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Kelda Habing and Lian Ruan

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Leading through Partnership: How the Illinois Fire Service Institute Library Leads to Serve its User-Community

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ABSTRACT

In the over three decades since its establishment in 1990, the Illinois Fire Service Institute (IFSI) Library has been a leader through taking the initiative in developing and maintaining partnerships for the benefit of its primary user community: the firefighters of Illinois. Partnerships at the local, state, national, and international levels have allowed the IFSI Library to respond to the unique information needs of firefighters through the creation and continued use of services and programs which have been created specifically to meet these unique needs, and the IFSI Library's place within the Illinois state fire academy allows these services and programs to be promoted and made available to firefighters across the state. By taking the initiative to create partnerships for the benefit of firefighters, the IFSI Library has established itself as a leader in partnership with both the library and information science field as well as to the fire service. The services and programs made possible through the IFSI Library's partnerships have contributed to Illinois firefighters' ability to access the information and resources that they need to continue keeping their communities safe.

Keywords: Leadership, Community Partnership, Firefighters, Special Libraries

INTRODUCTION

The Illinois Fire Service Institute (IFSI) is the statutory fire academy of the state of Illinois (Illinois Fire Service Institute Act, 1979), operated by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC). IFSI is the oldest continuous fire training institution in the United States and has provided training to Illinois firefighters since 1925 (IFSI, 2023). Through its law-mandated role in the training of firefighters and its mission statement "Helping Firefighters Do Their Work Through Training, Education, Information, and Research," IFSI is connected to all fire departments and firefighters across Illinois. In 2022, IFSI courses reached 58,638 firefighters, fire departments, students, and other individuals across all 102 Illinois counties (IFSI, 2022). In addition to its work with Illinois firefighters, since 2009 IFSI has reached 277 international students from China, Brazil, and South Korea through courses at IFSI or at locations outside of the United States in international students' home countries.

The IFSI Library was established by a solo librarian in 1990 as an in-house library for IFSI instructors, both onsite and those acting as field instructors across the state. As IFSI has become a

world-class institution, the IFSI Library has also grown to match IFSI's mission and to serve a larger user community. In 1999, the IFSI Library transitioned from an in-house to a statewide library; while out-of-state and international reference requests to the library have increased, the IFSI Library's primary users are Illinois firefighters. As of January 2023, Illinois had 1,107 fire departments with 65.2% being composed completely of volunteer firefighters who are not compensated for their time and services, 14.5% composed completely of career firefighters who receive a salary, and 20.3% composed of a mix of volunteer and career firefighters (USFA, 2023). Whether volunteer or career, firefighters face high training and education requirements which must be supported by accessible and comprehensive library services. Through past studies and continued work with Illinois firefighters, the IFSI Library has identified their unique information needs and created unique services and programs to support their needs. Many of the IFSI Library's initiatives for firefighters would not have been possible without the Library's proactive creation of strategic partnerships.

The IFSI Library has established itself as a leader by taking the initiative and fostering partnerships at the local, state, national, and international levels for the benefit of its firefighter user community. Local and state partnerships provide the key connections needed to create and continue services for firefighters and allow the IFSI Library to connect to all firefighters across the state, while national and international partnerships, especially with professional organizations, have provided opportunities for staff development and connection with the larger library community. This report from the field will describe the partnerships that the IFSI Library has created at these levels and the benefits to the firefighter user community that these partnerships have supported, especially the Library's ability to continue to meet the dynamic needs of firefighters.

LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS

The IFSI Library's first level of leadership through a partnership is at the local level and includes the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), especially the UIUC Main Library, School of Information Sciences (iSchool), and IFSI instructors. These local partnerships have been key to providing firefighters with accessibility to the information that they need, supporting library operations and special projects, and conducting library outreach to Illinois firefighters.

