



# Sister library cooperation: Inspiring cross-cultural capability for librarians

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International Federation of  
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2018, Vol. 44(1) 44–55  
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sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/0340035217751959  
journals.sagepub.com/home/ifl



## Abstract

The study examined the perceptions of team members of a sister library initiative between Nimbe Adedipe Library, Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta, Nigeria and the Valley Library, Oregon State University, Corvallis, USA. An online survey and focus group discussion were used as data collecting instruments. All of the 26 members of the team were sent an email to respond to an online questionnaire; only 16 members responded representing a 61.5% response rate, while 20 members participated in the focus group discussions. The finding revealed that members had positive perceptions towards the relationship. They were enthusiastic in learning about each other's culture; thereby inspiring cross-cultural capabilities in knowledge and information handling. Although members on both sides of the relationship had great concerns about the technology gap between the libraries, the study revealed that they were willing and looking forward to assisting one another.

## Keywords

Cross-cultural capability, librarians, library cooperation, Nigeria, sister library, United States of America

Submitted: 19 July 2017; Accepted: 27 November 2017.

## Introduction

Libraries from time immemorial have played a unifying role by providing access to information for people of diverse cultures and races. Inasmuch as these libraries strive to satisfy their users' needs they are always being curtailed, because no library is self-sufficient in resource acquisition. Library cooperation is, therefore, seen as an important element in facilitating global access to information and effective library service delivery. Cooperation among libraries takes on diverse forms and could mean different things to different libraries. Examples of cooperation include library consortiums, exchanges of resources, networking of professionals, interlibrary loan, and even collaboration on specific projects.

Whatever it means, cooperation is not a new phenomenon in the history of libraries. According to Kumar Jha (2001), it can be traced back to 200BC when the Library of Alexandria shared its resources with the Library of Pergamum. Kraus, cited by Kumar Jha (2001), stated that there existed library

cooperation among the monastery libraries in the 13th century. Although cooperation among libraries may sound simple, it can be difficult to establish. This is because the needs and expectations of libraries differ widely and it may be difficult to reach a common agreement for further development or to even sustain such a relationship. It is, therefore, very important that any two libraries going into partnership or cooperation must have a concrete agreement and mutual understanding between them to drive the cooperation.

Although library cooperation has been in existence since ancient times, most often this has been between libraries of the same region, country, or nation. Regardless of this, the libraries of the Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta, (FUNAAB) Nigeria

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and Oregon State University, Corvallis, (OSU) in the United States of America, decided to establish a friendly relationship effective on 28 September 2015, despite their different locations, region, and orientation. It is believed that through this sister library relationship it will be possible to:

1. raise the awareness of staff about issues and needs facing libraries internationally;
2. inspire cross-cultural competence of librarians and other staff through networking opportunities;
3. share information, resources, and expertise between staff with similar responsibilities;
4. identify trends in librarianship across borders in order to improve library services to users; and
5. share technological expertise.

A memorandum of understanding was signed by the management of the two universities and an agreement was made in the following areas of cooperation:

- a. exchange of library staff;
- b. joint research activities;
- c. participation in virtual seminars and academic meetings;
- d. exchange of library materials and other information.

In addition to the memorandum, a sister library team was formed in each library to work out and establish a solid relationship, hence; like Henry Ford cited by Murray (2004) the two libraries are saying ‘coming together is their beginning, keeping together will lead to their progress, while working together will lead them to success’.

## Background information

The Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta, (FUNAAB) Nigeria is one of the three specialized universities of Agriculture in Nigeria. It was founded in 1988; presently it has 47 academic departments and 10 Colleges (FUNAAB, 2014). In its effort to become a World Class University, its members of staff are constantly charged to establish relationships with their colleagues outside the University to put their work in a global context. Oregon State University (OSU) is a public university located in Corvallis, Oregon. It was established in 1868 and is the state’s largest public research university which specializes in studies of marine sciences, forestry, and sustainable food systems (US News and World Report, 2017). Included in its international program is the Africa Initiative which seeks to open opportunities for

collaboration between the OSU community and partners in Africa through research, teaching, and service projects (Oregon State University, International Programs, 2017).

