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Qing Li, IEEE

Qing Li is an IEEE client services manager and UPP coordinator in China. She is currently based in Beijing, mainly responsible for China Mainland, Hong Kong and Taiwan. She is working on building customer relationships and driving IEEE awareness among Chinese communities, including librarians, engineers, students and faculty, and also supports initiatives and information needs of IEEE Student Branches through IEEE University Partnership program.
Let’s Get Students More Involved!
-- Experiences from the Collaboration between the IEEE University Partnership Program and Chinese Libraries

Abstract
Involving students is not uncommon in university libraries. Students can greatly reduce librarians’ workload, provide peer reference services, and change the image of librarians to the public. With the prevalence of e-resources, more users choose to work from their own workplaces and reduce their visits to physical libraries. To understand actual needs of end users and offer better services in this digital era, it is very important for librarians to reach out to students and work with them closely in their routine work. However, it is quite challenging to identify student partners and maintain a continuous steady relationship. This paper brings a new perspective by introducing a volunteer network of a professional membership society into library activities. It presents two successful case studies initiated by the IEEE University Partnership Program (UPP) in two top Chinese universities- Peking University and Tsinghua University. It shows how IEEE student branches get involved in librarian outreach activities and other routine work at various levels. Through this program, student volunteers serve as effective collaborators to promote library resources and bring librarians into specific domain disciplines, and reach out to various parties. These best practices will provide valuable lessons and useful suggestions for both Chinese and worldwide librarian communities.

Introduction

Having students involved is not uncommon in the librarian communities. Students can greatly reduce the workload of librarians by answering general questions about directions, printing and simple reference inquiries as well, thus solving the short-of-hands issues brought by budget cuts. Although this topic has been extensively discussed, Zink et al [1] points out that the value of student involvement in library activities is still under-appreciated and deserves greater attention from the librarian communities.

Given the prevalence of electronic library resources, more and more users choose to work from their workplaces and reduce their visits to physical libraries. For example, a survey conducted by the University of Washington libraries shows the percentage of faculty who access library resources in “Remote-Only” mode has increased from 26% in 1998 to 72% in 2007 [2]. Many of today’s libraries are facing challenges of effectively reaching out to users and understanding their actual needs. As the main component of user community, student outreach becomes the focus of library service revolution, e.g. University of Washington librarians try to meet users in their own spaces, lure them into the library, and talk to them via blogs and geocaching [2]. The University of Georgia library creates comfortable “learning commons” and sets up a reference desk in the dorm and cafeteria [3]. All these changes are expected to engage more students and establish a steady relationship with end users.

Moreover, prior studies have recognized the high-tech talents and skills of students. Zink et al [1] characterize them as “early adopters of digital technology [who] have spent much of their pre-college years searching, collaborating, and communicating” (p.111). Students are usually
proficient in seeking information online and ask for help from peers via social networking tools which many librarians rarely use to reach out. To better serve them in this digital era, it is very important for academic librarians to work with students closely. The Coastal Carolina University’s Kimbel Library adopts a “Peer Reference” service model by training senior undergraduates as paraprofessional-level workers [4]. This initiative not only helps students improve their information literacy skills, but also provides an opportunity for librarians to understand their students’ actual needs and obtain first-hand user experiences.

Although student involvement has been extensively explored in the library communities, three points distinguish this paper from prior studies. First, most prior studies focus on hiring students as part-time employees in the library for financial reasons [5]. But in this paper, librarians are working with student volunteers. There is no paycheck or mandatory commitment involved in their collaborations. All the activities are based on the discussion and negotiation between three parties, the university library, the IEEE University Partnership Program (UPP) and the IEEE Student Branch.

Second, instead of the traditional units of schools and departments, this paper focuses on engaging student organizations through an external resource. The University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign library suggests breaking the boundary of discipline and calls for collaborating with various educational programs to offer deep-level services [6]. This paper brings a new perspective by introducing a professional membership society- IEEE -into library activities. So what roles should the professional society and its membership network play in librarian outreach and other routine work? How does this partnership work? How can we motivate those engineering student volunteers to work with librarians? What are the lessons we have learned and what are the challenges we are facing? A better understanding of these questions will help librarians build more external support, thus improving library service quality in the future.

