the border, to ease postal regulations and rates, and to create cooperative copyright agreements. NAFTA has been the topic of many FORO and SLA programs. Results of this agreement include the facility to transport computers and other information technology equipment across the border with less trouble, especially lowering import/export costs, reducing paper work, and in some cases freeing up the trade of goods between the three signatory countries. The NAFTA benefits to the library community have been great, because they have facilitated the buying and selling of information, both electronically and in print, as well as computer and telecommunication equipment to libraries. Now, there is a library trade between the U.S. and Mexico. Mexican bookshelves are exported to the U.S., and American library furniture is imported by Mexican academic libraries. This exchange would have been rather difficult before trade tariffs were lowered by NAFTA partners.

The Fidelcomiso para la Cultura EUA-Mexico is an example of a non-governmental body financed by Consejo Nacional para la Cultura, Bancomer (a bank), and the Rockefeller Foundation which has given funds to support part of the organizational expenses of the last two FOROs. It has also given seed money to some library cooperation projects, such as the Controlled Vocabulary project that aims to create a set of hemispheric subject headings for libraries in the Latin American continent, a project led by the El Colegio de Mexico Library. Another similar foundation is the UC Mexus program that sponsors scholarly exchanges and programs of interest to scholars (including librarians) affiliated with the University of California and its Mexican counterparts. UC Mexus was a major sponsor of the Riverside FORO (1998).

## **Professional Development**

Sharing information between countries on new ways of doing things in the library has been a primary outcome of both the FORO and SLA partnerships throughout the world. The following are projects directly related to the FORO experience.

### **Training**

The most valuable spin-offs from the FOROs have been staff training. Some examples are the reciprocal exchanges between libraries of all types from Chihuahua, Coahuila, Baja California, Nuevo Leon, and Sonora with U.S. libraries in Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and California. These institutions have organized several courses and workshops with volunteering library professionals that travel to the other country's site. Some collaborative training has even taken place as far south as Chiapas, a state on the Mexican border with Guatemala, 2,000 miles away from the nearest American library, yet experiencing the same sets of problems confronting border librarians to the north. Consultations and sharing of organizational and leadership materials has been shared across borders. Several of the trainers have been SLA members who work mainly in academic libraries.

Although not every bi-national action has been generated by the existence of the FOROs alone, it could be said that most U.S.-Mexico Border Library initiatives have had some relation to the communication channels established and perpetuated by the existence of the annual FORO meetings. An example of this is the new joint Master's library degree program jointly offered by ITESM and the University of Texas at Austin Library School. This program uses the latest telecommunication technology to record and broadcast academic library education programs to 26 sites all over Mexico.

### **Staff exchanges**

Personnel exchanges have been most successful. USIA travel grants to the United States are not only valuable themselves, but set the stage for future collaborative opportunities. The consultancy between the University of California, Riverside and the Colegio del Front era Sure, the Foro library representing "the other border" of Mexico, in Chiapas, was one outgrowth. In this consultancy, a new library system was acquired and new cataloguing schemes were created for backlogs, as well as staff training.

Staff exchanges between the librarians at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces and the Autonomous University of Cd. Juarez (UACJ) have focused on language training and in-site library training. SLA has recently established a goal to expedite an effective means to recruit and train library personnel in the international marketplace and for dealing with international information to serve

business patrons. The 1993 State-of-the-Art Institute sponsored by SLA was entitled "Latin America: the emerging information power" and brought several Latin American library leaders to present position papers at the Institute. (SLA, 1993). OCLC explored the value of its international catalogs at recent Directors Conferences which brought library leaders from Latin America (and other parts of the world) to its Dublin, Ohio headquarters.

### **Professional Associations**

Finally, it must be re-emphasized that professional associations have played a pivotal role in the success of these bi-national collaborative ventures. Existing associations have encouraged participation by the other country at their conferences. SLA, ALA, the Association of Mexican Librarians (AMBAC), the Sonoran Library Association (ASBAC), AzLA, the Texas Library Association, and the Border Regional Library Association are examples. The most active ones in the past decade are undoubtedly the Arizona Library Association, the Texas Library Association and AMBAC. However, other associations, such as the Southern Association of Law Librarians, have invited Mexican librarians to participate in their conferences as speakers as well as attendees.

