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Progressing with Changes

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In the history of East Asian libraries or collections in North America, development has always evolved along with social, political, and economic changes. Changes happened when libraries and collections adapted to a new environment. Different libraries make decisions on changes based on their individual situation, and not all the changes move toward the same direction, sometimes they may even move in opposite directions. Changes made often seemed necessary at the time of change, but the most crucial aspect that impacts where we go and how we serve as a library is how we react to the changes.

In 2010, the administration of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Library took a big step in its organizational structure, and closed or consolidated many branch libraries to realize the idea of a “new service model.” In this wave of closing and consolidation, Asian libraries along with few other area studies libraries, including African Studies, Latin American & Caribbean Studies, and Slavic Library, were officially closed and all became part of the International and Area Studies Library (IASL). Not only that, but in the following few years, the library also integrated the collection stacks into one sequence. Basically, it was a change in a totally opposite direction from an independent library with full services including acquisition, cataloging, and reference to a collection within a library with no physical space for the collection with acquisition and cataloging managed separately in central unit, and materials in stacks managed also by central unit.

The following are some major changes that occurred in implementing the new service model. All points are made mainly with a focus on East Asian/Asian perspective.

- No longer an independent library, but merged with other units and part of the IASL. The original Asian Library was divided into Chinese, Japanese, Korean, South Asian, and Middle Eastern collections.
- Technical service is mostly centralized into the library’s Cataloging and Access Management unit. The staff who have multi-task duties were appointed with percentages in IASL and other units, such as cataloging or acquisition.
- Collections were integrated with other materials, and there is no longer a physical space dedicated to the EA collection

After the consolidation, the library structure for area studies became almost totally opposite of what they used to be. The Asian Library was no longer a branch library and was disintegrated into several collections. As a result, some of the functions or service advantages were no longer possible.

- First of all, it lost its space both for offices and for public services. The Asian Library’s reading room with reference collection was totally closed, and the new IASL reference

collection has much less space for each area. Although some individual librarians' office space was increased, overall office space was reduced.

- There is no longer a separate Asian collection in stacks. The previous Asian reading room was directly connected to Asian collections in the stack. This was very convenient for faculty to teach classes in the reading room and had been used heavily in the past. However, after the integration of the collection into one sequence, all the materials of different languages were mixed with English materials and are no longer kept in a separate location in the stacks.
- There is no circulating collection with the new IASL. Compared to the few other major branch libraries, such as Social Science, Literature and Languages, History and Newspapers, or even Classics, the IASL is the only one that doesn't have a circulating collection, nor a separated collection space in the main stacks.
- Consequently, there is no physical location in the library that holds collections for CJK or any other area studies collection. The only identifiable access point is the collection web pages for each area. Associated with the integration of the collection came the problem of physical and online browsing, which may affect the accessibility of the collection.
- Personnel for the Asian library was reduced. CJK now has only 50% of the subject librarians it used to have. It lost almost all staff members, and has many fewer graduate student helpers.
- We also have less bargaining power in terms of budget for applying for funding, positions, and promoting services. This is because the IASL has multi-area studies collections, and each collection has to compete for resources within the IASL. Besides which, at the university library level, when the IASL functions as one unit, fewer resources are available for each collection.
- All the issues mentioned above can serve as examples that signal the gradual loss of bargaining power.

These are some additional results of the changes:

- The most visible change is extended hours, from 9-5 to 9-7 plus some weekend hours.
- Acquisition work flow changed, and pre-order search can be performed within the library system.

Some things remain basically the same:

- Liaison to centers on campus remain basically the same, with each area studies librarian as the liaison to respective centers and departments. However, for East Asian, now the Chinese librarian is the liaison instead of the head of the Asian Library.
- Collection budgets also remain the same for each collection. Since the library collection was assigned to each subject librarian, the structural change did not affect the collection budgets that were originally assigned to each area studies librarian. However, this does not apply to any newly added funds for collections or endowment funds.

The new service model is the implementation of a conceptual change in service the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Library has made in reacting to economic and budgeting issues the University was experiencing. As far as area studies libraries go, there the library had a few outcomes it wanted to implement. However, there was no assessment or outcome report after years of implementation. How successful or unsuccessful the consolidation was is not the point of this paper. Its purpose, rather, is discussion. Not all outcomes are positive, and not all outcomes were fulfilled either in the process of implementation or over time.