UIUC Main Library

While IFSI is a part of UIUC, the IFSI Library is not a branch of the UIUC Main Library as it is a standalone special library on campus. This separation allows the IFSI Library to maintain access to IFSI Library materials for firefighters regardless of their affiliation with the university. Despite this separation, the IFSI Library has maintained close ties with the UIUC Main Library, with University Librarians having visited the IFSI Library in the past. Two aspects of this partnership with the Main Library are the IFSI Library's use of Main Library LibGuides and the Illinois Digital Environment for Access to Learning and Scholarship, both online resources that are maintained and hosted through the Main Library. The use of LibGuides and IDEALS has allowed the IFSI Library to make the information that firefighters need easily accessible for them when they need it, as well as to highlight other aspects of firefighting such as fire service history and the important role that IFSI plays in the fire service as Illinois' statutory fire academy.

LibGuides is an online content management system that allows librarians to curate and share knowledge and information on specific topics. The IFSI Library has found that firefighters prefer more direct guidance toward the answers that they seek, and not simply directed toward

potential resources which they must sift through themselves (Ruan, 2004). The use of LibGuides can help to provide this guided and pointed experience for firefighter information seekers. Through its partnership with the Main Library, the IFSI Library has created 22 LibGuides which have grossed nearly 148,500 views since their implementation (https://www.fsi.illinois.edu/content/library/lib_guides.cfm). LibGuides are regularly updated and new LibGuides are created to continue to provide useful information for firefighters. LibGuides cover a wide range of subjects relevant to firefighters including:

- Types of emergencies and fires
 - Agricultural, ethanol, wildland-urban interface, hazardous materials, natural disasters
- Historical
 - Diversity in the fire service, major U.S. fires, significant Illinois fires, U.S. fire service
- Issues faced by first responders
 - Cancer, pandemics, resiliency
- Fire safety for different populations
 - Children, those with disabilities, libraries and cultural institutions
- Tools and techniques firefighters can use to complete their jobs
 - Grant writing, search and rescue, technology

The Illinois Digital Environment for Access to Learning and Scholarship (IDEALS) is the institutional repository for UIUC which collects, disseminates, and provides access to research and scholarship at UIUC. IFSI's collections include 13 collections which cover the areas of IFSI operations (Annual Reports, Course Calendars, Library and International Programs, Marketing, Newsletters), Illinois fire service and IFSI history (Covid-19 and Illinois Firefighters, Covid-19 and the Illinois Fire Service Institute, Illinois Fire College, Significant Fires and Emergencies in Illinois History), and research and findings reports (IFSI Research, Illinois Homeland Security Summit, Illinois Terrorism Task Force, Illinois Volunteer Fire Service Summit). These collections provide firefighters with access to the research and activities that are occurring at IFSI to train and support Illinois firefighters, in addition to collections and items which feature experience-based knowledge. Experience-based knowledge has been found by the IFSI Library to be the most commonly desired form of knowledge by firefighters for training, teaching, and research (Ruan, 2011). IDEALS collections related to the history of the fire service especially include experience-based knowledge, with the two collections on Covid-19 being created as part of a grant to document firefighters' experience-based knowledge gained during the pandemic.

iSchool

The IFSI Library has a long history of working with UIUC students who have been hired to work at the reference desk, in the archives, or on special projects. The majority of students are hired from the UIUC School of Information Sciences (iSchool), but in addition to iSchool students, Computer Science and Architecture students have been hired in the past by the IFSI Library particularly to work on special projects such as the design of the new IFSI Library building or the creation and maintenance of databases and websites. These undergraduate and graduate students gain valuable experience in a special library environment and have been crucial to library operations and the creation and maintenance of new projects and resources. For example, two recent grant-funded projects received by the IFSI Library relied on the skills and dedication of

student workers: the *Children Fire Safety Literacy Reading and Discussion Program* through the American Library Association, and the *Experience-Based Knowledge Management Initiatives to Support Illinois Firefighters Dynamic Needs in Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic* through the Institute of Museum and Library Services. Students who have been hired to staff the reference desk also address another unique factor of firefighter information need, which is that they often require a quick response time to reference requests and prefer more personal assistance with their queries even when online assistance may be available (Ruan, 2003). Student workers allow the IFSI Library to respond to all firefighter requests quickly and in a personable manner. In addition to the IFSI Library's extensive work with iSchool and other UIUC students, the IFSI Head Librarian has also served as an adjunct faculty at the iSchool and has taught the course Special Library Administration, gaining leadership experience through leading the course and inspiring graduate students to become interested in special librarianship.