The third point is that all the cases presented in the paper were conducted in China. Possessing the largest science and engineering population, China is attracting attention from the whole world. This paper will overview issues and challenges faced by Chinese librarians in the evolution of a library service model, share experiences and lessons working with student volunteers in the library activities, and also provide suggestions and implications for all librarians and professionals who are interested in the China context.

### Background

#### Chinese Librarian Community

Similar to other counties, Chinese users are no longer dependent on professional librarians for information seeking due to various powerful search engines. Instead, they are looking for in-depth, value-added services that can be embedded in their work. Consequently, we have observed low attendance rates at library training sessions, low awareness and lack of response to library services, and a widening gap between librarian expectations and actual needs of end users.

Chinese librarian communities are currently going through a transforming process from providing print materials to electronic resources. Their service models are also changing from
content-orientated to more user-orientated. In 1998, the Tsinghua University Library was the first among all the Chinese academic libraries to set up the Liaison Program. The liaison reference librarians are expected to reach out to end users, offer embedded services, collect user requests on a regular basis, track discipline trends, and maintain healthy relationships with one or more specific departments.

The establishment of the Liaison Program caused an extensive debate among Chinese librarian communities. The main arguments focus on whether this service model can be successfully implemented in China and what are the problems and challenges faced by the current librarian team. Although the majority of top Chinese university libraries have started similar programs today, most of their librarians agree that successful implementation is not easy for various reasons, such as current tenure system, qualification of librarians, vague job responsibilities and so on [7].

The role of the library has been under-valued in China for a long time. University libraries are not positioned in the center of the current academic system. Meanwhile, faculty are overwhelmed with teaching, research, publication and grant applications, and students are buried by their homework and research projects. It is very challenging for librarians to engage end users and obtain their support.

Other barriers to successful implementation of a liaison effort are related to personalities and educational backgrounds of Chinese librarians. Zeng [8] summarizes the qualities required to be a liaison librarian as information literacy skills, solid background in one or more disciplines, marketing and public relations skills, ethics and life-time learning capabilities. Many Chinese librarians chose this job because they expected to mainly handle books instead of people. As their personalities generally tend to be quiet, outreach- as a main requirement for a liaison librarian- can be very challenging. Educational background is another issue in China. Different from the United States, China offers Library and Information Science (LIS) degrees at both undergraduate and graduate levels. Thus many Chinese librarians have no significant educational background in fields other than LIS. The lack of specific discipline knowledge hinders them to offer in-depth consultation services and get embedded in the actual research projects. Although at least one non-LIS degree is becoming a requirement of liaison librarian recruitment in China, the increase of multi- and inter-disciplinary research fields brings new challenges.

The last issue is the use of web2.0 technologies. Many users, especially younger generations tend to seek information and ask for help using methods such as Facebook, Twitter and other online forums and bulletin boards. However, few librarians are aware of these channels, or are comfortable becoming involved in these groups.

In order to understand what users actually need and offer better services, it is very important for liaison librarians to reach out to students, work with them closely in routine work, thus building a steady healthy relationship. The following sections in this paper will share best practices on facilitating coordination and collaboration between students and librarians via the IEEE University Partnership Program.
IEEE University Partnership Program (UPP)

The Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) is the world’s largest professional association with 400,000 members in over 160 countries. As one fourth of IEEE members are students, IEEE has established over 1800 Student Branches (SB) in engineering schools around the world. The IEEE University Partnership Program (UPP) was developed in 1999, aiming to strengthen relationships with librarians, students and faculty and support IEEE Student Branches. With the goals of promoting information literacy and student leadership, the UPP is trying to involve librarians in the daily lives of student branch activities, as co-sponsors of technical and career presentations, as guest experts at faculty/graduate student luncheons, and supporters of student competitions and conferences. Currently, seventeen schools participate in the program, including University of California, Berkeley/Los Angeles/San Diego; Massachusetts Institute of Technology; and Stanford University etc.

Peking University (PU) and Tsinghua University (TU), two top universities in China, are the first partners outside the United States to join the UPP. All of the representative partners within the participating schools (librarian liaison, engineering faculty chair, IEEE Student Branch Faculty Advisor and IEEE Student Branch President) sign an agreement to work toward specific goals. The program recognizes the value of collaboration among professional societies, faculty and librarians to ensure that students understand and develop the skills, knowledge and behaviors expected of professionals in their chosen fields.

