Attending the 77th IFLA General Conference and Assembly in San Juan, Puerto Rico, contributed to my professional development as a librarian on a number of different levels. As a dual-degree master’s student in Library Science and Latin American and Caribbean Studies at Indiana University, I have gained valuable work experience and benefited from outstanding mentorship opportunities. However, it was at IFLA’s World Library and Information Congress that I felt, perhaps for the first time, a profound sense of professional identity as a librarian, a sense of belonging to a worldwide community of practice, not simply a profession. In accordance with the conference theme, “Libraries beyond Libraries,” I can best describe my experience—at the risk of hyperbole—as transcendent. I chose to become a librarian because I knew that libraries made a practical difference in people’s everyday lives. At IFLA, however, I felt a genuine sense of pride in belonging to a global profession that transcends linguistic and national boundaries and aspires altruistically to uphold the public interest.

As a first-time attendee, I was primed to appreciate the positive aspects of the gathering; nevertheless, I also got an inkling of why more-experienced participants might express frustration with IFLA’s rigid hierarchy or resistance to change. As one Norwegian conference blogger put it, “IFLA’s principles are excellent. It is basically a force for good. But the organization hampers its own work by rigid rules and its attitude to knowledge and public debate.” Duly warned.

Because of my work in Latin American studies and my current research activities in Brazil, this year’s conference location in Puerto Rico was a major factor in my decision to apply for the Rovelstad Scholarship. Indeed, the work of Latin American and Caribbean information professionals figured prominently in this year’s conference program, and I made it my priority to attend sessions that focused specifically on the region. Throughout the conference, I was able to network, share my research interests, and form important connections with professionals from throughout Ibero-America and the Caribbean—especially Brazil, but also Mexico, Colombia, Spain, and Haiti. My interaction with young librarians from Brazil provided me with invaluable insight into the organizational culture of Brazilian academic libraries and digital library initiatives, which have been somewhat resistant to adopting social media as a tool for engaging their users.

Regarding networking, an interesting dynamic came into play for me. Because I am currently located in Brazil and traveled to the conference from Brazil, my IFLA name badge listed “Brazil” as my country of origin. New acquaintances, therefore, were led to assume that I was actually from Brazil, and this seemed to shape many people’s first impression of me, leading them to be more open and less guarded than they might have been if I had been identified as being from the United States.

One session shaped my experience of the conference in particular: on Monday morning (08/15), the New Professionals Special Interest Group (NPSIG) held an off-site session at the
Biblioteca Madre María Teresa Guevara of the Universidad del Sagrado Corazón. Although I had arrived early at the convention center, I missed the bus that was transporting attendees to the university. In the lobby, I ran into a Ugandan librarian who was in the same position, and we decided to share a taxi. On the way, I learned about her work with the African Prisons Project in Uganda, where she helps coordinate library services to female inmates. Serendipitous encounters like this one contributed to shaping and enriching my idea of international librarianship as a shared enterprise in which librarians from the developed world should not and cannot see themselves as separate or disengaged from their colleagues in the developing world.

The NPSIG session featured an innovative format involving an opening talk by former IFLA president Claudia Lux, a round of “speed networking” (brief three-minute exchanges between pairs), and a series of five-minute presentations of longer papers that are available through the conference website.

This session led to friendships that lasted throughout the conference—and will last well beyond, I hope—and provided a panorama of the exciting work that young librarians are doing around the world. One paper that I plan to read presents findings from a survey of hiring committees at U.S. libraries. The kind of information presented in this paper—which I might not have had access to if I had not attended the conference—could help provide me with a competitive edge as I enter the job market.

In addition to opening, closing, poster, and plenary sessions, I attended at least one session from each of the conference’s five thematic tracks (I had not explicitly planned to divide my session attendance this way, but it seemed to happen naturally). Not all of the sessions I attended, however, were assigned to a thematic track in the conference program.