One of the directions of the implementation of the IASL was to keep individual identities for each area studies collections through designations such as "the Latin American and Caribbean Library Collection," with distinct spaces for selected parts of each area's reference collection in the new service point. This has already been lost subsequent to the implementation. In 2017, the reference collection in IASL was also integrated into one sequence, and the collections no longer have separate spaces.

The other major rationale for consolidation was to save money. However, the Library has not conducted any survey nor assessments to measure the outcome of the consolidation and whether any money or how much this new service model has saved. The outcomes are vague in many aspects. One example is the reduced service points. One of the economic applications of the implementation was to reduce the service points of area studies libraries to only one in IASL so as to save resources in both personnel and operation. However, when these area studies libraries were standalone libraries, their staff worked in multifunctional tasks and holistic duties across reference, collection development and cataloging. After the consolidation all staff were moved to other central departments, and almost all the area studies collections lost their staff members. There is no hard evidence to show that this model saved money compared to the previous one.

The other unfulfilled outcome relates to librarian positions. The plan was to have one full time area specialist librarian for each collection area, but for East Asian, there is now no full time Japanese librarian, nor Korean. For a large academic state university which has both a center for East Asian Studies and also a department for East Asian languages and literatures, this is not an ideal situation.

During the Roundtable Discussion at last year's CEAL conference, some asked if this process can be reversed. I am not sure if that can be done. However, we can certainly be alert about where we really want to go from here and ponder how we can make progress after these changes. Here are few points I would like to make for further discussion.

I think the foundation for all the changes will be the accumulation of knowledge for teaching and research today and tomorrow. Our users' needs should always come first. Changes are made in order to provide better service to our users. This may not always happen in the changes we decide to make. When the University Library made the decision to integrate all collections with LC classification system into one sequence, the main reason given was that it would be easier for stack staff or student workers to resshelf books. The change was not

welcomed by our users. More recently, when IASL planned to integrate its reference collection, the survey went out to undergraduate students, graduate students and faculty. Among total submissions, 82% of the survey participants preferred the collection to be grouped by separate areas, African Studies, Korean Studies, or Chinese Studies. 70% of survey participants come to the IAS reading room and use the reference collection by regions, 23% by call numbers, 14% by subjects (i.e. history, literature). We also received complaints from our students and faculty that it is hard to find materials in stacks with the integrated sequence. So to me, the integration of the collection with one sequence according to call number does not provide our users convenient and friendly access to our collection. Therefore, this change was not justified.

Regardless of whether the library has difficulty maintaining separate collections in its stacks due to the shortage of staff, or lack of language skills, it certainly should not be at the cost of our users. When a library cannot provide convenient and friendly physical browsing options for our users, we should find innovative ways to make up this lack. We should be able to provide better online browsing function, for example, to cancel the inconvenience of the integrated collection arrangement. We have a long way to go in this regard in order to provide better access to our collection. We still have many records that have no subject headings, no complete information about the books, even sometimes no call numbers. If online browsing is the alternative to convenient physical access, we have no reason not to provide good online access. We have a long way to go in achieving this.

Another thing that we should be concerned about is how, when we have the overall power of a library with combined area studies collections, to keep the strength of each area collection and not let the so-called internationalization overshadow the uniqueness of individual collections and their special priorities. Although international and area studies often go hand in hand, they certainly cannot cancel each other. Recently, we hear more of international over area studies as if international studies is the same as area studies. For example, in IASL, we have created more positions with the labels of “international”, such as “international reference librarians” and “international pop culture librarian.” These terms are ill-defined and confusing in terms of scope of the responsibilities. Culture is something unique to a country or a nation. These positions previously mentioned are more coordinating in nature, and cannot replace the areas specialists. When it comes to really providing services, it is still the responsibility of the area studies librarians. Over the course of changes, it is not progress to have international studies replace area studies. We might see some “international” positions to coordinate projects that cross boundaries, or some institutions with less personnel resources choose to have international studies librarian positions to cover different area studies. But international studies can never replace area studies. On the contrary, ideally we hope to see all institutions can afford to have librarians for each area.

Another worrisome signal appears in the call for serving undergraduate students on campus. Due to language difficulties, undergraduate students may rely more on English materials than on original language materials, but this should not mean that we need only English materials and therefore we switch our focus in collection development. Authentic

internationalization should only encourage more collection development of original language materials, not the opposite.

Changes happen often, and not all changes necessarily turn out to be good, but reversing the change or going back is often not an option. The best thing we can do is to find innovative ways to get the best outcomes in the new situation and progress with the changes.