

PANEL: Area Studies Librarianship, Globalization and Interdisciplinary Studies , & Today's and Tomorrow's
Academic and Research Libraries
ALA/ACRL/SEES, Washington, D.C. 27 July 2010 Washington Conference Center 103A 4:00 pm

**R&EE Area Centers, Area Scholars, and Area Collections in
Today's and Tomorrow's Research Libraries**

by Maria Carlson, University of Kansas
Professor of Slavic Languages & Literatures
Courtesy Professor of History

Thank you for inviting me back to this forum and allowing me to have a voice in your discussions about the further evolution of area studies librarianship. Area librarians are very faculty-friendly, and the fact that you have invited me here today says a lot about who you are and how seriously you take your responsibilities as the professional partners of faculty in the teaching and research missions of the university.

THE ISSUES OF 1998:

Today we revisit the issues we discussed in this very forum in 1998. Back in 1998 I made three predictions for area scholarship, so let me state what these were and briefly comment on them in light of the intervening period:

1) 1998: Area studies will continue to be important in American universities, and, consequently, so will area collections and area librarianship. Most of these area collections will continue to privilege print media in the short- and mid-term for a variety of economic, historical, linguistic, and technical reasons.

COMMENT: I still basically agree with that position. I would only add that not all sectors of the evolving concept of area studies have kept pace with the evolution of library technology.

2) 1998: Area studies will survive the current challenge from the quantitative, theoretical tendencies in the social sciences. This challenge has led to tension between international and area studies and between disciplines and interdisciplinary studies. It is ideologically

driven and will eventually resolve itself ideologically in a nice Hegelian (actually, I should say Fichtian) sort of way, as the triadic dialectic resolves itself in synthesis.

COMMENT: The challenge to area studies from the hardening social sciences was serious in 1998. In 2000, however, there was a push-back against the hegemony of rational choice and quantitative theory. That push-back was led, appropriately enough, by a young political scientist using the pseudonym “Mr. Perestroika.” His widely-circulated memo attacked the “Orwellian system” that political science had become, and the “Perestroika Movement” that followed has promoted methodological pluralism, leading to a better balance between theorists and applied political scientists, between Americanists and comparativists. The result: a critical mass of social scientists returned to area studies; moreover, they returned with stronger and more rigorous methodological credentials. This balancing trend between quantitative and qualitative research developed area allies in other social science fields as well. So Hegel and Fichte work.

3) 1998: Area studies on the one hand and international/global studies on the other will be changed both by their dialogue with each other and by the economic, political, and social challenges the world areas are facing. Libraries will have to address these changes at the same time that they are overwhelmed by technology and all the implications it has for information science.

COMMENT: In 1998 this was a *major* issue, because it was a *resource* issue: institutions could fund global only by subtracting resources from area studies. Over the last 25 years we have seen a variety of initiatives to “internationalize higher education,” with the result that universities experienced a radical proliferation of interdisciplinary and international centers, institutes, and programs -- although a large number of them remained what I’ll call “letterhead entities,” because institutional resources did not grow proportionally.

What we could not know in 1998 was that history would shortly step in to put a dramatic spotlight on the importance of area studies and their support structures, the area centers. Government and military enterprises in the Balkans, in Iraq, in Afghanistan, and in other arenas did not seek monolingual “globalists” or “internationalists” as they worked to meet their new missions; they sought area specialists who had deep cultural, historical, and linguistic knowledge, and they found a serious shortage of such specialists. The immediate result of recognizing this need has been:

- ✓ an expansion in the number and focus of US/ED Title VI International programs, including:

- ✓ 15 Language Resource Centers (up from 9 in 2001, when they were created)
- ✓ 132 National Resource Centers for language and area training by world area (up from 109 in 1998, and with increased funding;¹)
- ✓ the designation by the US federal Government of critical languages (Arabic, Farsi/Persian, Chinese, Indonesian, Korean, Russian, Hindi/Urdu, Turkish/Turkic languages, and certain African languages -- among other LCTLs [less commonly-taught languages] and ANTLs [almost never taught languages]) for additional funding and enhanced training, and
- ✓ the creation of new programs, such as
 - ✓ a **National Foreign Language Center** at the University of Maryland;
 - ✓ the national **Language Flagship Program**, a major new initiative now involving some 15-20 partner colleges and universities and offering intensive language training and special Flagship Fellowships in the critical languages;
 - ✓ the **Critical Languages Scholarship Program**, for in-country study;
 - ✓ the **National Language Services Corps**.