In line with the above, and the ‘Sister Library Twinning Initiative’ supported by the American Library Association (ALA, n.d.), the International Federation of Libraries Association and Institutions (IFLA, 2000) and the International Association of University Libraries (IATUL, 2008), the researchers decided to explore establishing a sister library partnership in 2015. It is expected that through this relationship the librarians will be inspired to develop cross-cultural capabilities and enhance their skills by learning from one another. A memorandum of understanding (MOU) was signed between the two universities after which the two library teams exchanged mailing lists of its members and had an electronic virtual conference. The technological gap between the two universities did not let the team enjoy the conference. However, the two teams continue to exchange emails while seeking for an opportunity for staff exchange and other concrete projects. The researchers, therefore, embarked on this study to assess members’ perceptions and identify some likely problems that may spoil the relationship.

## Objectives of the study

The objectives of this study are:

1. to assess the perception of team members about the sister library relationship between the two libraries;
2. to examine how the relationship will enhance the cross-cultural capabilities of librarians;
3. to examine the perceived benefits the two libraries stand to gain from the sister library relationship;
4. to ascertain how these benefits will enhance universal access to information and knowledge among librarians;
5. to find out whether the sister library relationship will enhance library services at the two libraries.

## Literature review

### *Cooperation among libraries*

The term cooperation can be defined as a relationship which is built on trust and mutual understanding between two or more parties, while the aim of any cooperative activity is to achieve what the members cannot achieve individually. Cooperation is also a

social activity which is as old as human civilization (Kumar Jha, 2001); the most important elements for successful cooperation are the people. In essence, people must first agree to come together and be willing to work together. Many reasons have been given for cooperation among libraries; one of the sparks for library cooperation is the worldwide information explosion (Adam and Usman, 2013; Omotosho and Igiomoh 2012; Ossai, 2010). Borek et al. (2006) observed that libraries often come together for selfish but positive reasons to leverage shrinking budgets, to learn from each other, to build better tools together and most importantly to serve their users better by taking advantage of each other's collection. Rezaul Islam (2012) summarized this in another way and stated that the main objective of cooperation among libraries is to maximize the availability of and access to information and services at a minimum cost. Cooperation is, therefore, often attached to benefit, no matter how small it might be.

Literature abounds on various forms of cooperation that exist between various libraries in different parts of the world. Kumar Jha (2001) claimed that the first library cooperation activity in India was a catalog of manuscripts compiled by Whitney Stokes in 1868. In 1876 the American Library Association (ALA) formed the committee on cooperation in indexing and cataloging in college libraries (Millard, 2010). Murray (2004) also wrote about the TriUniversity Group (TUG) library collaboration that was initiated in 1995 and which has been widely emulated. Gross and Riyaz (2004) reported that the Maldives-Australian library partnership was a valuable way of building an enduring professional partnership. Also worth mentioning is the Fujian Provincial Library and Oregon State Library relationship which began in 1984 and it is still waxing stronger (Greedy et al., 2014). In 2006, the University Librarian of Xiamen University, China and the University Librarian of Haifa University, Israel met in Seattle and initiated a personal relationship which later became a sister libraries relationship between Israel and China (Xiamen University, 2014). A successful tripartite collaboration partnership between University of Namibia, University of Tampere and University of Helsinki, Finland established in 2010 was also reported by Namhila (2014). According to Rosa and Storey (2016), there are more than 100 library consortia in the United States, each offering significant advantages to libraries.

There is a long tradition of library cooperation among American libraries, while in Nigeria a few do exist but do not always stand the test of time. Iroaganachi et al. (2015) stated that library

cooperation in Nigeria can be traced back to the National Union Catalogue which was created in 1963 by the National Library of Nigeria; however, the cooperation did not last due to a lack of a standard. Another initiative was started by the National University Commission to examine the possibility of a cooperative acquisition, but this also failed. Nevertheless, informal cooperation continues among most libraries as interlibrary loan and referral services.

