Third round of... SALLP

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Ingrid Thomson spent two months in 2005 as a Fall Associate of the Mortenson Centre for International Library Programmes at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign, United States of America. She was one of the seven South African librarians selected for the third round of the South African Library Leadership Programme (SALLP) - a joint two-year programme between the Library and Information Association of South Africa (LIASA) and the Mortenson Centre for International Library Programmes.

The Fall 2004 Associates of the Mortenson Centre were from South Africa, Columbia, Vietnam, Japan, Uganda and Kenya.

Just before I left South Africa, I was asked what my expectations were about the South African Library Leadership Programme, and what I hoped to achieve. My response was that I was looking for 'A-ha' moments, that my horizons would be expanded, that I would see new opportunities and ideas and look at old ones anew. I was of the opinion that many answers to problems would be found in the United States, and that libraries didn't have the same problems that we have. Wrong! If there is one overriding message that I brought back, it is that libraries all over the world face similar problems - advocacy, budget cuts, technology - and that, although there is no one solution - librarians across the world need to work together through the sharing of experiences. Strategies that work in the United States of America (USA) or Columbia won't necessarily work in South Africa, but through the sharing and networking, there could be 'A-ha' moments and breakthroughs.

The programme provided good exposure to issues in all library sectors. It was a very full academic programme and although my focus was on academic library matters, there was attention given to public libraries. Workshops and sessions on a variety of topics were held such as fundraising and grant writing, marketing and market research, library advocacy, services to disabled users, visits to different library services, visits to Chicago and Springfield, learning presentation skills, learning new computer skills including web design, and discovering digitisation. We attended two conferences while we were there. The first was the Reaching Forward South Conference for library support staff which offered a number of personal empowerment workshops to specialised library training. Titles included *Open-source software in the library; Programmes on a shoe-string budget* and the *Many looks of reference* - a very interesting session on reference work presented by a panel of public, academic and school librarians.

The second conference was the annual conference for the Illinois Library Association where the South African librarians presented a session on library advocacy in South Africa - the first of three presentations we would do during our stay. The conference programme was very extensive - there was a wide choice of sessions to attend, and I really wished I could have split myself in two as some of the topics for public libraries looked so interesting. One of the pre-conference sessions for public libraries was on how to plan programmes that will draw borrowers to your library. The one effective way is to invite an author to speak in your library. Sessions included *Training public librarians on intellectual freedom; Customer service*; and *Start your engines: starting, jump-starting or reinvigorating your Friends group*. Other topics included *Positive partnerships* which explored collaborative partnerships between different types of libraries including programme partnerships; *Displays: what we can learn from museums, theatre, retail and the container store, the top technology trends for libraries in 2004; The practicalities of family literacy;* and a session on *Getting childrens' programming in synch with today's busy families*. Topics for starting conversations here?

A highlight of the stay in Chicago was the visit to the Chicago Public Library - a real oasis in the middle of town. See Nazeem Hardy's (a fellow SALLPer) article in the July/August 2004 issue of **CL** (p.32).

Workshops

We attended two interesting workshops which were, in the main, aimed at public libraries, one on market research and one on strategic planning. The workshops only reiterated what we all should know and should be practicing - if you don't know how your library contributes to the community, if you don't know who your customers are, if you can't show how effective your library is then library advocacy is almost an impossible mission.

Market research on a dime described efficient and inexpensive techniques for libraries to learn about their customers. Why bother to research? One needs to know first hand how customers see your library and its services - as the presenter said, what you don't know, can hurt you. The customer's perspective is invaluable and is different from how you and your colleagues view the library and its services. Knowing your customers allows you to be proactive in addressing customer needs rather than reacting. It forms the basis for long-range and marketing plans.

The presenter told the story of a public library in a new community that started a story time session for children in the morning, only to find that it was hardly supported. When the librarians started looking at why this was so, they found that in the majority of the households, both parents worked and the children were in day-care. A survey revealed that the best time for the story hour was in the evening. And once the change was made, the story hours were well attended.

But before one leaps in and starts drawing up questionnaires and surveying customers, one needs to be clear about what one wants to learn and what one is going to do with the information. What kind of decisions will one be making using the information that one proposes collecting? And yes, one may need to call in the help of a professional, but it depends on one's requirements.

Research

There are different types of research: existing research where information such as circulation records already exist, the number of registered library users versus the total population in your community, the number of visitors to the library, the number attending programmes and so on; secondary research specific to your geographic area such as census data or forecasts or master plans for your local authority; or more general information such as literature surveys. Quantitative research (like circulation records, numbers of registered users, et cetera) are statistically reliable while qualitative research would answer questions like who are our customers, what kind of people are they,

how do they think, how do they feel about our services. The approach you use depends on what you want to research.

You need to be clear about who you want to speak to; decide on a technique for talking to the customers (individual interviews, focus groups et cetera); work out a rough budget; identify who you are going to talk to, and how you are going to select them; and find a venue to do the research. If you are doing group interviews, then it would be an excellent idea to use a professional moderator who has the necessary skills and who would also be neutral.

Know your community

She described a case study where a library wasn't sure how parents of young children perceived its current programming and services. The library also had ideas for improvements but weren't sure if they met the needs of the parents.

The names of parents of young children were collected via a customer survey and followed up with phone calls from the library staff. The library's meeting room was the venue for the group interviews. Light refreshments were offered. A tape recorder was set up so that the interviews could be taped.

The discussion consisted of several parts: a warm-up where the names and ages of the children and interests were elicited and the parents asked to describe a typical visit to the library and what the alternative to library visits were; they were asked about their general thoughts about the library; then about the services for the youth - these included aspects like staff, physical layout of the library, noise levels, food and drink policies, programming as well as suggestions for improvement.

Related to getting to know your community through market research, was the workshop on *Strategic planning* which included documenting your library's contribution to your community. Using **The library's contribution to your community**, a resource manual for libraries to document their social and economic contribution to the local community published by the Southern Ontario Library Service, the presenter Bev Obert, provided guidelines on how to construct arguments aimed at both politicians and funders to demonstrate the value of libraries and stakeholders. She started off by asking us to name five activities that our libraries do best or contributions that our libraries made to our communities, and then to think of three or four or five issues that are important to our communities. Was there any commonality in the lists? We should be

linking the services the libraries can provide with the community needs.

The resource manual was developed as a guide to provide libraries with an easy to use, flexible and adaptable tool to send a persuasive message to stakeholders. What stakeholders want to hear is:

- ❑ local data (not the benefits from the literature)
- ❑ hard data (not opinions)
- ❑ community support and satisfaction (which can be determined with market research)
- ❑ broad-based benefits (the contribution the library makes to a wide range of corporate/community objectives)
- ❑ a comparison to others to demonstrate cost-effectiveness.

The contribution that the library makes can be divided into two broad areas - social/personal contribution and economic contribution. The social and personal contribution is divided into three categories - personal growth and development; community development; and support to community groups and agencies. Economic contribution is divided into three categories: the direct economic impact of the library; support of local business and investors; and the indirect economic impact.

Much of what was covered in this workshop was also covered by the session on *Market research.*

A powerful message was that one needs to know one's community and how the library serves that community if one is to be an advocate for libraries. And that is the challenge!

Note: Ingrid, subject librarian in the Humanities Information Division at the University of Cape Town, is currently public relations officer for the Western Cape Branch of LIASA.

The Mortensen Associates outside the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library; delegates had a preview the day before it opened

Ingrid found the Cat in the Hat at the Illinois Library Association Conference where there was this great stall selling toys