

The Simmons College Vietnamese Scholar-Librarian Program: A Model for Collaborative International LIS Education

Patsy Baudoin and Meaghan K. O'Connor

Simmons College Graduate School of Library and Information Science has been educating Vietnamese librarians since 1993. Students in this master's program complete coursework at the Boston campus of Simmons College and in Vietnam; this unique approach is creating a strong network of Vietnamese librarians, many of whom have emerged as leaders in the field. Recent accomplishments of Simmons's graduates include founding the Vietnamese Library Association and contributing to the Vietnamese translation of the Dewey Decimal Classification system. This article details the history and development of the Vietnamese Scholar-Librarian Program.

Introduction¹

The Simmons Graduate School of Library and Information Science (GSLIS) Vietnamese Scholar-Librarian Program is a model for training international librarians who lack local access to modern library and information science (LIS) education. The program is designed to provide participants with the credentials and knowledge to become leaders and to focus national attention on libraries. In the initial proof-of-concept phase, between 1993 and 1996, the Harvard-Yenching Institute and the Simmons College GSLIS devised and implemented a program to educate 18 Vietnamese librarians, each of whom earned a master of library and information science degree.

Previous efforts to train Vietnamese librarians by international organizations have primarily consisted of workshops in Vietnam.² These types of programs are well-intentioned but temporary in nature and far from comprehensive. To pursue advanced training, students have to travel to Europe or the United States, where LIS programs do not necessarily address the specific issues of Vietnamese libraries. The Vietnamese Scholar-Librarian program resolves these concerns by holding classes in Boston and in Vietnam; this structure allows students to study modern library practices and explore practical applications to Vietnamese libraries. The program has continually evolved in response to participant feedback, the recommendations of the coordinators, and changing funding sources. The success of the

About the Authors

Patsy Baudoin, Ph.D., M.S. (patsy@mit.edu) is an adjunct professor in the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at Simmons College and also the film studies and European languages and literatures librarian at MIT's Humanities Library. Meaghan O'Connor (meaghan.oconnor@simmons.edu) is the Dean's Fellow for International Initiatives at Simmons College GSLIS, where she expects to receive her M.S. in December 2008. Ms. submitted 04/07; accepted 11/07; revised 01/08.

initiative heralds a new phase of collaborative international training in librarianship.

The State of Vietnamese LIS Education at the Outset of the Project

Library science education has been available in Vietnam since 1959 and is presently being offered as a bachelor's program at four institutions.³ According to Simmons professor Dr. Patricia Oyler, low salaries make library science an unpopular choice; many students select it because they are unqualified to enter programs for more lucrative fields. There is a master's program, but it is only offered to those who already have an undergraduate degree in library science. Individuals who seek out librarianship as a second career, even those who express considerable interest, are unable to achieve their ambitions unless they are able to leave their jobs and pay for a second bachelor's degree.

The system of education has been one of memorization and recitation, with little focus on analytical thinking. In a 1998 article, Tran Lan Anh describes the bachelor's program as being based primarily on the Soviet system of librarianship, with obsolete texts and resources. A 1991 revitalization effort brought about new courses, including "Information Retrieval and Distribution," "Introduction to Informatics," and "Automation of Library Activities," although Anh writes that the courses were "new in name only, with generally outdated content."⁴ At the time the article was published, the majority of the faculty had out-of-date training, with little opportunity for professional development. Inadequate funding and a dearth of detailed knowledge of modern library trends have hindered efforts to revamp the curriculum.

History of the Simmons and Harvard-Yenching Program

The Harvard-Yenching Institute began sponsoring Vietnamese faculty to earn master's and doctoral degrees in the United States in 1989. Their return to Vietnam, it was felt, would create a demand for greater library support and services. In January of 1993, Edward Baker, Deputy Director of the Harvard-Yenching Institute, approached Dr. Robert D. Stueart, Dean of

the Simmons College Graduate School of Library and Information Science, about collaborating to sponsor Vietnamese librarians to study in the United States.

Dean Stueart proposed a master's-level program that would expose participants to current practices in American institutions and create strong professional connections in Vietnam. The goal was to provide solid training to generations of librarians, thereby helping to build an infrastructure for Vietnamese library systems and services. Preliminary overtures were made to involve the faculty of the library science programs, but it was determined that their general level of English would not be sufficient for completing coursework in the U.S., even with the planned English-immersion course. Although the program does not directly influence library science education in Vietnam, the hope has been that the knowledge and training provided to the participants would be disseminated as they engaged in professional activities.

The Vietnamese Scholar-Librarian Program emerged with the support of the Harvard-Yenching Institute, which provided most of the project's initial funding of approximately one million dollars. The Harvard-Yenching Institute identified six Vietnamese research institutions with strengths in the humanities and social sciences. Each of these institutions was asked to nominate candidates for the Vietnamese Scholar-Librarian Program, with the intent of creating a national network of highly trained librarians. After meeting the candidates in Vietnam, Mr. Baker submitted interview reports to the GSLIS Admissions Committee, which in turn evaluated each candidate's application dossier, including TOEFL scores and letters of recommendation. The Committee selected the first six students from the following Vietnamese institutions: The National Library of Vietnam, Hanoi University, the National Center for Humanities and Social Sciences of Hanoi, the Ho Chi Minh City University, the General Sciences Library of Ho Chi Minh City, and Cantho University. The first students arrived in Boston in May of 1993.