Cooperation among libraries sometimes do encounter some challenges; for instance, Ke and Wen (2012) in their study of schools and public libraries in Taiwan highlighted a diverse interest on the part of the cooperators as one of the difficulties encountered in library cooperation. Rezaul Islam (2012) also noted that one of the problems hindering effective cooperation among libraries in Bangladesh was a lack of appropriate communication systems. Nevertheless, Miambo (2002: 1) maintained that "cooperation among libraries is a universal language spoken in different dialects" while Manu Kumar and Manasagan-gotri (2013) observed that cooperation among libraries is now moving from sharing of "things" to sharing of people's know-how.

The advent of information communication technology (ICT) has also made cooperation among libraries easier and more viable. While commenting on cooperation among libraries, Zhang (1997) indicated that libraries are entering the golden age of cooperation where there is technology to link libraries and make users aware of the collections of other libraries.

### *Cross-cultural capability of librarians*

The concept of cross-cultural capability is a relatively new area of study that began in the late 1990s and has grown at a rapid rate (Kamorski, 2006). A cursory look at the literature revealed that different terminologies have been used in this area to refer to the same concept. This is because the concept cuts across various disciplines. According to Killick cited by Kamorski (2006), the list of these terms includes cross-cultural skills, cross-cultural competence, cross-cultural awareness, intercultural communication, just to mention a few. In librarianship the same concept has been referred to as multiculturalism, inclusiveness, and cultural diversity; hence, in this study, the terms "cross-cultural capability" and "cross-cultural competence" will be used interchangeably.

Globalization has accelerated the need for cross-cultural capability among librarians; for the frontline information professionals, it is important to know how to make information available in different

formats to meet the needs of diverse users despite their background and orientation without bias or prejudice. Mestre (2010) argued that our society is one of cultures, languages, abilities, preferences, and backgrounds, and providing the optimal library experience to all constituencies is clearly one of the service goals of librarians. She, therefore, suggested that all librarians need to possess at least the basic knowledge of what it means to be culturally competent. In the same vein, Dewey and Keally (2008: 634) stated that:

the twenty-first century library must incorporate new methods of communication, collaboration, access to scholarship, and learning methodologies, recognizing that understanding and advancing diversity in the broadest sense is critical to an individual's success through their life . . .

The above statement buttressed the fact that librarians need to enhance their cross-cultural capability more than before. According to Kamorski (2006), cross-cultural capability is a term that deals with how people react to a foreign culture, and how well they understand and accept their own culture. He stated further that cross-cultural capabilities begin with understanding the belief, values, and behaviors of one's own culture. This understanding can then be applied to other cultures in an effort to behave appropriately.

Overall (2009: 176) defines cultural competence for library and information professionals as:

the ability to recognize the significance of culture in one's own life and in the lives of others; to come to know and respect diverse cultural backgrounds and characteristics through interaction with individuals from diverse linguistic, cultural and socioeconomic groups; and to fully integrate the culture of diverse groups into service work, and institutions in order to enhance the lives of both those being serviced by the library profession and those engaged in service.

One of the diversity standards of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) is "cross-cultural knowledge and skills" it stated that:

librarians and library staff shall have and continue to develop specialized knowledge and understanding about the history, traditions, values, and artistic expressions of colleagues, co-workers, and major constituencies served. (ACRL, 2012)

Librarians who will be able to function cross-culturally need to understand the breadth of cultural values of their community and those around them and be able to process this into appropriate responses for

their diverse clients. Mestre (2010: 2) opined that cultural competence goes beyond diversity awareness: "it denotes an individual's ability to effectively interact with and among others whose values, behaviors, and environments are different from one's own". The question now is how do we develop or enhance this capability among librarians? ACRL (2012) explained that:

a culturally competent librarian shall work with a wide range of people who are culturally different and similar to themselves and establish avenues for learning about the cultures of these colleagues, co-workers, and constituents. Hence, it is increasingly becoming obvious that librarians need to become more cross-culturally capable.

It is presumed that interaction and cooperation among the professionals, across international borders, can have the intended outcomes.

