

# Our raison d'être: Teaching information competencies

By Gabriela Sonntag

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## Conference addresses needs of libraries in Mexico

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**I**nformación es educación” read the satchels given to some 80 librarians from throughout Mexico who came together on October 9–11 to focus on the role of the library in teaching information competencies to users. The National Meeting on Programs for Developing Information Competencies (*Encuentro Nacional Sobre Programas de Desarrollo de Habilidades Informativas: regreso a la razón de ser de las bibliotecas*), was held at the Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez (UACJ) in the Mexican state of Chihuahua. Spearheaded by Jesus Lau, director of Academic Support Services who oversees the library, this conference was the undertaking of an enthusiastic and hard working team of ten librarians. Most sessions were held in the modern library building opened in March 1995, which is now dwarfed by the large addition that is under construction.

### A new approach

Recognizing that Mexican librarians do not have academic status, Nancy A. Cunningham, St. Mary's University in Texas, set the tone for the first day with her keynote speech, which stressed the need to collaborate with teaching faculty and develop an understanding that the role of librarians as teachers is an integral part of the educational process. Discussions afterwards emphasized the need to change not just attitudes toward librarians but educational or study methods. Research is generally left to specialized institutes but is much less common in Mexican four-year institutions, where

faculty should be encouraged to require students to do more than just use the books placed on reserve or the quiet study area.

There were only two other presentations by U.S. librarians, including one by Donna Jurena and Ceri Daniels from Doane College in Nebraska in which they discussed and demonstrated the team-teaching approach used in their research course. Ed Erazo, from the University of New Mexico, discussed the contents

**The role of the librarian is to teach the concept that having information is having power.**

of a teaching portfolio and the importance of having one. The bulk of the panel presentations the workshops featured librarians from Mexico.

### Preparing the workforce

An excellent paper, entitled “*Instrucción de Usuarios y Alfabetización Informativa*” (User instruction and information literacy), by Guadalupe Vega from the Colegio de Mexico called for Mexican academic institutions to assume their role as a major force in modernizing the country. Information literacy skills are essential in everyday life on social, economic, and civic levels. The workforce will become information-illiterate if technology develops and they do not keep up. Acknowledging this, the Colegio de Mexico is developing programs to meet the needs of its students and faculty. The term generally used throughout the sessions was *formación de usuario*, or user formation, which many agree is a better description of the impact that information

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competencies can have on a student. Vega stated, "It's not just skills, it's a way of life that we are imparting."

This theme was reiterated and expanded in the keynote speech by Costa Rican librarian Saray Córdoba. She stressed the importance of active, participatory learning in teaching information competencies. She identified a cycle of information use that begins with young children learning to read but not developing a habit of reading. Deficient libraries that do not support the educational process are coupled with teachers who do not promote resource-based learning, library/information use, or reading. This leads to a lack of knowledge about the importance of information. Leaders in all areas of society make important decisions without adequate information, and we see in society a lack of understanding or culture of information use, which reinforces the lack of reading habits in society as a whole, both in adults and children. The lack of reading habits returns us to the beginning of this cycle, which may be more or less evident depending on the country being discussed but which is unmistakably universal. The role of the librarian is to teach the concept that having information is having power.

Recognizing that not much research has been done in Mexico on the topic of user education, Patricia Hernandez, of the Centro Universitario de Investigación Bibliotecológica, also noted the need to change the "culture of study." To do this, three important changes must take place: students must learn to do research not just study by rote; professors must also develop research skills, something not always required in Mexican faculty; and libraries must be developed to support the educational level and academic programs of the university. Hernandez elaborated on several research projects that are underway.

### **Brainstorming solutions**

Perhaps the most significant part of the conference was the evening brainstorming session. All participants were asked to identify three problems and three possible solutions to reaching the goal of developing programs for teaching information competencies. The animated discussion that followed generated lists, which included many concerns we share with our Mexican colleagues. These were then compiled, and a committee was chosen to draft a declaration. This statement, demanding action

to address the needs of libraries in Mexico and support for information competency programs, was reviewed on the following evening and adopted by the participants. It will be sent to numerous public agencies and university administrators and posted on the UACJ Web site.

Sessions aimed at sharing experiences included discussions of specific libraries, recent developments, and programs they are implementing. These included descriptions of additions to the library collection, Internet workstations, CD ROM's, and additions or renovations to library buildings. Many cited the need to provide continuing education opportunities to their library staff. Worth noting is the program developed at the Universidad Autónoma de Quintana Roo, which includes strong and active learning with hands-on components. Reinforcing the concept of team teaching, an excellent presentation on how to prepare and implement a quality instructional session was one of the five sessions explaining the impressive UACJ instruction program.

Of special interest were the exhibits that displayed instructional programs, handouts and pamphlets, and videos produced by the various institutions represented at the conference. On Saturday, participants were taken on library tours at the University of Texas at El Paso and the University of New Mexico, Las Cruces libraries. More information about the university, the library, and this conference can be found at the Web site: <http://www.uacj.mx/dirinfo>. ■

### **Letter**

*To the editor:*

Cynthia Coccaro's article on Career Development (*CE&RI News*, Nov. 1997) is a very nice overview, but I was disappointed to see that she missed one very important site: mine!

My career and job-hunting site has many great features, including expert advice on writing dynamic cover letters; writing powerful resumes; links to other expert advice on topics such as interviewing; a "Marketability Test"; the "Domino Effect"; and links to many job sites.

The name: Quintessential Career and Job-Hunting Resources Guide. Access: <http://www.stetson.edu/~rhansen/careers.html>.  
—Randall S. Hansen, Stetson University; e-mail: [Randall.Hansen@stetson.edu](mailto:Randall.Hansen@stetson.edu)

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