New associations have sprung out of the need to increase U.S.-Mexico contact. The FORO itself is of course one, working now on its eleventh consecutive conference, to be held in Hermosillo, Sonora, Mexico, in March, 2001). (See its new web site at [victoria.ciad.mx/biblioteca/eventos/foro\\_xi.htm](http://victoria.ciad.mx/biblioteca/eventos/foro_xi.htm).) Librarians from Sonora had the preliminary meetings of their state association at early FORO conferences and the Baja Library Association also gained momentum because of the contact generated by the FORO experience.

Library conference programming increasingly encourages bi-national contributions: AMBAC invited a panel of U.S. librarians to attend their last two annual conferences, called Jornadas. AzLA continues to bring Mexican, primarily Sonoran, librarians to their annual conferences, and the AzLA International Librarianship Round Table, the first ever for a state association, maintains a strong membership base. The Texas Library Association also has a special committee for Texas-Mexico relations.

### **Conclusion**

All of these success stories, however, raise important issues which will require resolution if large U.S. associations such as SLA want to create a member base of Latin American special librarians and if the FORO wishes to remain a viable alternative for the "disenfranchised" and often economically pressured regional

librarians on the U.S Mexico border. These issues were discussed in a recent Library Trends article entitled "International Library Associations." (Baldwin, 1997). The most relevant for associations serving U.S. and Mexican librarians include the following:

1. The appropriate payment of dues relevant to the member's ability to pay for services and the value of those services to all members. The FORO has avoided this matter by not charging any dues, but is facing increasing difficulties in raising funds for future conferences and to solidify a member base and organizational leadership. SLA has not increased its membership in Latin America at the levels of other international areas in part because the dues is just too high in relation to the annual salaries of librarians in those countries. An SLA committee is looking into membership dues alternative structures which may in the future encourage increased membership in Mexico. Affiliation of Mexican library associations would be one solution, but sets economic precedents which would lower the ratio of dues to member service fees.
2. Planning programs that meet the needs of all member constituencies and how to identify and satisfy those needs. The FORO has evolved from highly interactive talk tables and a resolution-based format to a more formal set of programs by noted speakers delivered to an audience, albeit simultaneously translated. This may not sustain the FORO's unique sense of collaborative association. SLA's increased focus on business and corporate librarianship creates some international programming especially related to access to Mexican business information, but the organization has yet resolve central issues raised between its Board of Directors'-responsive International Relations Committee and its member-generated International Information Exchange Caucus. The success of Global 2000 will be directly related to the value placed by the membership on international experiences and international collaboration.
3. The ability to maintain continuity from year to year in library conference programming that develops and builds upon past programming. The FORO has done extremely well in this area, as noted in this paper of examples. SLA could do a lot more in this area. Its chapters which share a border with Mexico, provide opportunities to develop ongoing projects sponsored by SLA. Several chapters, for example, have utilized International Special Librarians Day for collaborative meetings and tours with Mexican librarians. Affiliate memberships would encourage other organizations to meet during SLA conferences.
4. The ability to disseminate and archive published and unpublished records of library meetings. Independent organizers of annual FORO meetings have not

been uniformly dedicated to the provision of proceedings of the conferences. Thus, the records of some conferences are lost. SLA headquarters has made a concerted effort to market its association in Latin America by translating brochures, membership forms, and abstracts of published articles into Spanish, but the traditional paper copy distribution of SLA publications is not as useful as the digital availability of the same information. SLA has embarked on an ambitious plan to create the virtual organization, and its successes in this area are contributing to the dissemination of information globally. This will assist in the vitality of SLA in Mexico and in other countries as well.