### *Universal access to information and knowledge*

Today the well-worn axioms "information is power" and "knowledge is wealth" are universally acknowledged across most cultures and countries. These two fundamental commodities are products of one another. Madukoma (2011) described information as the sum total of processed and unprocessed data which enhances knowledge. Knowledge, on the other hand, can be described as the utilization of information to accomplish a specific purpose. Ochogwu, (1999) emphasized that information is a basic resource, as fundamental as food and energy and its access is a fundamental human right. Generally, information has been accepted as a powerful resource which is equal to other natural resources (Abduwahab and Umma 2009). The World Development Report 1998/1999 also confirmed that "knowledge has become perhaps the most important factor determining the standard of living more than land, than tool and labor" (World Bank, 1998). Drucker (1994) cited by Onifade (2014) referred to knowledge as the primary resource for the individual and for the economy while land, labor, and capital are secondary. The fact that information and knowledge are important cannot be overemphasized; hence, no individual, organization, or community can succeed without using information. Corroborating this, Madukoma, (2011) stated that access to information is essential for the economic, social, and political wealth of a nation.

Nevertheless, access to information and knowledge is often seen as more of a privilege than a right in many nations of the world. One of the characteristics of information is that it is abundant, unlike other economic resources, which are scarce. Despite this, many



barriers exist to hinder its accessibility such as education, technology, cost, and culture (Bridges and McElroy, 2015). As a result of this, many people remain uninformed about crucial matters that affect their lives; in fact, many people are frustrated by the challenge of acquiring the necessary information to solve problems. Bridges and McElroy (2015) observed that segmented access to information can be very dangerous and have severe consequences. This was substantiated by Dahn et al. (2015) who claimed the threat of Ebola had been identified as far back as 1982 but the research was locked up in expensive journal archives inaccessible to health practitioners in Liberia. They observed that: “had the virologist findings been linked to long-term effort to train Liberians to conduct research, to identify and stop epidemics and deliver quality medical care, the outcome might have been different”.

On this basis, Kahle and Ubois (2005) agreed that the creation and dissemination of knowledge is important for building societies that grow and prosper.

Access to information has been greatly facilitated by the advent of ICT, but according to IFLA (2015), access requires more than investment in technological infrastructure; it also requires a policy statement. Moreover, libraries must enable universal access to information and knowledge against all odds to fulfill the mandate of the profession; this can be achieved to some extent through networking among librarians both within and across national and international borders.

### *Cultural empathy*

The theoretical framework that is used to anchor this study is derived from Edith Stein's empathy theory. The theory revealed that people are not solitary in their feelings and experiences because empathy allows two individuals to understand each other and share prevailing human occurrences such as joy or sadness without losing their individualism (Angell, 2011). This implies that it is possible for two different individuals to share sincere feelings with one another without losing their separate identities. The theory was also linked with the concept of cultural empathy which focuses on the ability to accept another cultural point of view and appreciate the particular way in which the people in a foreign society think and interact as the right way (Graham, 2010). In essence, cultural empathy will help one to empathize with the feelings of another person's culture and, therefore, better understand and respect the values of that culture. It will also enable one to consider the differences

and similarities to one's own culture. This will further prepare individuals and groups to have more positive interactions with different people and cultures of the world. However, it should be noted that cultural empathy is not an agreement with a specific culture; rather it is an understanding of a culture's values and beliefs which does not mean losing one's own cultural values and beliefs.

The connection of the theory to this study is based on the assumption that librarians are involved in a profession where the cardinal function is to provide information to a diverse audience (Angell, 2011). Hence, it is important that librarians develop cultural empathy skills in order to serve their diverse users better, irrespective of the user's home country or culture. Establishing a professional cross-cultural relationship with colleagues of different cultural backgrounds will help build the cross-cultural capabilities that are needed in their technical and professional skillset.

### **Methodology**

This study employed a self-designed online questionnaire and focus group discussion as the main instruments to collect data. In March of 2016, a two-phased research project was started to explore the expectations and opinions of sister library team members. At the time of the research project, the Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta (FUNAAB) had 18 members on their sister library team, and Oregon State University had eight members on their sister team; these numbers do not include the two researchers, who serve as both members and coordinators of the sister library teams.

The first phase of the project was designed to assess the perception of sister library team members about the newly established sister library partnership, which was established in September 2015. In March 2016 each team member was emailed an invitation to participate in an online survey; the email also provided an informed consent document and link to the survey. A reminder email was sent one week after the initial email. A total of 16 responses were received, eight from OSU team members and eight from FUNAAB team members.

