

## SISTER LIBRARIES TOOLKIT

### INTRODUCTION

Many academic, public, school, and special libraries in the United States and abroad have formed Sister Library partnerships with libraries in other regions of the world. Some are still ongoing, while others serve a temporary purpose. Few have partnered with Sister Cities. However, Sister Cities and Sister Libraries share similar goals. Both look to create relationships based on cultural, educational, and information exchanges. In both, lifelong friendships and “citizen diplomacy” are created. Both seek to enhance mutual cultural understanding and respect.

In this Toolkit, Sister Cities International (SCI) and Sister Libraries share best practices for developing long-lasting and successful relationships between libraries and Sister Cities.

### What Is an International Sister Library Partnership?

An international Sister Library partnership is a formal or informal relationship between libraries in different countries. A formal partnership will have a contract, agreement, or memorandum of understanding between the two libraries, their parent institutions, and/or their communities. The advantages of a formal relationship are that officials in both libraries sign an agreement and that the libraries can involve the parent institutions or communities and many library staff members. Such an agreement can bring a stronger commitment and prestige to the partnerships. This Toolkit is designed to provide tips on creating Sister Library relationships in the context of international Sister City partnerships.

### What Are the Benefits of an International Sister City/Sister Library Partnership?

#### *Increased cultural understanding between countries:*

Libraries can promote activities between the user populations in both countries, frequently online, increasing cultural understanding on both sides. Libraries can focus on arts, music, literature, holidays, and activities that celebrate different cultures to enhance understanding and respect.

#### *Greater recognition of the library as a community partner:*

Libraries can be community “team players” in support of literacy projects, environmental projects, or business development. International partnerships can bring recognition from the community and community leaders that the local library reaches beyond its borders to get information, resources, and understanding. Community leaders can include library administration in planning initiatives, make the library a destination spot for international leaders, and use the library as a meeting space for top-level discussions.

#### *Increased access to published information and artifacts in both countries:*

Libraries can draw on their partnership to improve their collections and can offer their language resources to libraries in other countries to benefit SCI projects. This exchange no longer needs to be limited to print resources but can include increased development of multilingual and multi-cultural Web pages, Web guides, and blogs. Librarians could partner in research and publication on topics of mutual interest and assist each other in identifying venues for publication, assisting in the success of SCI projects.

### ***Knowledge exchange and training:***

Many partnerships involve travel between two countries or online meetings. These allow library staff members to learn how libraries in different countries address similar issues and problems. New ideas cross international boundaries and can be adapted for implementation. Community members who serve on library committees may join in these exchanges, providing an added dimension of increased awareness, and may also serve as language interpreters. Training programs, either online or on-site can bring new skills to library staff members for both parties.

### ***Coordination of book donation and computer assistance programs:***

Libraries often have the means to coordinate collection development programs that can meet the needs of a local library in a partner city. They can also assist in the development and training of technology development and assistance programs.

### ***Expanding the view of the library profession in both countries:***

Attendance at library conferences and online interaction allows staff members in both libraries to learn the issues that are important in the other's library. The resulting relationship-building also gives Sister Cities opportunities to expand member programming.

## **OVERVIEW OF TOOLKIT**

Libraries from around the world have benefited from Sister Library Partnerships and can contribute to Sister City programs. They bring information, recognition, a sense of accomplishment, and global understanding. With careful planning and clear goals and objectives, a Sister Library Partnership will develop into a lasting relationship that will reap benefits for both library partners and the institutions that they represent.

The remainder of this Toolkit includes sections to aid in the development of Sister Cities and Sister Library cooperation.

## GENERAL TIPS FOR GETTING STARTED

### If you are a Sister City:

Contact your local library and establish a dialog about creating a Sister Library partnership.

