

Report to the Polar Libraries Colloquy
on the
University of the Arctic Council Meeting
held at Arkhangelsk, Russia
June 4-9, 2007

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Preamble

Members of the Colloquy will recall that in 2005, PLC became a member of the University of the Arctic in the International Organizations category. The purpose of our becoming a UArctic member was to become a network for information professionals who work in UArctic institutions, recognizing that a number of our current members were in that situation. Through UArctic we have been able to pass information about PLC to libraries in Arctic post-secondary institutions, who might otherwise have been unaware of the PLC.

As the Polar Libraries Colloquy liaison to the University of the Arctic (UArctic), I attended the Council Meeting at Arkhangelsk, Russia, June 4-9 and exercised the PLC vote. UArctic is now five years old and is still growing and organizing. For example, this year the rectors of the institutions met earlier in the year and their group was formally recognized at this meeting, with the understanding that the relationship between the two groups would develop over time. Much of the business that the Council conducted was related to the development of UArctic structures.

Pre-Council Sessions

On the first day of the meeting, I attended two Thematic Network meetings: Thematic Network on Global Change in the Arctic and Thematic Network on Images of Indigenous Peoples of the North. Thematic networks are structures within UArctic that allow people with similar interests to get together. I attended just to learn more about the people and their interests. I had imagined that the one on images might have to do with photographic or video images, but it turned out to be about how people view themselves or “world view”.

On the second day, I spent the whole day at the Program Team meeting of the Circumpolar Studies Program. This is the group that coordinates the delivery of the seven Bachelor of Circumpolar Studies (BCS) courses. I joined this group because it seems to me that at this point this is the part of UArctic which most needs information infrastructure. As UArctic evolves, there may be other logical places for PLC to fit into the UArctic structure.

Nine students who had completed the seven core BCS courses offered through UArctic were present at the meeting. Most of the students were resident in Arkhangelsk, Russia and one in Iceland. As many students from Murmansk, Norway, and California had completed the program, but were unable to attend.

The students were all asked to describe what they liked most about the program and what they liked least. Nearly every student cited access to the required materials as one of the greatest difficulties with the program. The difficulties they had seemed to be with all forms of information: the availability of print books and journal articles, access to electronic materials, slowness and expensiveness of internet connections, extreme cost of printing, lack of alternative sources. It was also apparent that some of the material might have been made available locally at libraries, but the students did not know that. I was later told that the information problems might be more acute in Russia than in other parts of UArctic, but I also heard from one instructor that some Canadian students had had information access problems as well. Clearly there is some work to be done by librarians.

Council Meeting

The Council Meeting ran for the next three days, with an intensive agenda of 8 sessions with a total of 29 agenda items. There were several highlights.

Agenda Item 8 was the Circumpolar Studies Program Graduation Ceremony in which the 9 students proceeded across the stage to receive their certificate of completion and a rose.

Agenda Item 9 was the Approval of new members. In the Higher Education Institution category, Northwest Community College (Canada), Royal Military College Canada, Stockholm University (Sweden), The State Polar Academy (Russia) and University of Winnipeg (Canada) were approved. In the Other Organizations category, Abisko Scientific Research Station (Abisko Naturvetenskaplign Station), Barents Institute, GALDU- Resource Centre for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and Nordland Research Institute were approved.

Agenda Item 17 saw the Council endorse the establishment of a UArctic Master Program. Among the several goals of this program are to “support and build the next generation of northern researchers”, and to “provide paths to graduate education for students of northern issues”.

Agenda Item 18 was 12 break-out sessions on various themes. I attended the one related to the Bachelor of Circumpolar Studies, where I was able to meet some of the instructors in this program. From them, I again heard about frustrations surrounding the location and delivery of appropriate information resources to UArctic students.

Reports from two other break-out sessions, Theme VI: Next Steps in Developing UArctic’s Graduate Area and Theme XI: What should UArctic do to meet the needs of Russian institutions better?, contained references to the need for support for information infrastructure or access to a UArctic resource centre or library.

Item 25 approved the next Council Meeting to be held in Edmonton, Canada, in conjunction with the 2008 meeting of the Polar Libraries Colloquy. Elaine Maloney

(Canadian Circumpolar Institute) and I are co-organizing these two events. We will be working to integrate the programs of the two meetings where it makes sense. The two meetings are quite different in structure and function, so will largely run on parallel tracks. However, we see opportunities for some common sessions, excursions, cultural and hospitality events.

Excursion

At each Council Meeting there is at least one excursion planned to aid members in getting to know different parts of the Arctic better. Our meeting ended with an air excursion to the Cultural and Historic Ensemble of the Solovetsky Islands, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Services are tenuous at this site. The runway on Great Solovetsky Island is metal clad and slippery when wet. Our small plane slid on landing and hit a runway light which damaged the wheel faring. The bio-stations at the airport are a pair of green wooden outhouses, with holes in the floor and no amenities. The road between the two sites we visited is a single track that has mud-holes large enough to swallow a bus. However, the monastery and lighthouse hermitage are well worth the visit. These places have the double history of being a Russian Orthodox religious community that dates to the 15th century as well as the first Soviet prison camp or gulag established after the October Revolution. The extremes of torture practiced here became the blue-print for other gulags, made known to us through Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich.

The monastery is an impressive fortress with 5 towers. It was unsuccessfully attacked at least 4 times and was besieged for 8 years from 1668 to 1676. Inside the fortress are a number of buildings including huge church with wood-shingled onion domes. The rich interiors of both this church and the one at the lighthouse hermitage were destroyed during the time of the gulags and military use and were later white-washed. Much repair and restoration is going on inside the monastery. At the hermitage, the interior of the church is being repainted with traditional images.

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