The online survey had 13 questions and each had a Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The 13 questions were grouped into four sections. Section A related to the perception of the library staff about the sister library relationship, Section B investigated team members' opinions about how the sister-library relationship may or may not increase their individual cross-cultural capabilities,

Section C delved into the topic of information access, and Section D inquired about potential benefits for each library. The survey also had three open-ended questions:

1. If you have any concerns about this sister library relationship, what are they?
2. What do you hope to achieve, professionally or personally, as a result of participating in this sister library relationship?
3. Do you have anything else you would like to say?

The second phase of the project was designed to gather qualitative information. Approximately two months after the initial invitation to participate in the online survey, two separate emails were sent inviting all sister library team members to participate in a focus group. There was one focus group for each team; seven sister library team members participated in the OSU focus group and 13 members participated in the FUNAAB focus group. The focus groups began by having participants silently review a consent document and results from the online survey; results were broken out by the institution. After participants finished reviewing the survey results, they were asked the following open-ended questions.

1. What stands out for you from the results of our sister library partner team?
2. What stands out for you from the results of our sister library team?
3. What concerns do you have?
4. Where should we go from here?
5. Do you have any final thoughts to share?

The focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed.

## Results

The results of the survey revealed that out of the 25 members of the two sister library teams who received the online survey link only 16 members (8 members from OSU and 8 members from FUNAAB) responded; representing 64% response rate for the study.

One of the objectives of the study was to assess the perception of the sister library team members about the relationship between the two libraries.

The results of the survey represented in Table 1 show that 75% of the respondents understood the potential benefits of the sister library relationship; 6.25% of the respondents did not. In the same vein, 81.25% of the respondents were optimistic about the

**Table 1.** Perception of librarians.

Statements	Agree	Disagree	Neutral
I understand the potential benefits of a sister library relationship	12 (75%)	1 (6.25%)	3 (18.75%)
I am optimistic about our sister library relationship	13 (81.25%)	1 (6.25%)	2 (12.5%)
Our sister library is a welcome development	14 (87.5%)	1 (6.25%)	1 (6.25%)
Cumulative %	81.25%	6.25%	12.5%

sister library relationship while 87.5% of the respondents agreed that the relationship is a welcome development. One can deduced from the above analysis that the majority of the respondents have a positive perception towards the relationship.

Another objective of the study was to examine how the relationship will enhance cross-cultural capability among librarians of the two libraries.

The majority of the total respondents (93.75%) agreed that the relationship will increase their knowledge about libraries and librarians at the international level while 87.5% indicated the relationship has prompted them to think about libraries and librarians in other countries, more than before. This reveals that the participants in the study are already taking more interest in learning about their colleagues who are from different cultural backgrounds. Hence, the above result (see Table 2) clearly shows that the majority of the respondents agree the relationship would enhance cross-cultural capability through learning about one another's culture. A cumulative percentage of 85.41% of respondents agreed with this while only 8.3% of the respondents disagreed.

The third objective was to examine the benefits that libraries stand to gain from the relationships. In order to know this, the respondents were asked to respond to the statements represented in Table 3.

Of the respondents 43.75% perceived that the relationship will help solve technology issues in their libraries, although this percentage was recorded from the Federal University of Agriculture (FUNAAB) side. Worthy of notice in this aspect is also the fact that a greater proportion of the respondents disagreed with the point that the relationship will not bring any tangible results to their libraries. This indicates that the respondents were optimistic about the gains or benefits that this sister library relationship will bring to them, no matter how small.