These are all under the aegis of NSEP [see: <http://thelanguageflagship.org/>].

These new initiatives and others have directly benefited area studies, which provide the cultural, historical, anthropological, political, and other training that must accompany language knowledge for it to be contextually useful. Still, this money remains connected to government security and military funding (just as it was in 1958, when Title VI programs were first introduced as a part of the National Defense Education Act [NDEA]). These developments reveal yet again the deep roots of area studies in policy and national security needs. Slavic studies has been the beneficiary of this government sector's largesse from the start.

So, to a great extent, the Global vs. Area issue has shaken out -- at for the time being. As long as major funding continues for area studies, institutions will follow the federal money.² And think of these two approaches in this way: global/international studies work on the horizontal axis and looks at a single issue (e.g., white slavery, AIDS, international banking) across a

1 These numbers are from the 2006-2009 round; new awards will be announced in July 2010. Nine of these 132 Title VI centers designate themselves as "International" -- but language and area training remains part of the mission. In several cases, these International Centers serve as the aegis for smaller area programs that could not compete separately; in other cases, the centers have double identities or overlap with other entities. Whatever the title, NRC funding is for language and area training, and centers must demonstrate capacity to meet that mission.

2 Thematic studies are more likely to generate foundation funding: foundations often pursue thematic initiatives (world peace, international health, environmental protection, etc.) that fit the "global" perspective of international studies. Foundation funding tends to be less reliable than government funding. Both, however, tend to be policy driven and applied, rather than theoretical, in mission.

variety of world areas; area studies work on the vertical axis and look at a contextual body of issues by probing deeply in a single world area. The first tends toward disciplinarity, the latter toward interdisciplinarity. The first often requires no language knowledge, the second requires advanced language knowledge, to achieve their goals. Do we need them both? Yes; yes, actually we do. They ask and they answer very different questions. And which are prioritized at your institution will depend on the priorities of your administration and the interests and profile of your faculty. And the future? well, at a number of institutions, both area studies and international studies have already been gathered together under a single umbrella. After all, areas are part of a larger international context, and international issues are experienced in their own way in specific world areas. There are obvious synergies here.

In retrospect, the updates are telling. But area studies have fared fairly well, given that in 1998 many people were predicting the death of “old-fashioned” area studies, a rumor that turned out to be greatly exaggerated as area studies continue to evolve and find new allies in various sectors.

THE ISSUES OF 2010:

So what issues have come today to take the place of yesterday’s issues? And what is driving them? Things are not the same as they were in 1998, that’s for sure. I’ve identified two issues that I think are meaningful (leaving aside the issue of funding, which is perpetually a meaningful issue in and of itself). These are: 1) Our response to historical realities; and 2) understanding the revolution in higher education. Let me look at these individually.

1) First, the lessons of history. This is the easy one, and this is the good news. Area studies scholars and librarians have all had a front-row seat in History 101 for the last few years. Remember when the Soviet Union collapsed and Harvard economist Jeffrey Sachs (*not* an area studies scholar) was going to build Russians a new economy by flying to Moscow two weekends a month and straightening out the Russian economy? And the Russians were going to be just like us in about ten years (that would be 2000), and we would no longer need area studies? And anyway, the whole world speaks English, right? And remember how pundits rushed to tell us that nationalism and national identity issues were *so* nineteenth century and passé? Ironic, isn’t it, that as soon as the Soviet Union collapsed, its historical attempt to “internationalize” the state also collapsed, and the whole empire broke apart into “nationalisms” and started rooting around in its respective pasts and native languages. Ditto the Balkans, where the defeat of 1389 is still front and center in national

consciousness and still rankles, and where Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian remain three mutually intelligible but completely different languages.

Meanwhile, the Russian government continues its fight against the “lowest common denominator” factor of globalization, represented by Western mass and popular culture. There has been push-back from all parts of the world, not just Central and East Europe and Eurasia, to the homogenizing impact of globalization. Our own, American “low-context culture” has generated a counter-globalization reaction world-wide. I have no idea where this will lead, but I do know that this phenomenon is going to keep area studies on the radar screen for the foreseeable future. I mentioned the additional resources that the government is putting into supporting language and area studies earlier in my talk. The government, you see, has also been enrolled in History 101.

That’s the good news; now for the other news.