IFSI Instructors

Within IFSI, the IFSI Library has established partnerships with IFSI instructors who, in addition to being key library users, play a role in promoting the Library to students and encouraging students to use the Library, especially as many firefighter students at IFSI may not be aware of the information resources available to them or may not have access to other information resources. A survey conducted by the IFSI Library found that local information resources for firefighters are scarce and fragmented, and many fire departments only maintain small libraries, with few personnel to maintain the library and none with librarians staffing the library (Ruan, 2001). Firefighters from small or rural fire departments may also be less likely to use library services. Thus, much of Illinois' firefighter population is often hard to reach or is an "invisible" population to the IFSI Library (Ruan, 2003). Additionally, the high rate of volunteer firefighter turnover (NVFC, 2023) likely increases the difficulty of making connections with the firefighter user community. The IFSI Library's partnership with IFSI instructors is crucial to make firefighter students aware of the Library's services and resources which they can use both during their time at IFSI and even when they return home to their fire departments.

There are three primary ways in which IFSI instructors have been partners with the IFSI Library: 1) inviting IFSI librarians to give short library instruction presentations to classes; 2) including the IFSI Library as a resource to receive the required texts listed on course syllabi; and 3) assigning course work which brings firefighter students to the Library. The short library presentations are 5-10 minutes long at classes in-person at IFSI and are intended to welcome students to use the library and let them know what library resources are available to them. After the presentations, some students visited the Library on the same day as a librarian spoke to them. While not all courses list the IFSI Library on their syllabus, those that do have contributed to students' use of the library. For example, students in IFSI's Instructor I and II courses, which both direct students to the IFSI Library in their syllabi, have mentioned their course syllabus as a reason for visiting the Library to receive textbooks. IFSI students may also be directed to the Library through instructors for projects, such as the Basic Firefighter/NFPA I Academy course which has included an assignment requiring students to research and present on a fallen firefighter. Students have often come to the Library for assistance in using the Illinois Firefighter Line of Duty Deaths Database (IFLODD), or to find more in-depth information on the fallen firefighter they are researching. Another course utilized the IFSI Library's children's collection to conduct fire safety programming for children in their community. Through the IFSI Library's partnership with IFSI

instructors, more IFSI students and Illinois firefighters have been made aware of how the Library can assist them in the course of their firefighting duties.

STATE PARTNERSHIPS

The IFSI Library's leadership through partnerships at the state level is crucial as the Library's goal is to reach all firefighters across the state. Two important partnerships are with Illinois firefighters themselves, as the IFSI Library's primary user community, and with the Illinois State Library, which allows the IFSI Library to reach firefighters regardless of their location in the state and provides support for library projects and initiatives.

Illinois Firefighters

As the IFSI Library's primary user community, it is important for the IFSI Library to establish and maintain trust and respect with Illinois firefighters, and to help them come to see the IFSI Library as a place that is truly for firefighters, both to meet their information needs and to tell their stories. The Library's development and continued use of resources such as the Illinois Firefighter Line of Duty Deaths Database (IFLODD) and the Illinois Firefighter Medal of Valor and Medal of Honor Database, as well as guidance by a Library Advisory Committee comprised of Illinois firefighters, has increased the esteem that Illinois firefighters hold for the Library.