**Table 2.** Cross-cultural capability.

Statements	Agree	Disagree	Neutral
This relationship will increase my knowledge about libraries and librarians in other countries	15 (93.75%)	1 (6.25%)	–
This relationship has prompted me to think about libraries and librarians in other countries, more than before.	14 (87.5%)	1 (6.25%)	1 (6.25%)
This relationship has inspired me to learn more about Nigerian or US culture	12 (75%)	2 (12.5%)	2 (12.5%)
Cumulative %	85.41%	8.3%	6.25%

**Table 3.** Perceived benefits the libraries stand to gain.

Statements	Agree	Disagree	Neutral
This relationship will help to solve technological issues in my library	7 (43.75%)	6 (37.5)	3 (18.75%)
This relationship will enable my library to reduce costs	5 (31.25)	6 (37.5)	5 (31.25)
This relationship will result in no tangible benefit to my library	2 (12.5%)	13 (81.25%)	1 (6.25%)
Cumulative %	29.16	52.08	18.75%

Universal access to information is one of the concerns of the sister library team members, the study, therefore, examined the sister library teams' perception on this.

The result (see Table 4) clearly shows that the respondents saw the relationship as an avenue to learn about information resources and access information from one another. Of the respondents 93% agreed that their participation in the relationship will offer them the opportunity to learn about information access issues while 87% agreed it will increase their knowledge on access to information globally. This will, in no small way, enhance their access to global

**Table 4.** Access to information.

Statements	Agree	Disagree	Neutral
I will learn about information access issues in other countries as a result of participating in this relationship	15 (93.75%)	1 (6.25%)	–
This relationship will improve my knowledge about information resources in other countries	14 (87.5%)	1 (6.25%)	1 (6.25%)
Cumulative %	90.625%	6.25%	6.25%

**Table 5.** Library services.

Statements	Agree	Disagree	Neutral
This relationship has inspired me to research library-related topics that are new to me	10 (62.5%)	2 (12.5%)	4 (25%)
This relationship will result in improvements to my library's services	10 (62.5%)	2 (12.5%)	4 (25%)
Cumulative %	62.5%	12.5%	25%

knowledge especially among staff that share similar responsibilities in the respective libraries.

The results represented in Table 5 indicate that more than half of the respondents, 62%, agreed the sister library relationship has inspired them to research more on library-related topics. (It is hoped that this will eventually have an impact on service delivery.) It is also interesting to note that another 62% of the respondents agreed that the relationship will somehow improve library services in their universities.

In addition to the above, it was obvious from the data collected from the open-ended questions that members of the two teams hope to gain professional improvement by networking with one another. These include research collaboration, sharing of techniques, and expertise among others. The relationship was, therefore, seen as an avenue to gain more knowledge and enhance their skills especially in cross-cultural capabilities.

### Focus group analysis

The Focus group discussion was conducted to have a more qualitative result. This provides the participants

ample opportunity to freely express their feelings about the relationship. The result was analyzed by grouping key responses into themes.

*What stands out for you from the results of our sister library partner team?*

**OSU team.** The majority of the participants claimed that what stood out for them, was that FUNAAB members were excited, had positive feelings and were confident about what they were going to get out of the relationship. Nevertheless, OSU members felt that it was still necessary to have an avenue for more discussions because there were some questions that they would have loved to answer if they had understood them properly. One of the participants expressed this, in the following words “maybe we could actually do things related to some of the questions that they are being hopeful about”; this indicated that team members still wanted to understand each other better.

**FUNAAB team.** On the other hand, what stood out for FUNAAB team was that, despite the cultural difference, OSU team were optimistic about the sister library relationship and were interested in the partnership. The majority of the members were impressed that the relationship was already inspiring cross-cultural capability among the OSU team as they stated that it would make them learn about other libraries in other countries. Furthermore, that OSU team members were willing to network and engage in staff exchange if there is an opportunity, not minding the distance. They were really encouraged by these revelations.

*What stands out for you from the results of our sister library team?*

**OSU team.** The OSU team stated that they were excited about the relationship, but that they might not get anything tangible out of it, aside from the experience. This experience would include knowing more about information access issues in other countries. They wanted to know how the things they care about are done in other places. They suggested that this may be a way to advance discussion among libraries about global information disparities which to them seems particularly rich.

**FUNAAB team.** On the FUNAAB side, members felt the relationship would help them in capacity building and provide an avenue for professional networking. However, they expressed that caution should be exercised so that they would not be seen as constituting a

burden on their sister library. They noted that in learning from each other, the partnership would enhance library service delivery in their library as it would provide them the opportunity to learn how to do the same work differently (Namhila, 2014). It would also promote technological advancement in FUNAAB because this would expose them to new trends in librarianship.

