

## OUTREACH AND ENGAGEMENT IN THAILAND

by *Ralph Gabbard*



For the past two years I have been fortunate to have been invited to give seminars and workshops at Rajabhat Maha Sarakham University located in the city of Maha Sarakham in northeast Thailand.

The northeast of Thailand is often referred to as the Isan area because the culture and the people were heavily influenced by the Lao people. The area is drier than other parts of Thailand, and the economy of the Isan area and Maha Sarakham province are largely agricultural. However, the city of Maha Sarakham is the center of education for the Isan area. Besides being home to Rajabhat Maha Sarakham University, it also features Maha Sarakham University, a large comprehensive university, and several smaller colleges and institutes. The population of Maha Sarakham doubles when all the universities, colleges, and institutes are in session.

Rajabhat Maha Sarakham University is part of the 41 university Rajabhat system spread throughout Thailand. Formerly, these universities were teachers colleges; however, their role has been expanded in recent years. There are approximately 15,000 students attending Rajabhat Maha Sarakham University studying in the areas of education, sciences and technology, humanities, social sciences (including offering a B.A. in Library Science Information), law, agricultural technology, and business administration. The university offers associate, bachelor, and master's degrees.

The Academic Media Center at the university provides access to books, periodicals, online databases (Eric, several Wilson databases), and NetLibrary's eBooks. It is home to a well-equipped computer lab and multimedia viewing stations. In addition, the Center is a wireless environment.

My first experience at Rajabhat Maha Sarakham University took place on November 8, 2005. I was invited by Academic Resource Center Director Porntip Worakul, Dean Sunee Sathitanant of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, and Vice President Nitaya Klangchaneey to be the sole presenter at a day long *Seminar on Libraries and Reference Services in the Twenty First Century*. Presentations included the

Physical vs. Virtual Library; New Opportunities for Collaboration; New Directions in Reference and Instruction; and Marketing Reference Services. The seminar was attended by 60 librarians from around Thailand, as well as 40 to 50 students from the library program. The audience was extremely attentive, especially given that my presentation was being translated. It was very difficult to have any group participation during my presentations due to both cultural and language differences. However, the seminar participants were quite willing to ask questions during the breaks. One thing I learned is that, similar to American universities, universities in Thailand compete for students so the idea of marketing library services was of major interest to the librarians.

Discussions I held with Director Porntip after the seminar resulted in his request that I develop a second presentation for the following year. I readily consented although I made some personal requests: I wanted to visit several temples, I wanted to see an elephant, and I wanted to see a water buffalo up close. They willingly agreed, and we began developing the content for the next event. We decided that the event would be a two day workshop titled *Developing Academic Resources and Promoting Public Accessibility*. Topics for the workshop included: Marketing the Library (with content provided by my colleagues Carol Jinbo, Juliet Kerico, Chris Mehrens, and Anthony Kaiser and by our library dean, Myrna McCallister); Assessment, Measurement, Monitoring; Usability, Usefulness, and Information Seeking Behavior; and New Technologies for Libraries. In addition, I demonstrated and implemented a blog for the workshop (<http://rgabbard.wordpress.com>).

At this workshop, President Somjet Poo Sri opened with an address to the participants of more than 60 librarians, along with a number of library students. They were especially interested in library marketing and new technologies for libraries. During this workshop, there was more give and take between the participants and myself.

The experiences that I had presenting the seminar and workshop have been very special. I am quite sure

that I learned as much from the participants and my hosts as they from me. I look forward to continuing my association with Rajabhat Maha Sarakham University in the coming years. And, on this visit, I was able to see a water buffalo up close, visit at least six temples, and touch an elephant, all exciting experiences.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Ralph Gabbard received his Ph.D. from the School of Library and Information Science at Indiana University. He has been an adjunct professor of library science at the Library and Information Science Indiana University/Purdue University Indianapolis. Dr. Gabbard was formerly head of the reference/instruction department at Indiana State University. Presently he is director of public programs at Fletcher Library at Arizona State University – West Campus.



**Author Ralph Gabbard teaching a class**



**Author Ralph Gabbard with an elephant**