1. **Open access and digital resources**
   - *Innovative approaches to delivering information products and services to Parliaments and citizens* (Library and Research Services for Parliaments Section)
2. **Policy, strategy and advocacy**
   - *Library and Information Science Education in Latin America and the Caribbean: opportunities and challenges* (LIS Education in Developing Countries Special Interest Group with Latin America and the Caribbean)
3. **Users driving access and services**
   - *Integration, innovation and information for all in Latin America and the Caribbean libraries* (Latin America and the Caribbean Section)
   - *Beyond the United Nations Decade of Literacy: what libraries can do* (Literacy and Reading Section with National Libraries)
4. **Tools and techniques**
   - *Rare and special collections depending on history: Latin America and the Caribbean* (Rare Books and Manuscripts Section with Latin America and the Caribbean)
   - *Advancing UNIMARC: alignment and innovation* (IFLA UNIMARC Programme)
5. **Ideas, innovations, anticipating the new**
   - *Libraries providing integration, innovation and information for women* (Women, Information and Libraries Special Interest Group)
   - *“The media is the message!” The convergence of media in rapidly changing societies from a user perspective as well as the demand for preservation* (Audiovisual and Multimedia Section with Preservation and Conservation)
• Hot topics in academic and research libraries: conquering the economic downturn—managing transformational change in our libraries (Academic and Research Libraries Section)

Sessions not assigned to a thematic track included the following:

• New Professionals beyond New Professionals—skills, needs and strategies of a new generation of LIS professionals (New Professionals Special Interest Group)
• SC II Latin America and the Caribbean
• Improving Lives: Experiences from (ATLA) Access to Learning Award Recipients in Latin America (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation—Update Session)
• Newspapers in the Caribbean, Central and South America: production, distribution and conservation. Cultural heritage and news media in the digital age (Newspapers Section)

As an IFLA first-timer, I found session selection to be a somewhat dizzying venture. As one Spanish attendee who was blogging the conference put it, “La tarde del martes fue el clásico ejemplo de cómo las sesiones paralelas que pueden ser interesantes limitan las opciones de quien está interesado en ellas. La decisión, salomónica, mitad del tiempo en cada una” (Tuesday afternoon provided a classic example of how parallel sessions that might be of interest can end up limiting the options of those who are interested in them. The alternative, a Solomonic one, is to attend half of each session).

Throughout the conference, I found myself making a series of Solomonic—at times super-Solomonic—decisions. On Wednesday afternoon (08/17), for example, I shuttled among three different sessions, spending most of my time in the middle:

• Advancing UNIMARC: alignment and innovation,
• Newspapers in the Caribbean, Central and South America: production, distribution and conservation. Cultural heritage and news media in the digital age, and
• Hot topics in academic and research libraries: conquering the economic downturn—managing transformational change in our libraries.

Notwithstanding, I was often left with the nagging sense that the very session I should have attended was the one that I missed out on. During my flight back to Brazil, for example, while chatting with a young Brazilian librarian, I learned that Thursday’s (08/18) session on “e-Books and interlibrary loan” had been particularly lively and engaging: during the session’s discussion period, a minor clash had broken out between librarians and content vendors, with the librarians insisting that they would put the information needs of their patrons first, licensing restrictions be damned!

Yet precisely because of the possibility of having missed something, many of the sessions in which I did not participate, or which I attended only in part, have proven to be just as salient and valuable as those in which I did participate.

As I review the online conference program and browse papers from some of the sessions that I did not attend, the relevance of certain issues is impressed on me with greater force. On Monday morning (08/15), for example, my participation in the off-site session of the NPSIG meant that I was only able to attend the first ten minutes of the day’s plenary session, a talk by Trevor C. Clarke, Assistant Director General of the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), who outlined strategies for navigating copyright issues in the digital age. My
subsequent airplane chat with my Brazilian peer reminded me of Clarke’s plenary session and motivated me to follow up on the topic of copyright. I have since watched a set of videos filmed during the 2011 IFLA Presidential Meeting, a gathering that addressed copyright, open access, and human rights, and I have begun to review related documents such as IFLA’s “Draft Treaty on Copyright Exceptions and Limitations for Libraries and Archives.”

The same dynamic holds true for the session of the Classification and Indexing Section, which featured two presentations on Linked Open Data (LOD). After viewing the slide show of one of the session’s presenters (posted to the website of the NPSIG), I added LOD to my list of new topics to explore.

Overall, I found the IFLA World Congress to be a concentrated learning experience whose impact was multiplied by social media and informal interaction with other information professionals. After experiencing this year’s conference, I am eager to attend next year in Helsinki, where I hope to present a paper or poster based on my current research on digital libraries in Brazil.