5. The development of a mission and vision that is broad enough for flexibility and change but exact enough to distinguish one association from another in the constant quest for new members and the provision of relevant services for those members. The FORO itself has evolved a "look and feel" which is much more traditional than its early mission. Recent FORO conferences have shown lower registration, in part perhaps because of the lack of urgency for its existence or uniqueness for what it offers. SLA is working on its image as well, and it is both losing membership in the academic arena and failing to attract members in some international sectors as it focuses more on the corporate and business librarians and the information they need to do their jobs.
6. Ascertaining ways to detail accomplishments. Questions such as "Must accomplishments be measurable and identifiable in order to be evaluated?" are related to continued support for the maintenance of the FORO. Many in the FORO believed in the beginning that just contact was enough, and for years two of the objectives of the FORO conferences were simply to network with other librarians with similar library concerns, and to get to know the cultural differences on both sides of the border. Many collaborative projects occurred out of this contact. Is it time for the FORO to cease existing? FORO participants of the last 3 conferences have asked this very question, and repeatedly the participants have voiced support for continuation. SLA's mission statement on its web site clearly offers support directly to its members' job effectiveness: "SLA's mission is to advance the leadership role of the special librarian/information professional in our information and knowledge-based society. SLA is committed to providing a variety of products and services designed to enhance its members' professional skills." The members vote their confidence in their association's service with their dues, their volunteerism, and their attendance at conferences.
7. Establishing the limit to the geographic coverage of an association. The FORO attempted to include Canada in its programming for several years just after

NAFTA. In fact, organizers briefly changed its name to the Tri-national Library Forum/Foro Tri-national de Bibliotecas to identify three countries in its embrace. However, Canadian information issues and Canadian-U.S. border libraries have less in common with the majority of programming and spin-off collaboration of the FORO in the U.S. and Mexico, and the group renamed itself the Foro Transfronterizo de Bibliotecas, the Transborder Library Forum, not to exclude Canada, but to fuddy the commitment. SLA is confronting issues related to its geographic coverage as well. Some SLA members in the United States are concerned that meeting the information needs of new members in Latin America, Africa, the South Pacific, and the Middle East may dilute the mission of the organization to support special librarians in the U.S. and Canada. Certainly, the organization will have to provide many alternatives to programming, member contact, and information dissemination to serve fully a world-wide membership.

8. Communicating appropriately with members. To deliver information in a format and language which is understandable and usable to members. The FORO has its listserv (See references for information on how to subscribe), but no central web site. Each Conference Chair has to establish a new web site, hopefully linking to all previous FORO websites, but hosted at their sponsoring institution, with no surety of its continuance. SLA has developed a very successful web site, and has many listservs to service its chapters, divisions, caucuses, board of directors, committees, headquarters operations, and general information for its members ([www.sla.org](http://www.sla.org)). The FORO has a serious problem with marketing upcoming conferences, as there is no standard distribution mechanism for promotional flyers and information brochures. SLA has a variety of publication media, and is assuming a greater visibility in the United States and Canada for its leadership in government and policy development related to information access.

All of these projects supported and nurtured by U.S. and Mexican library leaders point to the reasons behind this paper. We who are involved do this out of a desire to network, to understand information resources from other parts of the world, to explore better ways of organizing and disseminating information, to make our work more relevant to our clientele, and to feel connected to other professionals who face the same challenges and who recognize the same opportunities. The global village needs the global library. International librarians are paving the way.

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ITESM, Monterrey: [www-cib.mty.itesm.mx](http://www-cib.mty.itesm.mx)

INFOMINE at the University of California, Riverside: [infomine.ucr.edu](http://infomine.ucr.edu)

University of Texas at El Paso: [libraryweb.utep.edu](http://libraryweb.utep.edu)

Charlene Baldwin  
Chapman University  
One University Drive  
Orange, CA 92866  
e-mail: [Baldwin@chapman.edu](mailto:Baldwin@chapman.edu)

Jesús Lau  
Universidad Autonoma de Ciudad Juarez  
Av. Lopez Mateo 20  
32310 Ciudad Juarez, Chic.  
Mexico  
e-mail: [jlau@uacj.mx](mailto:jlau@uacj.mx)