*What concerns do you have?*

**OSU team.** The OSU team was conscious of the past history between the Americans and Africans and would not want to be seen as dictating the tune for the Africans. They rather wanted a dialogue. According to the participants “they would not like to tell their partner how to do things, and that this is the right way to do things”; they wanted the relationship to be a shared experience to learn from each other.

**FUNAAB team.** The FUNAAB team was concerned about the technological gap issue and the fear of meeting the standard of their sister library. This is because the FUNAAB library is still in its early stage of automation after many failed attempts. Funding was also a major concern for the team. They envisaged that they would need funding to carry out a worthwhile project.

*Where should we go from here?*

Members of the two teams agreed that one-on-one interaction should be encouraged and initiated; hence, the participants requested that members should be paired with one another from the two teams. Moreover, the FUNAAB team felt that the concentration should be on networking and getting to know each other better. They suggested that members could later seek a grant for a more concrete project. It was also suggested that individuals could collaborate for scholarly research activity.

*Do you have any final thoughts to share?*

The majority of the participants from both sides were concerned about the technological gap between the Universities. According to them, this was worrisome, as members would have loved to conduct a series of live interactions. Although members had earlier had two virtual interactions with Web Ex after the signing of the MOU, the reception quality was poor and they, therefore, did not enjoy the meeting. They were also concerned about making the time available out of their tight schedule to attend to one another’s queries.

The majority of the participants were of the opinion that the sister library relationship should be geared



towards promoting intercultural knowledge and research activities. Some participants from the OSU team expressed a deep concern on how to sustain the relationship; a participant was particularly worried about how long members would be able to keep their enthusiasm because of the long distance between them. Generally, members stated that they needed to start something real that would create a strong bond between them so that the enthusiasm would last. They admonished each other to provide regular updates to one another with news from both ends and maintain their connection.

## Discussion

Developing a university sister library relationship across international borders is not an easy task; however, this study reveals that the two teams have an initial positive disposition towards each other. In the focus group members were asked about the perceived benefits of the relationship. Some of the benefits that were mentioned included research collaboration, placement of their professional work in a global context; staff exchange; resource sharing; and sharing of techniques, expertise, and technologies. This will enhance the capabilities of the librarians in service delivery. As a result of their interactions with colleagues from a different background, members will be able to appreciate, respect, and value each other's culture better and this will enhance their cultural capability. Although responses to the online surveys and focus groups were overwhelmingly positive and hopeful, the following findings were identified as areas that require additional attention, discussion, and work in order to further develop a successful sister library partnership.

### *Creation and maintenance of one-on-one relationships*

In both the online surveys and focus group discussions, sister library team members in the United States of America and Nigeria expressed a desire for one-on-one connections between staff. Although some team members had been paired with partners several months before the focus groups and were sent emails about the pairings, it was revealed during the focus group discussion that there was confusion about the pairings, and none of the partners had communicated yet. Based on this feedback, the coordinators decided to use another method to pair the members. The two coordinators later paired members and created a master list, along with email contact information, which was sent to all participants. When pairings were announced, a list of "conversation starters" was

included in the email announcement. Conversation starters help partners kick-off their new professional relationship (adapted from Mel, 2014).

### *Technology challenges*

In the online survey, FUNAAB participants agreed that the relationship would help solve technical issues in their library. In the follow-up focus group discussion FUNAAB staff members again expressed optimism about the ability of the partnership to help with technology issues but expressed some concern about "meeting up with the standards" of the OSU libraries. Similarly, in the OSU focus group discussion, staff members talked about technical issues at FUNAAB, including concerns about intermittent Internet access and routine power outages. Ultimately, OSU librarians know little about the technological issues at FUNAAB and within Nigeria, because access to information on this topic has been limited.

