

Back Talk — CD in Digital Era CALIS

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This past week I attended the 10th Anniversary celebration of the founding of **CALIS (China Academic Libraries Information System)**. It is sort of a cross between a **SOLINET** (<http://www.solinet.net>) and **OCLC** (<http://www.oclc.org/us/en/default.htm>) in that it clearly sees its role to be one of total “no holds barred” advocacy for its members by purchasing content in their behalf, by negotiating shared licenses, and by operating a shared cataloging bibliographic utility. During my attendance at the meeting I was struck with a sense of the break-neck gallop into the digital era that these libraries have been experiencing since China decided to become a major actor on the world’s stage. Thirty years ago when I went as a member of the **Committee on East Asian Libraries** delegation to China, college and university libraries were largely unattended academic dustbins. Now scores and scores of them are bright, shiny, and rapidly growing with legions of young and ambitious librarians.

I was asked to talk about university library collection development in the digital environment and to say something of the situation in Hong Kong. It occurred to me that most of the basic functions performed by collection developers were the same: we need to understand user needs, what our collections already have to meet those needs, what relevant material is being published, and then to select as much of what is good as our pocketbooks will allow.

Such talk is comforting, but of course I also had to talk about the environment in which we continue to shuffle our CD deck chairs around is completely different: unlike in the past when our patrons would fairly quickly come to the library after exhausting the value of their own bookshelves and those of their friends, today’s users only give us a glance when THE fount of all knowledge, the WWW, fails them. As shown in the **OCLC** “College Students’ Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources” report (<http://www.oclc.org/us/en/reports/perceptionscollege.htm>), 89 percent of college students start their information searches with a Web search engine, while only two percent begin with a library Website. Moreover, most of these students are perfectly satisfied with what they get from the Web and their abilities to navigate it. I stressed in my talk that because we live in such a changed environment, we need to change so many things about how we operate our libraries.

At the **University of Hong Kong** my col-

league **Gayle Chan** was curious to see whether Hong Kong’s students were like those in the **OCLC** study. Her own surveys showed that while a smaller proportion of our students started with the Web and a larger proportion started with our library’s Website, still the percentage of our students going for a Web search engine first exceeded 75 percent and those going with the library’s Website were still only around 15 percent. Another area where there was a significant difference in the two surveys related to student satisfaction with the information provided by search engines. While more than 95 percent of the **OCLC** student survey respondents were satisfied with the information they got from Web search engines, only half of our students were so satisfied.

Most of my talk focused on a discussion of while the basic collection development functions performed by my library’s collection developers were the same as in the past, the methods employed to do this work had changed significantly. For example, we now conduct online user satisfaction surveys in order to understand the needs of our users. Biennially we ask all members of our user communities to gauge for us the importance of our services and collections and then to tell us how well we are doing. This enables us to conduct a “gap analysis” and to develop a list of the areas of most importance to our readers where we need to improve. For undergraduates, the most consistent gap over the past six years has been the “lack of sufficient books in my field.” While we always did surveys in the past, the Web makes this job much easier. We now have a group studying this issue more carefully: is the problem the lack of duplicates, the lack of unique titles, or the lack of English or Chinese language materials? I also illustrated how we use e-journal and eBook vendor reports, proxy server use statistical reports developed by our system’s office and **OPAC** circulation statistics to better understand the needs of our readers.

Collection analysis services of the type provided by **OCLC’s WorldCat Collection Analysis Service** or **Library Dynamics’s Spectra Dimension** were also discussed. While collection analysis tools like these have been around for several years in North America, having such services easily available in China have yet to become a reality. Many were interested in being able to compare one library’s holdings with those at other libraries and to be able to print out lists of books which others had for significant areas of interest.

Certainly another area where collection development work is very different in the electronic era, from how it was in the print world, relates to the amount of consortial purchasing going on. I remember well, as a new selector in the 1970’s, spending hours supplementing approval plans by going through tall piles of publisher brochures and exclusion slips deciding a “yes” or a “no” for each purchase decision. Part of the fun was being able to make independent decisions on what to buy. Now, with our own library spending 62 percent of its library materials budget on electronic materials, **Janny Lai** our E-resources Coordinator has to spend a lot of time meeting or communicating with her colleagues before decisions are made. We estimate we saved about US\$3.5 million dollars last year through consortial purchasing (we also buy North American and British monographs together).

A final area of difference discussed is the importance of “mining the Web” for freebies. In the old days gift and exchange materials composed a very small part of the books which we added to the academic libraries where I worked. I foresee this changing significantly in the future. Of course linking to books relevant to local needs in the **Google Book Search** system is the obvious place to look for out-of-print books to supplement current purchases. For example, we have a significant interest in books about China. When I did a **Google Book Search** for “China” I found 188,600 entries with 4,313 available to downloading. Of course a selector will have to sort out the books about chinaware dishes, but this is a simple illustration of what is possible. If you haven’t looked at **Bookyards**: library to the world (<http://www.bookyards.com/>) you should take a look at another example of where to mine for free materials. Doing **Google** searches for specific topics also reveals scores of wonderful databases which are free for the picking.

Our goal has always been to make it easy for readers to find the information they needed; and in the past we bought as many books and journals as possible to increase the chances that we had already acquired what they wanted before our students and faculty members entered the door. This is still the same but we now have Web resources to help us meet our goal. Because of the Web, we work more consortially than in the past. Collection Development in the print and digital ages has one more thing in common: You didn’t have enough money then, and you don’t have enough now!! 🌸