Locate a library in your Sister City through current contacts, support the program, and keep updated information for the Sister Library program. A local Sister City organization looking to establish a Sister Library program should consider:

- Identifying active partnerships and contacts in the Sister City, where the Sister Library will be located
- Identifying staff or volunteers supportive of incorporating a Sister Library partnership in their community, who may:
- Facilitating the pairing of Sister Libraries between Sister Cities
- Keeping updated contact information for a Sister Library
- Providing basic support and resources (including Sister Library Toolkits) for the Sister Library program
- Acting as a contact between Sister Cities International programs and the Sister Libraries

### If you are a library, how to connect with SCI:

If you are interested in developing a Sister Library relationship, SCI is a place to begin if your city has a Sister City. In addition to being a valuable cultural asset to your library program, it can also help you gain credibility with your city officials as your library supports some of the city's goals.

### *Starting the process of forming a Sister Library partnership:*

- Check if your city has active Sister City partnerships and projects
- Research the libraries in the Sister City
- For a balanced partnership proposal, it is recommended that a comparison analysis is conducted to find a library that best fits your current institution's mission and goals. A SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis is also a useful tool when researching the possibility of a partnership, allowing you to highlight the strengths you can bring to a collaboration, and areas that can be bolstered by forming a Sister Library partnership.
- Gain the support of your Library administration
- The role of the library administrator is critical to ensuring the sustainability of a Sister Library partnership. It allows for the designation of resources such as staff time and funding. And can allow for alignment with the organization's mission, values, and strategic plans. The library administrator can reap political, social, and service benefits from an international partnership for their organization.
- Contact your local SCI organization and ask if they would be interested in expanding the city's partnership to include a Sister Library project.
- If your city is supportive, ask your SCI representative if they can write a letter suggesting the expansion of the partnership to include your library. Include information about your library and offer a partnership and possible activities.

## SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS AND EXAMPLES BY LIBRARY TYPE



Great Reading Room at the Axumite Heritage Foundation Library

### ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

Academic libraries serve institutions of higher education, serving an institution's information needs, supporting information literacy acquisition and development, and maintaining the institution's on-site and digital collections.

Sister Library partnerships between academic libraries provide opportunities for students, faculty, and institutions to increase collaboration on a global scale.

Some typical examples of Sister Library partnerships between academic libraries include:

- provide free searches and electronic document delivery to the partner library
- share strategic plans and programming ideas; share information on addressing institutional challenges that might be shared
- share on-site library training programs and access to online training
- hold real-time virtual discussions for information exchanges on a variety of topics
- integrate Sister Libraries in current service-learning projects or study abroad programs
- sponsor displays of arts and crafts or historical documents from the local community
- arrange reciprocal visits or delegations including community members to visit the Sister Library
- assist with solving a library or community problem such as art preservation by donating your library's resources and expertise
- create peer-based professional relationships for professional growth and support

### Academic Libraries Examples:

*Biblioteca Th'uruchapitas, Bolivia, and Appalachian State University, North Carolina.*

"The original intent of the partnership was to get sorely needed children's books to Bolivia, but it soon became clear that the program offered additional benefits to both Th'uruchapitas and Appalachian State. In 2001, a group of study-abroad students from Appalachian State's Department of Human Development and Psychological

Counseling agreed to carry books to Bolivia in their backpacks, eliminating the need for costly postage. Upon their return, the students were markedly impressed and transformed by their experience with Biblioteca Th'uruchapitas. They were deeply moved by the dedication of [Gaby] Vallejo and the Mujeres Peli- groups, who often take public buses to local schools, transporting boxes of books to distribute to teachers. The students developed a new understanding of the importance of reading and literacy when they witnessed the tears of Gaby and other Th'uruchapitas founding members upon receiving so many new and beautiful books" ([Cramer, Vallejo Canedo, & Veltze 2015](#)).

### ***Penn State University Libraries***

From 2016 to 2020, Penn State's strategic plan called for "enhancing global engagement" and "embracing a diverse world". To meet this mission, the Penn State Libraries partnered with their Office of Global Programs to select potential Sister Library partners, including academic peer libraries in Australia, Croatia, and Peru, for a total of six partnerships. Zoom meetings were conducted at the initial stages of the partnerships, which then developed into reciprocal visits. Other products of the partnerships include news sharing, virtual professional development, cultural exchange projects, and a collaborative workshop ([2016](#)).