Throughout the world, computer technology has rapidly become central to library services. The ALA (2016) reported that "academic, school, and public libraries continue to face an uncertain economy as they shift resources and services to meet the needs of the 21st-century digital world"; this ALA statement also applies to Nigerian libraries. Hence, technological issues are of great concern to librarians in FUNAAB because, without relevant information technology tools, the library cannot perform optimally. Several attempts have been made to get the library fully automated since 1994, but these attempts have not been successful. It is on record that the FUNAAB library was the first library in West Africa to subscribe to The Essential Electronic Agricultural Library (TEEAL), which shows that attempts to become fully automated have been in process for over 20 years. Presently, the library uses Koha integrated library software to manage the library resources, but there are still some fundamental problems that needed to be resolved. Another major issue concerning technology in FUNAAB is funding. This has greatly hindered the library in acquiring the relevant information and technological tools needed to provide services to its various users. This has forced the library to look beyond University management for help in resolving technological barriers.

A next step in the conversation about technology between the sister libraries may be to have the librarians on the FUNAAB team write a short white paper about their goals and desires related to technology. At this point in the relationship, while technology is a concern, the US sister library team remains relatively unaware of how they might best support their sister

library. When the US library team better understands the issues that are of interest to FUNAAB librarians, and the self-identified issues facing the Nimbe Ade-dipe Library, a plan of action can be co-developed between the sister libraries. This could involve expert advice on procurement of technological tools needed in FUNAAB, aids in purchasing the technological tools from abroad, or the identification of grants to improve FUNAAB technological needs.

### *An equitable relationship*

In the online surveys, one US team member stated: "... as an American, I worry that it's hard for us to move out of a paternalistic paradigm, so making sure that we are aware of those biases is important". This sentiment was repeated, expanded, and agreed upon by several participants in the US focus group, with one person saying, "... there is just such a long-entrenched history with these issues, so there is being conscious of it, but then it's on both sides, that this is the way the structures have developed, so it's a difficult thing". Another librarian expressed concerns about not wanting to tell Nigerian librarians, "how to do things" or "this is the right way to do things", and concluded by saying, "... it's a shared experience and we are learning from each other".

It is not surprising to hear US librarians express trepidation about entering into a relationship with librarians in Africa. According to Saurin (2012), an international relations scholar, colonization hit its zenith in 1947, after the conclusion of the Second World War, and the "historical transition from imperial to international world order and from international to globalized world order is highly questionable"; he goes on to note that there is a "long shadow of history" (2012: 23–24).

Many people in the US are ashamed of the country's colonialist history and worry about continuing that narrative into the future. It is a "difficult thing" as one of the focus group members stated. It is possible that some libraries and librarians in the US may avoid developing sister library relationships with libraries in Africa for fear of continuing or repeating imperialist history. However, the two researchers believe that cross-cultural learning is one way to bridge understanding and offer counter-narratives to history and current reality. Embracing reflection and conversation about the fraught nature of this legacy, rather than avoiding it, is one way to enact many of our stated professional values, such as inclusion, equity, and access for all. Hudson (2012: 69), a librarian in Guelph, Canada, writes about the "critical discourse of global justice in library and information science"

and suggests a beginning step of "self-reflection in our interventions in global inequality". Hudson concludes his thought-provoking article by stating that, "[we] must start, in concrete terms, with a rigorous practice of asking ourselves difficult questions about what we understand and believe" (2012: 83). He goes on to say that we cannot find the answers until we ask the questions. For our sister library teams, and others, there is no easy path, but the first step for our librarians may be the "self-reflection" and "critical self-scrutiny" that Hudson (2012) suggests, followed by conversations within our libraries and across international borders.

### **Conclusion**

The sister library relationship between FUNAAB library and OSU libraries has been established; the study revealed that the stakeholders are committed to sustaining the relationship. Although both libraries have their fears (the fear of meeting each other's expectations), they are ready to share their strengths to improve their weaknesses. They are ready to respect the fact that they are different people with one common goal; "creating universal access to information and knowledge".

The relationship started with a "coming together" when the two coordinators met at the American Library Association Conference in 2015. Shortly thereafter they established a formal sister library initiative. Approximately seven months after their initial meeting they conducted the online study and focus groups in order to assess the library team members' perceptions and identify early bumps-in-the-road, a way of "keeping together". The next step is to further the relationship by "working together" in an effort to improve services at the two academic libraries in different countries to achieve greater efficiency, face new challenges in the profession globally, and enhance service delivery for diverse users.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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