The success of the initial phase of the Vietnamese Scholar-Librarian Program laid the groundwork for furthering the effort and increasing the number of students. Since the end of the partnership with Harvard-Yenching in 1996, the program has continued with the support of the Dean's Office of Simmons GSLIS, under James Matarazzo and Michèle Cloonan, as well as generous funding from the Luce and Starr Foundations. In 2005 Simmons College received a 1.8 million dollar grant from Atlantic Philanthropies to train 25 librarians to staff the Learning Resource Centers (LRCs) that Atlantic Philanthropies has constructed in Vietnam. As of April 2007, 30 students had graduated from the program; the 25 students funded by Atlantic Philanthropies are expected to graduate in March 2008.

Simmons professor Patricia Oyler, who took part in early discussions, has been instrumental in shaping and developing the program over the last 13 years. In 2004, Simmons and its Vietnamese alumni celebrated the tenth anniversary of the Vietnamese Scholar-Librarian Program's first graduat-

ing class with a two-day seminar in Hanoi. The "Conference on the Role of Library Resources in Higher Education in Vietnam" was designed to look forward to the next ten years of library service, to assess the needs and goals of the various institutions, and to create a detailed plan for success.

Program Structure

A Vietnamese students' typical year at Simmons begins with immediate enrollment in an intensive English language program so they are prepared to participate fully in GSLIS classes. Vietnamese students understand that their requirements are the same as those set for all Simmons GSLIS students. For the 30 students who completed the first phase of the program, this meant three core courses—"Reference/Information Services," "Information Organization," and "Principles of Management"—as well as six electives.⁵ Students took four courses each in the fall and spring semesters, and completed the ninth in Vietnam under Dr. Oyler's instruction. A special course in Southeast Asian bibliography was developed and taught by Judith Henchy of the University of Washington; it was designed to help students adapt the practices and theories of U.S. librarianship to the particular problems of their own institutions.

Students in the first phase of the project also toured Boston-area libraries, completed a four-week internship in an academic library, attended presentations at major libraries in Washington, DC, and participated in the ALA annual conference to see firsthand the scope and power of a national library association. Graduation ceremonies were held in Vietnam so family and friends of the participants could join in the celebration.

Under the grant from Atlantic Philanthropies and with the new credit system at Simmons, the current program has changed significantly. Students now complete twelve courses, five required and seven elective. In addition to the three previously required courses, the newly-required courses are "Evaluation of Information Services" and "Technology for Information Professionals." After one semester of classes (three courses) at Simmons, students toured libraries in Washington, DC and attended the ALA Mid-winter Meeting or ALA Annual Conference. The group then completed an eight-week research program at the Mortenson Center for International Library Programs at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The remaining nine courses were taught in Vietnam.

An ongoing problem of the program has been acculturation. Because the group funded by Atlantic Philanthropies is so large (ten or fifteen students at once, rather than three or four), special efforts were made to ensure they would have ample opportunity to experience American culture. Simmons hired three GSLIS students as group leaders and assigned each one five Vietnamese students. The group leaders act as student ambassadors, orienting the Vietnamese students to Boston, leading field trips to local libraries and cultural institutions, and providing information when students have cultural questions. This initiative is also valuable for the group leaders;

they connect with international colleagues and get an insider's look at Vietnamese librarianship and culture.

The cornerstone of the program is the coursework in Vietnam. The students selected for the Atlantic Philanthropies grant will work in academic libraries / LRCs, and are drawn from four universities: University of Can Tho (in the Mekong Delta), University of Hue, University of Danang, and the University of Thai Nguyen (north of Hanoi). Each of these universities has a new Learning Resource Center, funded under the supervision of RMIT International University Vietnam and East Meets West Foundation with funds donated by Atlantic Philanthropies. The LRCs are designed in contemporary library architecture, with wide open spaces on each floor, between 300-400 workstations, and several service desks.

The intention was to offer courses at each of the four LRCs. Three courses were offered by Dr. Oyler at Can Tho in spring 2007. Then the students all moved to Hue, where another three courses were offered: "Digital Libraries," "Digital Information Services and Providers," and "Academic Libraries." The remaining three courses—"Marketing," "Preservation," and "Collection Development"—were going to be taught half in Da Nang and half in Thai Nguyen, but the Thai Nguyen LRC experienced construction delays, and the fall 2007 semester was taught entirely in Da Nang. The courses in Hue and Da Nang were taught by faculty flown in from the US for periods ranging from one month to ten weeks, coming from Simmons GSLIS, Cornell University, and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

All of the students took the same twelve courses, focusing on their intended careers in academic libraries. The students are guaranteed professional work in their respective LRCs, and range in interests from IT to reference, cataloging, acquisitions, and administration. Some of the students had considerable previous experience in libraries, whereas for some this position is their first library job.