Both the Peking library and the Tsinghua library have established their liaison programs for more than ten years and have been the leaders in the transformation of library service model in China. In terms of discipline coverage and school reputation, Peking University is more general while Tsinghua University is more science and engineering oriented. When the author, also the IEEE UPP representative, approached the two libraries, they showed great interest in this new form of collaboration and expected to establish a long-term relationship with the IEEE student branches.

Collaboration at Different Levels - Two UPP Partners in China

Tsinghua University and Student Involvement on a Daily Basis

Tsinghua University has one main library and six branches on business, architecture, law, humanity, art and medicine. The main library is around 27,820 square meters with 2800 seats available, located in the center of the main campus. The TU library system has over 240 staff, including reference librarians, liaison librarians, general librarians and other staff.

The TU Library started its Liaison Program in 1998. Each librarian liaison is responsible for building a continuous relationship with a chosen school. Their job responsibilities include understanding users’ research focuses and collecting their actual needs; helping curriculum development, providing library trainings and research consultations; promoting library resources and services, working with faculty closely, and more. To facilitate mutual communication, the TU library hires a professor as the library advisor and a student as the library ambassador from each school. Both of them are expected to provide suggestions on the direction of library
resource development, facilitate collaboration between librarians and users, collect user feedbacks on a regular basis, and help promote library resources and services.

The TU librarians hoped IEEE student volunteers could take on some specific tasks to better promote library resources and services. Since the UPP was officially launched in September 2009, the Tsinghua SB has actively participated in many routine library activities. For example, due to heavy workload of librarians, the SB helped lead 14 New Staff/Graduate Library Orientations. The total number of attendees reached 220. This peer-led orientation received great comments from both librarians and students. Compared to the regular sessions, new students also got advice from senior students on their academic and daily lives.

To improve service quality, the TU library hosted regular meetings with the SB to collect feedback. Through these meetings, the librarians were able to receive first-hand user opinions such as offering better services for interdisciplinary fields, customizing services between social sciences and science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) students, and attracting donations from external resources etc. For example, one issue brought up by students was the shortage of non-Chinese technical books. Faculty and students often cannot find the appropriate English books they need, while librarians have no idea what to buy even with adequate budget. The library has offered a special service allowing users to recommend wanted books for several years, of which few users are even aware. The information gap caused constant complaints from end users. After the meeting, the SB helped promote this service among professors and colleagues, and submit the book “wish list” from time to time.

The other issue is the low attendance rate at library trainings and library events. On one hand, the SB helped with campus and online promotion, to ensure training news got widely spread. They also tried to participate in the library events themselves and shared personal experiences with other colleagues. For example, in the “Library Service Month” event, the representative from the SB gave a speech on how the library benefits his research and campus life. In the future, librarians may let students lead some training sessions from a researcher’s perspective. On the other hand, the SB started hosting some technical talks in the library hall, instead of department building. It can attract more attention from the campus and also better promote relevant library resources.

Other than being involved in the library activities, the SB also invited librarians to present at student events such as the SB welcome party, IEEE member lectures, and more. Librarians usually have a 15-minute time slot either before the event or after the event to introduce recent library services and relevant resources.

_**Peking University Library and Information Literacy Library Campaign**_

Peking University has one main library and thirty branches located in different department buildings. The main library is centered on campus, taking up 53,000 square meters with 4000 seats available. The PU library system has 188 staff, including reference librarians, general librarians and other staff. The liaison program of Peking University was established in 2001.
Different from the TU library, the liaison librarians in the PU library approached the author first. They expected to work with the IEEE UPP to engage students in more interesting and interactive ways, such as planning a campus-wide library campaign. After the IEEE UPP launch, the connection between the library and the Peking IEEE Student Branch was officially initiated. The librarians, the SB and the author had several kick-off meetings and decided the SB would play a major role throughout the campaign.

The library campaign, under the theme of “Robots, Us”, aimed to make advanced technologies and developments understandable for everyone, not just science and engineering students. The goal was to attract more users into the library, thus promoting library resources and services effectively. The event was planned in three phases: exhibition, interaction and presentation. About 20 students from the SB worked together to identify a theme, write an action plan and design posters. Students were divided into six subgroups according to the topics of the exhibition: origin of robots; timeline of robot evolution; technologies behind the famous robotic characters (e.g. Transformer); robots applied in real life; ethics of robotic era; and future of robot research. Each section consisted of the main concepts of a robotic technology, main theories and timeline of R&D, recommended library resources including science fiction, movies and digital resources. As the student supervisor, the reference/liaison librarian team had meetings with students every other week.

