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Universities for Democracy and Higher Education Reform**

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# Developments in Central and Eastern Europe: The Alliance of Universities for Democracy and Higher Education Reform

Donald Gilstrap

## Abstract

This article highlights the tenth conference of the Alliance of Universities for Democracy (AUDEM) held in Budapest, Hungary. Over the past ten years, AUDEM members have been instrumental in the reform of higher education in Central and Eastern Europe based on democratic principles. This year, government officials, college administrators, faculty members, and academic librarians from around the world met to foster continuing discourse on the direction higher education might move in the future and the implications this presents for all of us in a global society.

## Introduction

In response to the collapse of Soviet power in 1989, the Alliance of Universities for Democracy (AUDEM) was created to foster new partnerships between members of higher education across the globe. AUDEM's main aims over the past ten years have been to promote the concept of democratic institutions in higher education, to improve the infrastructure components relating to higher education, and to reform university curricula to reflect democratic ideals. However, bringing colleges and universities that were formerly communist into the democratic frameworks we are accustomed to in the West has not been an easy task. Each Country in Central and Eastern Europe has a unique identity based on hundreds of years of different cultural and political influences. These differing identities have caused each country and its institutions to embrace democracy at varying levels. Yet, great strides have been made by many of the colleges and universities within the region to open the door to the democratic academy. In this article I would like to present an overview of some of the larger themes relating to educational reform and of some of those topics focused specifically on community colleges and academic libraries, which were presented at this year's AUDEM conference.

## Conference Overview

It was a very exciting time being one of the participants in the conference, held this year in Budapest, Hungary, during the first week of November. Celebrating its tenth anniversary, AUDEM's overall goal this year was to discuss how far we have come since 1989 and where we should be going in the next ten years. The plenary session opened at the Budapest University of Economic Sciences and included addresses by: Tamas Meszaros, Vice Rector of the university and one of the founding members of AUDEM; Adam Kiss, Hungarian Deputy State Secretary for Higher Education; David Hake, AUDEM president; and Thomas Robertson, First Deputy Ambassador to the United

States Embassy in Hungary. Each presenter discussed his experiences during the transition process, while addressing the possibilities and challenges for the region in the future.

The keynote address was delivered by critically acclaimed author, Michael Thomas, who was extremely well received by the audience. Thomas noted the rapid changes taking place within the global society, predicting that over the next ten years, most information will be available online. He argued that the 21st Century "will be dominated by knowledge, not things," and how those of us in higher education will be affected by these changes. Most notably, Thomas discussed the emerging types of democracy and capitalism in the next century and how those of us in advanced nations will need to work at decreasing the discrepancies between the "haves" and "have nots" by preserving and promoting an inclusive, democratic society.<sup>1</sup> For those of us in academic library circles, the vision for this society will be based on relationships of trust in which librarians from around the world will be involved in the creation and maintenance of global information resources.

### Higher Education Reforms in Universities and Polytechnics

While attending several sessions devoted to higher education reform in Eastern Europe, it became apparent that the work performed by AUDEM representatives over the past ten years had resulted in the establishment of shared goals in initiatives based on existing, working models. The Hungarian education system is one such model of positive change. Adam Kiss, Deputy State Secretary for Higher Education in Hungary, noted the transformation taking place in regards to the present and future educational needs of students matriculating through technical colleges and universities into the workplace. Since 1989, Hungary has spent over 10 billion forints (roughly U.S. \$42 million) restructuring the higher education system and is looking at the main values and tasks of their academic institutions. Over the next few years, this will include providing general accessibility to the overall public, maintaining the high quality mission to educational research and educational outcomes, and looking at new concepts such as lifelong learning in order to restructure the educational system for the 21st Century. Mary Canning, World Bank representative in Hungary, also felt that the changes taking place in higher education in the country are positive, and, as a result, Hungary is on the fast track to entering the European Union.<sup>2</sup> Similar to the restructuring we have seen in the community colleges and universities in the United States, Hungary is working to integrate many of the separate universities and polytechnics into organized academic units. As many of us in community colleges in the United States can empathize with, Hungarian administrators, faculty, and librarians are now looking at dynamic ways to increase college enrollments and provide extended services without relying on large increases in tuition or budgetary support. In many ways though, educators and librarians in Central and Eastern Europe have already accomplished a great deal, considering they have had limited financial and physical resources with which to achieve their goals.

Another major emphasis in higher education reform has been on the polytechnic universities and vocational schools in Central and Eastern Europe, which are comparable in scope to the community colleges in the United States. In the U.S. we have seen

community college enrollments surpass those of four-year colleges and research institutions. College officials in Central and Eastern Europe have seen these same dramatic increases in enrollments for technical degrees, and they have come to realize that this type of specialized training will be more prevalent in society as the job market continues to change. Viatcheslav Naumov, Dean at the Kazan State Technical University in Kazan, Tatarstan, reviewed the transition of technical education and how the educational structure is changing to accommodate the real-world needs of students going into the workforce. A key initiative for the university now will be to develop and implement distance education programs while using the Internet as a teaching tool.<sup>3</sup>

### Changes in the Academic Library Community

Academic libraries have also undergone dramatic changes in Central and Eastern Europe over the past ten years. During the Soviet era, there was virtually no emphasis placed on the use of technology to distribute and provide access to information around the region. While many of these projects may seem basic to librarians in the United States, librarians in Central and Eastern Europe have actually accomplished a great deal in a very small amount of time, starting virtually from "ground zero." Over the past decade, there have been fundamental philosophical changes in the profession's attitudes towards the use of technology, as well as several creative and dynamic implementation projects for the use of technology in college and university libraries.