The strength of this combined in-country and US model was brought home to Simmons GSLIS professor Terry Plum while teaching "Digital Information Services" in Hue. Before going to Vietnam to teach, Professor Plum weeded out all of the obviously U.S.-centric reference questions (such as questions involving the Boston Red Sox) and wrote new, putatively culturally-neutral questions for the Vietnamese students. Less than two weeks into the course in Vietnam, he threw out all of the questions and re-wrote the reference queries from a more Vietnamese point of view, involving open access databases that are common to Vietnamese universities but unavailable in the U.S. Without the experience of teaching in Vietnam, those rejected questions and learning outcomes—subtly biased toward western interests—would have remained, and the students would not have learned how online reference might function in their country. Other assignments centered on aspects of the Vietnamese culture, including: building a digital library of Vietnamese medical materials using Greenstone; a "real life search" in which the students took on an academic literature search for

a number of Vietnamese faculty from all four universities; and IT issues specific to each LRC.

During the three semesters in Vietnam, students traveled to each others' institutions, looked critically at the systems in place, and began to understand what needs to be accomplished throughout Vietnam to move libraries and the library profession forward. Studying in the United States exposed students to the latest developments in library science and took advantage of existing resources at Simmons College, but bringing students back to Vietnam to complete their degree is the key to producing librarians who will be invested in their home country.

The program also offers ongoing continuing education opportunities to its alumni. Every time Dr. Oyler returns to Vietnam, all former students are invited to participate in classes and events. The long-term benefit of gathering students at the end of their coursework with alumni from the program is palpable: it renews and strengthens their professional bonds, helps to continue developing Vietnamese libraries' infrastructure, and provides a means for learning about accomplishments and new ideas.⁶

Accomplished Graduates

Armed with their degrees, many of the Vietnamese Scholar-Librarian Program's graduates have been promoted to decision-making positions as directors or deputy directors of their respective libraries in Vietnam; others have risen through the ranks over the past decade. They find themselves capable of influencing the full range of library policy decisions, whether building libraries from the ground up or improving collections and services at existing institutions. One graduate has made it her mission to improve library services to the blind and visually impaired. Among the many libraries benefiting from the vision, accomplishments, and skills of this program's graduates are:

- The General Sciences Library of Ho Chi Minh City
- National Library of Vietnam, Hanoi
- National Center for Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi
- United States Embassy Information Center, Hanoi
- Cantho University
- Hue University
- National Center for Scientific and Technology Documentation, Hanoi

In addition to distinguishing themselves in their own careers, GSLIS graduates have worked together to achieve the goals set at the 2004 anniversary conference. They were major contributors to the recently completed Vietnamese translation of the Dewey Decimal Classification.⁷ They were also vital to the founding of the Vietnamese Library Association; as a show of support for this initiative, Dr. Oyler attended the opening ceremonies as an honored guest in October of 2006.

The powerful team of GSLIS graduates is initiating change in Vietnamese libraries, and they will continue to play a role in library development as mentors to the next generation. Indeed, two graduates are now teaching library science courses at the Vietnam National University, and a number of the latest GSLIS graduates intend to offer LIS courses at Cantho. A precedent-setting and visionary collaboration, the Simmons College Vietnamese Scholar-Librarian Program has contributed significantly to professional exchanges among librarians within Vietnam, and has set a standard for training librarians from other parts of the world who seek to revitalize and modernize their libraries.

References and Notes

1. The authors wish to thank Michèle V. Cloonan, Patricia G. Oyler, and Terry Plum for helping to inform and shape this report.
2. Sandy MacMillan, "Vietnam: Libraries and Information Services," *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*. Ed. Allen Kent. Vol. 50. New York: Marcel Dekker, Inc., 1992.
3. Vinh-The Lam, "Issues in Library Development for Vietnam," *Asian Libraries* 8, no. 10 (1999): 371-79.
4. Tran Lan Anh and G. E. Gorman, "Library and Information Science Education in Vietnam," *Asian Libraries* 8, no. 3 (1999): 65-82.
5. In the fall of 2005, Simmons GSLIS switched from a four-credit system to a three-credit system. The program now consists of twelve courses, with five required courses and seven electives.
6. Some Vietnamese librarians, with Simmons GSLIS encouragement and support, returned to Boston to attend IFLA's 2001 annual conference. At that time, GSLIS offered them an exclusive course in Online Information Services.
7. "Dewey Decimal Classification Debuts in Vietnamese," *Information Today* 23, no. 9 (2006): 54.



COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

TITLE: The Simmons College Vietnamese Scholar-Librarian
Program: A Model for Collaborative International LIS
Education

SOURCE: J Educ Libr Inf Sci 49 no1 Wint 2008

The magazine publisher is the copyright holder of this article and it is reproduced with permission. Further reproduction of this article in violation of the copyright is prohibited.