The Intersection Where Collection Development and Acquisitions Meet Interlibrary Loan

by Maria Silva Kuhn

The intersection where Collection Development and Acquisitions meet Interlibrary Loan is the result of shrinking budgets and the consumption by electronic resources of an increasingly larger portion of the library’s allocation. This well known dilemma has forced many academic libraries to look towards resource sharing as an essential component of Collection Development and Acquisitions.

Resource sharing is not a new concept for libraries’ but the rise in the costs of library materials at the same time that advances in technology made cooperation among libraries easier than before, has made this solution attractive and possible. “Perhaps the most important development for academic libraries during the current decade has been the move from organizational self-sufficiency to a collaborative survival mode as personified by the growth of library consortia.” Gone are the days when resource sharing was considered to be repugnant and when all librarians had to offer as an alternative to students and faculty was the traditional ILL mode, with its cumbersome forms and delays.

Now that the growth of library consortia and advances in technology have made resource sharing a more attractive and plausible alternative, recommending its use to patrons has become more acceptable than before. This has opened new possibilities for Collection Development and Acquisitions librarians who can now give careful consideration to what must be purchased for the permanent collection in contrast to what can be obtained quickly through resource sharing in order to satisfy requests whose importance to the overall collection may be relative.

Here at Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania we are fortunate to belong to a consortium, PALCI, now called the Pennsylvania Academic Libraries Consortium Inc., composed of 54 private and public academic libraries in three states: Pennsylvania, New Jersey and West Virginia. These libraries with disparate systems are connected through a virtual union catalog that electronically provides direct access to over 31 million volumes. More than 340,000 students, faculty and staff of member institutions are able to take advantage of this seamless integration of resources through a $39.50 Web-based interface that enables patrons to search members’ catalogs and directly request needed titles. PALCI has named this method “EZ Borrow.” Through “EZ Borrow” a patron is able to obtain a book within three to seven days, the loan period generally given is twenty-eight days and renewal for another twenty-eight days is also possible. Fast and direct accessibility gives the patron the immediate satisfaction of knowing that the desired title is available and will arrive promptly. The length of the loan is also a bonus for the researcher looking for that esoteric title that is either out-of-print or whose cost is out-of-sight for the smaller academic library.

While direct patron borrowing is obviously a labor saving function for Interlibrary Loan departments, it represents both labor and cost savings to the Acquisitions department who would have to go through the process of searching, ordering, and paying for a title that would be of little interest to a student, or because of language, age, or other restrictions, limited to only a handful of users. In the smaller college or university library, where purchases are generally done on the basis of curricular needs, such purchases would be extraneous to the collection development policies of many libraries. Yet by providing this accessibility to a wide variety of materials, faculty and students feel less isolated from the research library world and in turn are able to concentrate on building a library collection that supports their teaching and research needs.

When asked to purchase an out-of-print title, or an esoteric one that would be of little interest

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can yield valuable glimpses into a library’s collection needs. Basing responsible purchases on these data necessarily draws from both quantitative and qualitative cost-benefit analysis of borrowing vs. purchasing. Interlibrary loan software with the capability to generate a variety of customized reports is also essential to accomplishing this task. The extent of purchasing based on ILL data is driven by budgetary constraints, collection policies with regard to specificity of curricular support, and access vs.-ownership philosophies. With meaningful ILL data analysis and a spirit of collaboration, ILL and acquisitions can indeed converge on the task of fine-tuning the library’s balance between access and ownership.