After two months’ preparation, the first phase of the Peking UPP library campaign was successfully launched in May 2010. Thirteen life-size exhibition panels were placed in the main library hall for three weeks. Both the Peking Library director and the vice dean of the Computer and Engineering School presented at the launch and called for more collaborations of this kind. In this period, the library offered four “Robots” movies for free in the multimedia theater and encouraged audiences to leave their comments on the panels. Those who provided valuable comments got a specially designed “Robot” T-shirt from the IEEE. After three weeks, the exhibition panels were fully covered with all sorts of suggestions on the event itself and the library services in general.

In summary, the collaborations between two university libraries and the IEEE student branches via the UPP coordination have obtained very positive comments from both sides.

A librarian liaison from the Peking University library said:

“Students rarely take advantage of the library resources, so one of this campaign goals is to change that and get students to visit and support the library, while developing skills outside of the technical talents they’ve already mastered as science and engineering students. The involvement of the Student Branch really helps us reach out to departments at deeper levels and attract attention from the campus”.

In the closing ceremony of the Tsinghua Library Service Month, the student representative shared his experiences: “When I started to work with our librarians, I just realized how much work they have done to offer us a better academic environment, the rolling announcements in the e-screen, frequent text message reminder on my cell phone, automatic circulation desk, real-time online chatting and
etc. In the library seminar, the librarians gave students opportunities to speak out. They collected and respected our opinions and frequently improved the library services to better service our needs."

Observations and Findings

As mentioned earlier, this paper distinguishes itself from most prior studies because librarians are working with students volunteers instead of student employees, through the coordination of a technical membership society. The author hopes to bring an external perspective to the library community by sharing personal observations and findings on working with both librarians and students. Since the two cases described in the paper are Chinese universities, it will also provide valuable insights for people who are interested in Chinese culture.

Prior studies have mentioned main challenges faced by librarians when working with student employees. Gregory [9] states the primary goal of student employees is still their coursework and research, so it is difficult to build a steady relationship and exert control. Zink et al [1] summarize major issues as the time to train students and frequent change of student employees, difficulty of sharing knowledge, the relation between students and staff supervisor and so on. Compared to student employees, working with student volunteers will be more challenging since there is no requirement or commitment for them to get involved in the library activities.

Motivating Student Volunteers

The IEEE Student Branch is a volunteer organization, mainly comprised of science and engineering students. These student volunteers are usually passionate about things like technical talks, job talks, corporate visits and other related activities. It is very new and unusual for them to work with librarians. At the beginning of this collaboration, the most frequent question from the students was “Why should I need to work with the library? Is that a mandatory requirement to be part of the UPP? Do I have a choice?” Simply explaining the UPP goal as improving information literacy didn’t work well for the students. So the author worked with the librarians to gradually gain trust from students and stimulate their internal motivations.

First, although a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the SB and the Library is not a mandatory contract, it makes students feel responsible. One item in the MOU is specified as “working with librarians on at least one event a year”. The UPP also requires the dean of the school the SB is associated with to sign the MOU. His presence and approval not only encourage students to pay more attention to this collaboration, but also made a big difference in obtaining support from faculty in the future.

Second, before this collaboration, students had zero experience working with librarians, or rarely talked to them even when facing problems with their research or class projects. The author initiated several casual meetings for both groups to get to know each other, where food and drinks were offered sometimes. Many young librarians are about the same age as students. The conversation usually went well and turned into an informative brainstorming after the ice-breaking. These meetings have greatly changed the students’ old perceptions and reduced their distances with the librarians.
Third, the collaboration has to be related to students’ actual work or personal interests. For example, in the PU library campaign, students got to decide the event theme which could be attractive to their generation. Similarly, most of the Tsinghua collaborations were related to their daily work to be able to actively engage students.

Adjust Our Expectations and Respect Students’ Schedule

When working with student volunteers, librarians are well-advised to be patient and work out things little by little. When professionals schedule a big event, we want everything to be organized and well-controlled. But students are usually at different ages and from different backgrounds and many students have no experience in planning and implementing this type of event. Being too demanding will drive students away or restrain students’ creativity. Ideally, we should view this as an opportunity to teach students to make a timeline and action plan, and then set up bi-weekly meetings to supervise their progress.