IFLODD and the Illinois Firefighter Medal of Valor/Honor Database serve as forms of experience-based knowledge, which includes the knowledge of how to react in certain situations given context and experience with past situations and is the most commonly desired form of knowledge by firefighters (Ruan, 2011). To document the knowledge, the IFSI Library conducts research as well as interviews firefighters and family members to learn more about a fallen firefighter or the act that led to the award of a medal. IFLODD highlights the sacrifices made by Illinois firefighters who have lost their lives in the line of duty. It includes firefighter records from 1857 to the present day and is updated regularly as new information about incidents becomes available or a new death occurs. IFLODD currently includes 912 records, with 1,537 images and 14 oral history interviews, making it the most comprehensive source of information on Illinois firefighter line-of-duty deaths. As of 2022, IFLODD has been visited over 150,000 times, and has been recognized by state and national organizations and publications such as the Illinois Library Association as an exemplary Illinois State Library grant award recipient in the ILA Reporter, and by Scout Report and Genealogy News. The Illinois Firefighter Medal of Honor is the highest award given by the state of Illinois to a firefighter for an act of bravery or heroism that goes above and beyond the call of duty, and the Illinois Medal of Valor is an award given by the state of Illinois for an act of heroism or bravery which shows courage and dedication in the face of danger. The Illinois Firefighter Medal of Honor and Medal of Valor Database includes 302 records from 1994 to the present day, with summaries of the event that led to the award of a medal and citations related to the awards. Due to the sensitive nature of the information in IFLODD and the Medal of Honor/Valor Database, the IFSI Library's thorough and conscientious work in researching, interviewing, and providing information on fallen or honored firefighters has helped to tell the story of Illinois firefighters and has strengthened the connection between the IFSI Library and the Illinois firefighter user-community.

The Library Advisory Committee is composed of Illinois firefighters who represent more than 15 fire organizations across the state. These advisors serve as the Library's "eyes and ears"

on firefighters' information needs and provide insight into the ways that the Library can adapt services and create new services to better meet these needs. Advisors are key library supporters, especially through the promotion of the Library and its programs to firefighters and fire departments with which they are affiliated and enthusiastically providing the IFSI Library with letters of support particularly for grant applications. To keep advisors up to date on the IFSI Library's activities, advisors attend an annual meeting with Library staff. In this meeting, advisors share their thoughts and insights on how the Library has met firefighter needs in the past year, and the IFSI Library staff tell them of plans for the next year based on the Library's achievements of the past year.

Illinois State Library

To reach Illinois firefighters no matter their location across the state, the IFSI Library's partnership with the Illinois State Library through membership in one of Illinois' regional library systems has been crucial. Partnership with the Illinois State Library has allowed the IFSI Library to reach firefighters through interlibrary loan, the Illinois Digital Archives, and the award of state grant funding.

In 1999, when the IFSI Library transitioned from an in-house to a state-wide library, the Library joined a regional library system to provide interlibrary loan services to firefighters across the state at no cost to them. The system was at that time called the Lincoln Trail Library System and has since been merged with other regional systems into the Illinois Heartland Library System (IHLS). The IFSI Library's becoming a member of a regional library system is an exemplary example of the IFSI Library's leadership and initiative in creating partnerships, as this was a unique case due to the IFSI Library's location within UIUC but not as a branch of the Main Library which was already a member of the regional library system. To allow all firefighters regardless of affiliation with the university to access IFSI Library materials via interlibrary loan, it was necessary for the IFSI Library to join as a separate member. Through the IFSI Library's efforts to become a unique member of the Lincoln Trail Library System, the Library's commitment to providing library services to firefighter patrons across the state was confirmed, regardless of the new paths the Library would have to forge or the challenges that the Library would have to overcome. Since then, interlibrary loan services continue to be extensively used by the IFSI Library and have become an integral part of the services that are available to Illinois firefighters. As firefighters are scattered across the state and face challenges in traveling to IFSI due to long travel times and scheduling around shifts at their fire department or another job, many are unable to come to IFSI in person to pick up the books that they need for courses, promotional exams, or research to improve their fire department's operations and community safety. When firefighters contact the IFSI Library and ask about having books shipped to them due to difficulties in coming to IFSI, IFSI staff enthusiastically promote interlibrary loan services and highlight the ease of receiving books through interlibrary loan. Requested books are sent to firefighters through IHLS and can be both picked up and returned at the firefighters' local public library—a much shorter journey from their fire department than to IFSI. The IFSI Library's extensive use of interlibrary loan has allowed more Illinois firefighters to access the information that they need, and the IFSI Library is grateful for the understanding shown by the public libraries of Illinois who may not be accustomed to receiving direct interlibrary loans and are more familiar with receiving interlibrary loans which they have requested for patrons through OCLC. The establishment and extensive use of interlibrary loan services have helped to make the IFSI Library accessible to all Illinois

firefighters and has helped the Library adapt to the changes that came from the necessity of evolving from an in-house to a state-wide library.