Two AUDEM presenters focused specifically on Polish libraries as models of the technological evolution taking place. Maria Jankowska, Associate Professor and Network Resources Librarian at the University of Idaho, noted that basic automation is virtually complete in university and college libraries. She also sees a service-oriented future evolving among professional librarians who are increasingly using the Internet as a standard for research.<sup>4</sup> Bogdan Maruszewski, Professor at the Poznan University of Technology, related experiences the school had encountered while undergoing the automation of its libraries. Relatively new to the nature of western librarianship, Polish librarians are now familiarizing themselves with the MARC record format, as well as with the digitization of print resources. Recently the college converted its card catalog system to the Horizon ILS and has subscribed to several electronic databases now readily available online. Maruszewski noted that this transition has not been easy, as it has involved many technological and legal issues to which the librarians had not been accustomed in previous years.<sup>5</sup> Certainly those of us in college libraries in the United States could concur with these sentiments. However, the Polish librarians have had a positive attitude about the directions the field may be headed in the future and have learned many of the technologies we are familiar with in the West at a rapid rate.

Many of us in the United States are concerned with helping to improve the status of Central and Eastern European academic libraries, and perhaps the most critical element in this transition will be to develop new partnerships with our colleagues in the region. Herbert Achleitner, Professor, and Rebecca Miller, graduate student of the School of Library and Information Management at Emporia State University, Emporia, Kansas, outlined an innovative project to foster these types of relationships. Using web

teleconferencing, a group from Emporia State University was able to train Warsaw College students on the use of the information audit to evaluate organizational performance. A true exercise in systems thinking, this experiment was not only successful in fostering global communication, but it also helped further our colleagues' knowledge of information channels that promote organizational effectiveness.

In my own presentation I discussed the overall technological changes that have taken place in academic libraries in Central and Eastern Europe. Several college and university libraries throughout the region have automated many of the functions and are now online. College library networks that have been particularly successful are:

- Slovenia's Cooperative Online Bibliographic System & Services (COBISS)-one common platform for sharing an online catalog and licensed databases. It is now used by most of the academic libraries in the country.
- Hungary's Electronic Library-a virtual library with most services online, including Virtual Reality Markup Language (VRML). Hungary has also launched the Common Electronic Catalog (ComElCat), which links different online catalogs into a single interface.
- The Czech and Slovak Republics' CASLIN Project-a shared union catalog of the two countries' library holdings, now available online.<sup>6</sup>

By providing conference participants with models of integration and global restructuring, I tried to present a picture of how academic libraries might transform their organizations and expand their use of technology to further access to global information. Using successful models from my experiences in the United States and specifically in Connecticut, I discussed how the use of shared partnerships and loosely coupled consortial agreements between libraries might now be moved into the international spectrum. By making this leap into the global information infrastructure, we as librarians might be able to establish expanded working relationships, while building an even stronger bargaining force for negotiating licenses with companies in the private sector.<sup>7</sup>

## Conclusion

A large number of new relationships have developed between academic librarian, faculty, and administrators across the globe since the collapse of the soviet system. These relationships previously were almost non-existent. Organizations such as the Alliance of Universities for Democracy, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, and the Online Computer Library Center have certainly been instrumental in establishing extended partnerships and have been catalysts for promoting global change within the academic library community. The 21st Century still holds many uncertain yet exciting challenges for us. As our community college libraries continue to evolve, and as we develop new ways of thinking about the future of librarianship, it will be equally exciting knowing that we have newfound friends and partners across the globe with whom we can share in the experience.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Thomas, "Thoughts on Building a Just and Stakeholding Society, The Decennial Conference, Alliance of Universities for Democracy, November 7-10, 1999, Budapest, Hungary [hereafter AUDEM Conference 1999].

<sup>2</sup> Adam Kiss, "Higher Education in Hungary: Restructuring the Higher Education Institutions"; and Mary Canning, "Objectives of World Bank Assistance to Higher Education Reform in Hungary," AUDEM Conference 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Viatcheslav Naumov, "Restructure of the System of Technical Education," AUDEM Conference 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Maria Jankowska, "Polish Libraries' Participation in a Global Information Infrastructure," AUDEM Conference 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Bogdan Maruszewski, "Computerization of Scientific Libraries in Poznan," AUDEM Conference 1999.

<sup>6</sup> "COBISS-Cooperative Online Bibliographic System & Services," Available at [http://www.izum.si/cobiss/welcome\\_eng.html](http://www.izum.si/cobiss/welcome_eng.html); "Hungarian Electronic Library," Available at <http://www.mek.iif.hu/>; "CASLIN Union Catalog," Available at <http://galaxy.einet.net/hytelnet/CS002.html>

<sup>7</sup> Donald Gilstrap, "New Rates of Exchange: Technological Integration and University Libraries in Central & Eastern Europe," AUDEM Conference 1999.