2) The most significant event that affects us all is the revolution that has been going on, quietly and sometimes not so quietly, in American higher education. This revolution was already under way in 1998, but it was less recognizable then, at least to me. Then it looked more like transition than revolution. But there have been some significant tectonic shifts. This revolution is taking place on many different levels -- I’ll name four, and you can fill in the blanks:

a) The first is the technological explosion and the technocratization of our institutions (and yes, I really mean technocracy: “rule by technology”). It affects every aspect of the university. We are reaching the point where it will be impossible in this fiscal climate to continue to invest in technology and the support staff needed to tend it and still offer an education that students can afford to buy. Technology may be a boon, but technocracy carries the risk of substituting form, application, and data for content, structure, and meaning. We have been confronting this problem for a while, but we are a long way from its resolution.

b) Another aspect is the increasing corporatization of university administration and its impact on institutional mission, involving serious reallocation of resources (more adjuncts, fewer professors [who do research]; expanded administrative layers; redistribution of workload; a view of the university as a vendor to student-customers; a view of faculty as employee grunts; a view of the library as an enormous computer lab

or student lounge; etc.). I know everyone in this room can write their own scenario on this one.

c) One aspect of this revolution that will have an impact on area studies is the loss of the liberal arts ethos and the consequent vocationalization of the curriculum -- a vision of university education as preparation for a specific job instead of preparation for life. This has been driven by corporatization, and it accompanies significant shifts in the expectations, behaviors, and priorities of students and their parents.

The loss of the liberal arts ethos is connected to a growing polarization (in spite of all the lip service to interdisciplinarity) between the hard sciences on the one hand and the humanities and soft social sciences on the other. This polarization may never have been as strong as it is now; certainly the perceived value of the humanities has never been so low.

I mention this because the devaluation of the humanities traps area librarians as completely as it traps area faculty; both groups are educated in the humanities and the soft social science disciplines. As the humanities and soft social sciences faculty become increasingly viewed as second-class citizens of the institution (while hard science and lab research receive the bulk of institutional resources -- in salaries, space, start-up money, equipment, journal subscriptions), so do area librarians come to be increasingly viewed by administration as second-class citizens in the library. Unfortunately, this is happening at a time when academic libraries are undergoing their own identity crisis (what is the future role of the academic research library? will the library really become bookless?) and the stakes are high.

d) These changes, and others, are leading to the redefinition of disciplines and the restructuring of departmental curricula to address the competing demands of government needs, change in national priorities, budgetary pressures, output and assessment issues, and other factors. An obvious example for our field is not only in the radical expansion of multidisciplinary area studies curricula to address fields and issues that were not even in play in 1998, but also the reconfiguring of Slavic language and literature departments, which now offer history, culture, civilization, cinema, folklore and other topics in addition to the traditional language and literature. Curricular changes change the profile and mission of the university itself.

This revolution in higher education, with its emphasis on quantitative over qualitative strategies and assessments is changing the very nature of what a university has traditionally meant, at least since the Second World War. We are in a period of major reinvention, and like every crisis, this one offers opportunities as well as threatens dangers.

HOW DO WE RESPOND?

How do we in area studies ever respond? We respond with what we in area studies do best: we educate and we collaborate.

Area faculty and librarians have an obligation to **educate** monolingual, monocultural administrators, faculty, and librarians about what area studies are, what resources area faculty and students need and why, and what librarians do to help users (that *is* still a priority, right?). What needs to be communicated?

- ✓ that area studies remain central to the mission of the institution, to state growth and well-being, and to national security and needs;
- ✓ that interdisciplinary scholars in the humanities and social sciences have particular needs that chemists or mathematicians or pharmacy professors do not: area scholars use the full range of available materials: not only databases, electronic resources of all kinds, Googlebooks, and desktop delivery, but also physical media -- books, journals (no, not all of which are available electronically), and archives. Area scholars often work retrospectively -- that means eighteenth, nineteenth century materials (or older) -- not just what came out in the last year or even the last century; they are not looking for just a piece of information, but for a world view; and they do this in more than one language; among those needs is the need to have an area librarian colleague they can depend on;
- ✓ that while digitization may be our future, the countries of the world are not digitizing at the same rate; that academic disciplines are not digitizing at the same rate; that not everything will be digitized -- but scholars still need access;
- ✓ that not everything is in English: the size of the Arabic web, or the Chinese web, or the Russian web inevitably comes as a shock to monolingual monoculturals who "had no idea!"; what, then, about centuries of publications in Arabic, Chinese, and Russian?

- ✓ that there is still a lot we don't know about how the use of electronic and digital resources is going to affect the processes of scholarship and learning in the long-term.

You can fill in the rest. And strategies for collaboration? You will hear about those from my fellow panelists.