### **PUBLIC LIBRARIES**

Public libraries serve their local communities by identifying their information needs, and providing tailored digital access, programs, and information resources in the form of on-site and digital collections.

Sister Library partnerships between public libraries provide opportunities for local communities to connect to other communities across the globe.

It should be noted that international libraries serving their local communities can vary by what they are called: public libraries, national libraries, community libraries, etc.

Some typical examples of Sister Library partnerships between public libraries include:

- exchange genealogical information
- share local newspapers, cultural materials, bibliographies, and artifacts
- share on-site library training programs and access to online training
- share strategic plans and programming ideas; share information on addressing organizational and community challenges that might be shared
- hold real-time virtual discussions for cultural exchange; sponsor presentations by your Sister Library on a variety of topics
- virtual book clubs with participants from both Sister Libraries; coordinating visiting authors for cultural exchange; exchange local author books
- sponsor displays of arts and crafts or historical documents from the local community
- cultural festival or program series that highlights a community that your Sister Library serves; celebrate each other's national holidays and displays and programs
- arrange reciprocal visits or delegations including community members to visit the Sister Library

### **Public Libraries Examples:**

#### ***Alexandria Sister Library***

Alexandria Library, a public library in Alexandria, Virginia, began its first Sister Library partnership with the Dundee Public Library, located in one of Alexandria's Sister Cities, Dundee, Scotland, in late 2021. Alexandria

Library staff reached out to Dundee staff in a general inquiry email through the Dundee Library website. Dundee staff who were interested in working on the partnership soon afterward met with Alexandria Library staff on a Zoom call. Staff from both libraries then independently brainstormed ideas and came back together to decide on a first partner event. Our first program, a “Trans-Atlantic Book Club” took place in early 2022. Following this successful event, we continued offering co-sponsored partner events over Zoom. In addition to holding Trans-Atlantic book clubs twice a year, we also hosted other events such as a Scottish Folk and Fairy Tales program with a professional storyteller, and a program on Alexandria and Dundee’s shared history of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, featuring presentations by both libraries’ local history librarians. While Alexandria’s Sister Cities Committee has been actively working with Dundee for many years, previous partner events focused more on small numbers of government officials, students, and committee members traveling to their Sister City and did not give Alexandria and Dundee citizens at large an easy way to connect with one another. Luckily, when Zoom was popularized during the pandemic, more options became available for persons all over the world to inexpensively meet. It seemed natural that the public library would utilize this technology, to which it already subscribed, to provide programming that supported building more relationships among Alexandrians and the residents of their Sister Cities ([Diana Price, Alexandria Library’s Central Library Manager, 2024](#)).

### ***Indianapolis City Public Library/Indianapolis Sister City Program***

“Indianapolis Public Library (IPL) formed partnerships with the eight international cities that are part of Indianapolis’s Sister City Program. Participating in global efforts strategically places IPL as a leader in the globalization of our city. Indianapolis is becoming not just the crossroads of America but the crossroads of the world. Because of the extreme popularity in Cologne of Indianapolis-born author John Green, IPL organized a program featuring Green that was Skyped to viewers at the Cologne Public Library. IPL CEO Jackie Nytes later traveled to Hangzhou to deliver an address at a conference for Chinese librarians (Cairo, 2015).

“The Sister City initiative is a critical aspect of Indianapolis Mayor Greg Ballard’s efforts to help IPL welcome global visitors and new residents and to celebrate the richness of their culture. For the library, it has been a way to make new friends and share information that bridges differences, creating citizen diplomacy and new partnerships” ([Cairo, 2015](#)).

