

# **“Bridging the Language and Cultural Gap: Partnering with an Academic Library in Francophone Africa”**

James J. Natsis, Ph.D.

Coordinator, Office of International Affairs

West Virginia State University

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Three year project between the Drain-Jordan Library at West Virginia State University and the Main Library at the Université Nationale du Bénin.

- Funded by the United Negro College Fund Special Programs and US Agency for International Development (USAID).
- Total funds for 3 years: \$250,000

- The 3-year project increased human and informational capacity at both WVSU and the NUB, and technological capacity at the NUB. Using the two academic libraries as focal points, the project expanded information services, leadership in the communities, and formation of a substantial and sustainable bridge between the two societies. The project also addressed the objective of “women in development” and an increased foreign language capacity at both institutions.

# Benin

- Benin is located in West Africa and is bordered on the north by Burkina Faso and the Republic of Niger, on the east by the Federal Republic of Nigeria and on the west by the Republic of Togo. A relatively small country in African terms Benin covers an area of 43,483 square miles, or 112,600 square kilometers, slightly less than the size of Pennsylvania. Although the capitol is Porto Novo, the largest city and port is Cotonou. Both cities are located in the southern coastal region.
- Many languages are spoken in Benin but French remains the official language, even after full independence from France was achieved in 1960. With a population of more than 6 million habitants, the economy of Benin remains underdeveloped and dependent on subsistence agriculture, cotton production, and regional trade. Literacy rates are low--the average literacy rate is 37%, while only 25.8% of women are literate. These conditions of limited economic development and low literacy rates led to the idea for the proposed program described below.



- **Université Nationale du Bénin (National University of Benin)**

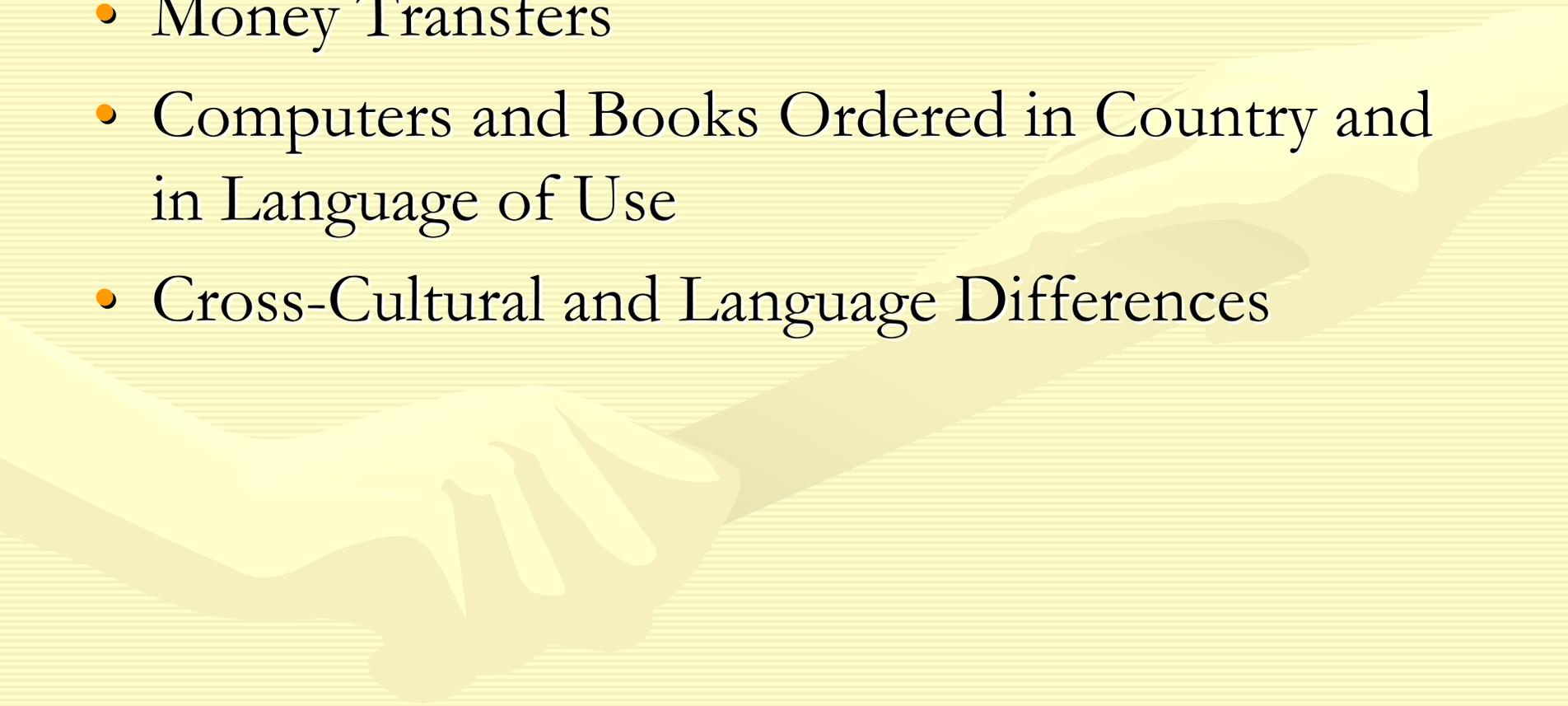
The National University of Benin was created in 1970. It unites the body of higher education establishments of Benin, spread over different campuses in six different cities: Abomey-Calvi (seat of the executive office, seat of the University library management, and 6 establishments), Cotonou (5 establishments), Porto-Novo (2 establishments), Lokossa (1 establishment), Parakou (1 establishment), and Natitingou (1 establishment).
- **The National University of Benin Library**

The NUB University Library is situated on the Abomey-Calavi campus. It offers varied services to students and professors in support of their educational, instructional, or research activities. The library holds approximately 50,000 books and a small number of mainly non-current periodicals. According to NUB library data services offered include: a student reading room; a faculty reading room which contains a number of reference holdings, theses, and periodicals; a current periodicals room; catalogs which references publications of books, theses and dissertations; and photocopy facilities.

# Project Objectives and Activities

- Women in Development
  - Leadership Development
  - Bridging Programs and Relations
  - Public Relations
  - Increase Capacity
    - A) Human Capacity
    - B) Informational Capacity
    - C) Technological Capacity
  - Strengthen Language Development
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- A faint, stylized background image of two hands shaking, symbolizing agreement or partnership. The hands are rendered in a light, semi-transparent yellow color against the overall light yellow background.

# Lessons Learned

- PR for WVSU and NUB to sustain development
  - Money Transfers
  - Computers and Books Ordered in Country and in Language of Use
  - Cross-Cultural and Language Differences
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# Conclusions

- Working in the developing world under any circumstances is tiring and frustrating.
- French-speaking Africa offers increased challenges because: a) it is Africa, b) the francophone countries share systems (education, documentation, electricity, communications, etc.) that are not compatible with those found in the U.S., c) the French language is deeply infused throughout these systems and thus English is not easily imposed.
- The people are nonetheless friendly and hospitable. The local African traditions and cultures, juxtaposed with a francophone/francophile perspective of the world offer a fruitful and insightful experience.