In addition to the physical materials which can be disseminated to firefighters through the Illinois State Library's regional interlibrary loan systems, the IFSI Library can also utilize the Illinois Digital Archives (IDA). IDA is the repository for the digital collections of the Illinois State Library as well as other libraries and institutions in the state. The IFSI Library currently has three collections in IDA: the COVID-19 and the Illinois Fire Service, Illinois Firefighter Line of Duty Death Digital Image Collection, and the Springfield Fire Department Image Collection. These digital collections highlight the IFSI Library's commitment to telling the stories of firefighters and making these stories available both to firefighters themselves as well as to the general public. The collections in IDA all feature further examples of experience-based knowledge, which are crucial to firefighters' training and education as well as to their trust in the IFSI Library.

Finally, the IFSI Library's partnership with the Illinois State Library through membership in a regional library system has made the IFSI Library eligible to receive state grant funding. Between 1999 and 2014, the IFSI Library received 14 grants totaling over \$258,000 from the Illinois Office of the Secretary of State and the Illinois State Library (<https://www.fsi.illinois.edu/content/library/grants/>). Grant funding was received from a variety of grant programs, with many projects funded through the Library Service and Technology Act grant program. Grant projects included outreach, workshops, and training to Illinois firefighters, fire departments, and public libraries; the creation of and support for online resources; the creation of IFLODD; evaluation of IFSI Library subject access; and purchasing support for materials and supplies. While available state grant funding has decreased since 2014, the grants received from the Illinois State Library were key in building the foundation of the IFSI Library's services for all Illinois firefighters.

NATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

Leadership through partnership at the national level by the IFSI Library has primarily consisted of membership in national professional organizations, leadership within these organizations, and grant funding received through these organizations. Through these organizations, IFSI librarians have gained valuable connections to librarians and libraries across the country, leadership skills, and opportunities for IFSI Library growth.

Memberships in national organizations have provided IFSI librarians with sources for networking, staff professional development, and exposure to new ideas and trends in librarianship across the U.S. IFSI librarians have presented on the IFSI Library and other aspects of librarianship including at the conferences of the Chinese American Librarians Association (CALA), American Library Association (ALA), ALA International Relations Roundtable (IRRT), Medical Library Association (MLA), Special Library Association (SLA), and Joint Council of Librarians of Color (JCLC) (<https://www.fsi.illinois.edu/content/library/research/index.cfm>). These conference presentations for organizations of which the IFSI Library and/or IFSI librarians are members have allowed the IFSI Library to highlight the innovative work which the IFSI Library conducts for Illinois firefighters and to make the unique information needs of firefighters more widely known to the national library community. Membership in national organizations not only has allowed IFSI librarians to promote the Library's accomplishments and findings but also to foster connections between the IFSI Library and other libraries that have provided support for IFSI

Library initiatives. For example, a recent grant application submitted by the IFSI Library included letters of support from representatives of a wide number of organizations including ALA, SLA, and JCLC. The connection to a national network of libraries and their support of IFSI Library initiatives are crucial for the IFSI Library to be competitive when applying for grants. The IFSI Head Librarian has also held leadership positions within these national organizations, especially within CALA of which she was president (2015-2016), executive director (2016-2022), and co-representative to IFLA (2017-2019). As a member of ALA, she has served on the ALA Task Force on Equity Diversity and Inclusion (2014-2016) and the ALA Nominating Committee (2017); and, as a member of SLA, she served on the Emergency Preparedness and Recovery Advisory Council (2013-2016). Through these leadership positions, the Head Librarian has gained valuable leadership experience which she has brought back to her work at the IFSI Library and applied to her leadership of the library team, her advocacy of the IFSI Library to IFSI administration, and her vision for what the IFSI Library can become.