### ***Denver Public Library and Axum, Ethiopia***

Denver Sister Cities International, Axum, Ethiopia has a formal relationship with the Denver Public Library, with specific ties to the Blair-Caldwell African American Research Library, which opened in 2002 and reopened in August 2023 after a major renovation. A museum on the third floor of the library branch houses former Mayor Wellington Webb’s office and significant memorabilia related to his term of office. Mayor Webb facilitated the construction of the Blair-Caldwell Branch Library in the historic Five Points neighborhood in 2002. Items related to DSCI include a staff marker, and an exhibit with a beautiful Ethiopian dress gifted to First Lady Wilma Webb by the Mayor of Axum during a Mayoral state visit to Axum to sign the agreement between Denver and Axum. The Denver Public Library also holds archival files of Denver Sister Cities International. The Axum committee has supported many library projects in Axum, Ethiopia, including a large shipment of books to the Aksum University Library, and funds for building the Axumite Heritage Foundation Library building (a community library), developing the children’s library within, and establishing two e-learning labs, projects initiated by university faculty and librarians

(Please note, since the names are transliterated from the local script, there are two ways that the name of Axum/Aksum is identified. Aksum is closer to the correct pronunciation, but Axum is more often identified on maps and other listings. The abbreviation for Aksum University is AKU, thus it is the correct and most accurate transliteration. There is no "x" sound in the syllabary: አክሱም)

([Janet Lee, 2024](#)).

## SCHOOL LIBRARIES

School libraries specialize in serving youth and teachers, fulfilling their information needs across various formats.

Sister Library partnerships between school libraries provide opportunities for students and teachers to learn, explore, and connect with their peers across global boundaries.

Some typical examples of Sister Library partnerships between school libraries include:

- exchange student projects, such as artwork or written stories, for displays and exhibits
- hold real-time virtual discussions for cultural exchanges, sponsor presentations by your Sister Library on a variety of topics
- arrange pen pals, online chats, book clubs, and other informal communication avenues to allow students to interact with their peers
- share strategic plans and programming ideas; share information on addressing challenges that might be shared
- celebrate each other's national holidays and displays and programs
- arrange reciprocal visits or delegations including students to visit the Sister Library

### School Libraries Examples:

#### *La Matanza, Buenos Aires School Library and Piura, Peru School Library*

School libraries in La Matanza district in Buenos Aires, Argentina and in Piura, Peru joined the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) Sister Library program that was being promoted by IFLA's Children and Young Adults Section. The program aimed to promote international cooperation, idea sharing, cultural exchange, and peer connections. The two school libraries connected virtually for three years, sharing their National Reading Plans, exchanging professional information, updating each other on their activities, and learning about each other's cultures and customs. In 2012, they met in person in La Matanza to celebrate their partnership ([Hildamaría Machuca, 2012](#)).

## SPECIAL LIBRARIES

Special libraries serve specific groups and organizations and their specialized information needs, and they range from medical, corporate, military, government, law, and museum libraries, and more.

Sister Library partnerships between special libraries provide opportunities for the sharing of expertise across an international stage.

Some typical examples of Sister Library partnerships between special libraries include:

- provide free searches and electronic document delivery to the partner library
- hold real-time virtual discussions for information exchanges on a variety of topics
- share on-site library training programs and access to online trainings
- share strategic plans and programming ideas; share information on addressing organizational challenges that might be shared
- arrange reciprocal visits or delegations including community members to visit the Sister Library
- assist with solving a library or organizational problem by donating your library's resources and expertise
- create peer-based professional relationships for professional growth and support.

## Special Libraries Example:

### *Horner Fellowship, Arizona, U.S.A./ Japan Library Association, Japan*

Since 1989 when the Horner Fellowship was established, the International Relations Committee of the Japan Library Association (JLA) and the Horner Fellowship Committee of the Arizona Library Association (AzLA) facilitate reciprocal exchanges between library personnel from Arizona and Japan. The Horner Fellowship is awarded annually, with the two committees (from AzLA and JLA) selecting Fellows in alternating years and facilitating their stay. Fellows come from all types of libraries and have a wide range of interests. They visit libraries, museums, and other places of interest. During their stay, many librarians from both countries find surprising differences and similarities between the countries and library systems. Enriched by their new experiences they can apply personal and professional benefits in their libraries and communities ([2019](#)).