Also, we need to respect students’ schedules. The main goal of students is their education, so librarians should not be too disappointed if they fail to keep up with the plan. We have to collaborate in an open source way. We should teach student leaders to break down major tasks into small pieces and distribute them among team members. The author had one experience where a student leader took on too many tasks himself and chose to resign from his leadership position. We need to help students work as a team and utilize this opportunity to improve their “soft” skills, which are exactly what Chinese engineering students need, although they are excellent in technical aspects.

Another challenge we may experience is the frequent change of student leaders. For example, the IEEE Student Branch has an election every year. The change of SB chair usually means the change of the entire leadership team. The librarians might spend considerable time training the students and adapting to each other’s style. Then the leader and the team are replaced, and the process begins anew. The difference can be even more significant if the team is changing from the graduate-composed to the undergraduate-composed. Graduates usually have busier schedules working in their labs and publishing papers. But they are generally more experienced and organized in getting things done. Undergraduates have a more flexible schedule, except the exam period and they are generally more vibrant, creative, but sometimes less organized. So we have to learn how to work with different groups with different styles in this process of collaboration.

The Role of IEEE as a Technical Membership Society

As mentioned earlier, one of the reasons which make this paper unique is the role of IEEE as a technical membership society in the collaboration between librarians and students. As an external partner, the author tries to get a better understanding of how the IEEE should get involved without interfering too much, obtain trust from both sides and positively facilitate this process.

The beginning of the UPP in China was a little bit challenging. The UPP is a non-commercial program, working towards the goals of information literacy and student leadership. However due
to IEEE’s role as a publisher, some librarians were suspicious when the author first approached them. Building communication channels and gaining trust from librarians was the first step. But the more challenging part was to build connections between students and librarians, especially convincing and motivating engineering students to work with the library. The last thing the UPP wants is to make students consider this collaboration as an assignment, or even a burden.

When the author first approached the IEEE Student Branches, they were very excited and expected more support from the society, such as contacting distinguished speakers, reaching out to corporate customers, looking for valuable seminars to attend and so on. While coordinating multiple resources for students to reach out to professionals in the field, the UPP also tried to include these activities as part of library activities. For example, in the Peking Library campaign, the UPP helped get IEEE members and corporate customers involved by giving lectures, arranging visits and providing interactive products.

Lastly, an appropriate incentive is always helpful. The UPP offered certificates for the volunteers in recognition of their work, which would help build stronger resumes in the future. The professional and social network built up through these activities will also be carried with students throughout their careers.

**Marketing Online and Offline**

Marketing is very important in these collaborations. Multiple channels were utilized to maximize the influence of the activities. The launch ceremonies of the UPP partnership were hosted in the both university libraries. About 200 people attended the event. The news was announced in the library portal and university website, and posted in the electronic screen in the main hall of the library. Both the library head and the engineering school dean were invited to attend the event and give speeches to show their support. In the library campaign, interactive programs were designed for attendees to participate actively and the winner received small gifts from the library and the IEEE. The Student Branches were in charge of promotion on campus and among their colleagues. They drafted interesting announcements in their own languages and posted them in the e-forum, and social networking spaces. They designed posters and posted them in the places which could attract more attention, such as dining hall, dorm, labs and even the shower room.

**Conclusion**

This paper presents two best practices in China on the collaborations between librarians and students. It shares first-hand experiences and practical suggestions in working with student volunteers through a technical membership society. This new form of collaboration really helps librarians promote library resources and services in a more effective and engaging matter. Students use their own channels, speak their own language and spread the word among their peers. As end users, students facilitate communication and coordination between the librarians and the schools and play an important role in the librarian activities. In the long term, student involvement will help change the stereotype image of librarians as they start to invite librarians to their events, give library trainings to peers by themselves and share knowledge of library resources and services with their colleagues.
Due to the short duration of these collaborations, this paper didn’t provide any quantitative data measuring the success of this initial collaboration. In the following step, the author will work with the librarians to evaluate how these activities may improve library service, such as the number of attendees in the training sessions, the awareness of new and existing library resources, and more.

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Reference