Additionally, the IFSI Library has received grant funding from partnerships with national organizations. Grant funding received from organizations with which the IFSI Library is affiliated includes two from ALA and one from SLA. Grants from ALA include the “Children Fire Safety Literacy Reading and Discussion Program” (2022) which enhanced the IFSI Library’s humanities efforts on children’s fire safety and literacy through the purchase of fire safety, firefighting, and fire history children’s books for inclusion in a reading program in which firefighters read to children in their community, and the “Role of Chinese American Librarians in Library and Information Science Diversity” (2013) which collected and analyzed data on Chinese American librarians who have been involved with diversity initiatives to address diversity issues within the U.S. The grant from SLA (2003) supported a survey to support evidence-based practice in special libraries serving fire service personnel and researchers in public safety and homeland security areas. Through these grants, the IFSI Library has been able to create new programming to meet firefighters’ unique needs and to further the IFSI Library’s understanding of firefighter patrons as well as the broader field of librarianship.

INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

While the IFSI Library’s primary users are in the state of Illinois, the development of international partnerships beyond Illinois and the U.S. has allowed the Library to connect to other similar libraries and the larger library community and to create opportunities for library staff professional development. Through its membership in the International Network for Fire Information and Reference Exchange (inFire) and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), the IFSI Library has grown its leadership to an international level.

As a member of inFIRE, the IFSI Library has gained access to a network of fire and emergency libraries and affiliate organizations, who have come together to facilitate the exchange of resources and expertise among members, as well as to provide opportunities for networking and professional development, especially through the inFIRE conference. Between 1999 and 2015, IFSI librarians presented at 11 inFIRE Annual Conferences on a variety of topics related to meeting the information needs of firefighters such as internet outreach and digital resources for firefighters, reaching underserved firefighters, mapping vocabularies for fire science materials, and the development of experience-based knowledge management services. Additionally, IFSI librarians have served within inFIRE in various capacities including as chair and members of the executive

committee, and as treasurers. These IFSI librarian positions within inFIRE have helped grow the leadership skills of IFSI librarians, increasing their capacity for taking on further leadership roles for the benefit of the IFSI Library in the future. The IFSI Library's inFIRE membership has also allowed the Library to connect with similar fire and emergency libraries, allowing both the IFSI Library and other inFIRE members to learn of the innovative ways that others have responded to the unique information needs of firefighters. The IFSI Library is also affiliated with IFLA through the IFSI head librarian's IFLA membership which she has held since 2011. She has given multiple presentations at past IFLA congresses and has been a member of the Information Literacy Section Standing Committee and the Library Theory and Research Section Standing Committee. Due to IFSI's work with international students, it is crucial for the IFSI Library to continue to be involved in global library communities. As the IFSI Library continues to plan for the future, continued international collaborations through membership and leadership roles within international organizations will help increase support for the Library's new initiatives and provide crucial opportunities for continued staff development and understanding of international library trends.

CONCLUSION

Through the IFSI Library's leadership initiatives, local, state, national, and international partnerships have been created that support and enhance the IFSI Library's work for its user community: the firefighters of Illinois. Local and state partnerships provide the key connections needed to create and continue services for firefighters and allow the IFSI Library to connect to all firefighters across the state, while national and international partnerships, especially with professional organizations, have provided opportunities for staff development and connection with the larger library community. The IFSI Library plans to continue strengthening its current partnerships and to expand its list of partners, particularly through work with more international partners. These partnerships have allowed the IFSI Library to grow from an in-house to a state-wide library, and for its work to become known even at the international level. The IFSI Library serves as proof that through taking a leadership role with proactive partnership-making, a small, special library can become a leader on a large scale and serve as an example of how to successfully meet the information needs of firefighters.

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