**FOR ADDITIONAL RESOURCES, VISIT THE AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION'S INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS ROUND TABLE, SISTER LIBRARIES PROGRAM:**

<https://www.ala.org/irrt/irrtcommittees/irrtsisterlibrary/sisterlibrary>

- examples of success stories;
- reasons to become a Sister Library;
- a planning checklist to help you get started;
- suggested activities and a list of resources.



## TIPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL SISTER LIBRARY PARTNERSHIP

- Each library needs a primary contact who is excited, enthusiastic, willing to commit time to the partnership, and enjoys spending time working with people from another country. This person is usually not the library director. The director needs to be supportive of the program and is usually the primary contact with the local Sister City, but usually does not have time to personally devote to the partnership. The library's primary contact will facilitate communication, projects, and activities with the Sister Library.
- Frequent communication is the most important ingredient in a Sister Library partnership. The primary contacts and other members of the library staff should be in frequent contact with their Sister Library. Sometimes one partner is reluctant to communicate with someone in another country. Persistence in pursuing the partnership is critical. E-mail the partner at least once a month with news of the library. Frequent communication builds a strong partnership; like any friendship, it will grow with the small steps. Communication should also occur with the Sister City parent organization, keeping them periodically updated with successes of the Sister Library partnership or seeking advice on any challenges that occur.
- A common language needs to be determined and used. With languages as prevalent as English and Spanish, this is not usually an issue, but it can be if one of the countries has a less common language (such as Bulgarian or Arabic language), where there might not be library staff members who can communicate.
- Time is often cited as the reason for lack of communication. Both partners should get in the habit of communicating regularly, even if there is nothing important to communicate. Short messages about library activities, the weather, or personal events can sustain the partnership. Schedule online meetings in advance, taking into consideration the variance of time zones.
- Sister Library partnerships need to have a feeling of equality even if the resources of one library are more abundant than the partners'. Less-funded libraries need to contribute to the partnership, even if it is less than what the more well-funded library can offer. Sometimes partner libraries might expect more than their Sister Libraries can deliver, such as equipment and significant print/electronic resources. The scope of the partnership should be clear. Work with your Sister Cities when proposing a Sister Library partnership to discuss the scope and potential activities.
- It may take money to make the partnership work. Funding is needed for sharing resources and ongoing program activities. Funds could come from the library, a partner institution, your Sister City, donations from interested NGOs, and fundraising activities. If the project is of a large enough scope it may be eligible for a grant.
- Trust may build slowly. There may be some doubt that one of the partners is truly interested in the partnership. Building trust is why ongoing communication is so important. Your Sister City can help in building this trust and multicultural communication.
- More than one library staff member needs to be involved. Sister Library partnerships failed when the primary contact found a new job or took an extended leave.
- Put together a formal agreement that includes: the goals of the Sister Library partnership; primary and secondary contacts; some indication of activities (though this should grow over time); expected reasons for or benefits of the Sister Library partnership, and the relationship to the Sister City. Take care not to promise more than can be delivered. Provide frequent updates to the library's governing body and your Sister City through reports, e-mails, and inclusion in newsletters. Be visible.
- Face-to-face visits promote understanding and friendship, and these visits can bond partners in a way e-mail and postal mail cannot. The best way of connecting is by visiting in person, but the costs of traveling can be expensive for both sides. Your Sister City may schedule mutual visits that can include

library visits. However, with the modern ease of video conferencing, such as Zoom and other virtual conferencing apps, the world of face-to-face communication has changed dramatically.

- Bring recognition of the partnership through publicity. Publicize your Sister Library status via your library newsletter and at speaking engagements at non-governmental organizations (NGOs) like Rotary, the Chamber of Commerce, and library association meetings; give interviews and photo opportunities to the media and share these with your Sister Library. Share your positive experience as part of a Sister Library program with other libraries and with your Sister City.

