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Using Interlibrary Loan Data as a Selection Tool: ILL Trails Provide Collection Clues

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had to be reordered from another vendor. If it had not been necessary to reorder some books, it might have been possible to achieve a turn around time closer to the ILL average of nine days.

We calculated an average cost of $30.16 per item acquired, based on the purchase price for the 168 items ordered, excluding labor costs. Although this figure is more than the mean borrowing cost of $16.67 for US research libraries cited in table 6 in Measuring the Performance of Interlibrary Loan Operations in North American Research & College Libraries (Jackson, 1998), we did get the benefit of additional circulations from the items ordered.

Conclusions
First and foremost we learned that faculty members tend to use ILL to order items that could easily have been purchased through their departmental collection development account. It surprised us that faculty members were relatively uninformed of their collection development opportunities, despite our best efforts to spread the word. This project helped us realize that additional marketing of our collection development process needs to occur, specifically highlighting our ability to use credit cards with Internet book vendors, which assures a faster acquisition process.

We also learned that ILL requests could serve as a valuable tool for collection development. Patrons place ILL requests for materials they need access to, and both collection development and ILL can help meet those needs. Our project results show us that many of the materials acquired for the collection fulfilled more than just one patron’s research interests since 168 items had circulated 261 times as of October 2003. Checking circulation statistics for those titles again three months later revealed that they had circulated a total of 348 times, an increase of 33%.

From these findings it can be concluded that ILL requests should be considered as one of several collection development methods. Funds should be made available to support continuing projects like this so that materials requested through ILL can be acquired for the library’s collection and we will try to incorporate similar projects into the library budget. However, staffing is equally important to materials funding. The project was not continued because the library had lost an acquisition staff position the previous year and the demands of a new project that required daily expedited ordering could not be sustained. Despite the lack of a formal project at this time, we plan to analyze ILL requests each year so we can purchase those titles that match our curriculum.

The ILL/Acquisition project was an excellent vehicle to use for some of our collection development activities. We learned a number of valuable lessons from this pilot project and also enhanced services to those who placed requests that were ordered as a part of this project. The library continually earns good will from its patrons and this effort only strengthens that perception.

References

Using Interlibrary Loan Data as a Selection Tool: ILL Trails Provide Collection Clues

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Interlibrary loan (ILL) data can provide a goldmine of information for acquisitions and collection development. Both interlibrary loan and acquisitions support the library’s mission of timely patron access to needed materials. While acquisitions is geared to supporting the core information needs of the library constituency, interlibrary loan complements this role by providing access to additional materials that are out of scope, beyond the library’s purchasing power, or any combination of these factors. Interlibrary loan data provide a glimpse into what is being borrowed. When viewed from an acquisitions standpoint, these data can point to gaps in the library collection and/or to specialized research in areas beyond the library’s scope. By providing additional insights into library needs, ILL data can enable library acquisitions to provide greater customization of curriculum support.

Data Analysis — What is the ILL Trail Telling Us?

The key to analyzing ILL requests is through use of a good interlibrary-loan software package that allows storage and manipulation of historical data mature enough to contain at least several years of interlibrary-loan history. The library may choose to use a standalone package such as Clio, OCLC’s ILLiad, or the integrated library system’s ILL module. Regardless of which system is used, the data elements needed to meaningfully track the requests include the department, requestor (faculty, staff, undergraduate student, master’s level, doctoral student), lender, the item ordered, borrowing costs, and requests and return dates. Meaningful data elements facilitate analysis of summary data for a big-picture assessment of the overall situation.

Summary of the data by academic department/area of study provides an overview of subject areas, allowing for at-a-glance identification of the highest concentrations of borrowing. Additionlly, detailed interlibrary loan data (including articles and monograph titles) reflect library needs from several vantage points with the help of needs-specific sorting variables:

• By academic department/area of study. This breakdown of data assists acquisitions librarians in identifying needs specifically by subject area.

• By patron level. When combined with title information, this reflects the level and purpose of the kind of work being accomplished with the borrowed material. For example, the borrowed material could be used by specialized faculty research in an individual area of interest that is not necessarily tied to the university’s existing curriculum. Or items could be borrowed for students’ course work and thesis/dissertation projects.

22 Against the Grain / April 2004
satisfaction research. Note of caution: patron-use information could be skewed if student assistants request in their own names materials through ILL that are actually intended for a professor’s research.

- By borrowing cost. Documented borrowing costs are crucial when analyzing high-volume requests of articles from specific journals. Do the copyright and/or IFM fees paid in a given year exceed the actual cost of subscribing to the journal and maintaining it on-site? If yes, is this cost level consistent from year to year or did it spike during one isolated year? And does the journal reflect an active area of the curriculum?

- By lender. By examining aggregate ILL data, it could be revealed, for example, that the library has been borrowing a high volume of material on international law from a nearby university that has recently started to develop a strong collection in this area. Does international law fit into the borrowing library’s own curriculum? Or do the requests reflect concentrations of specialized research needs beyond the level and scope of the borrowing library? As the time arises for the collaborative collection development agreement with this institution to come under its scheduled review, the possibility of formally assigning international law as a topic to the lending university could be addressed.

What is being requested through interlibrary loan, and why?

A trail of several years can provide enough data to provide a history of what was being borrowed across a broader spectrum of time. Being able to sort ILL data by department area of study and patron level provides insight into context of the request. Bibliographers can glean from such “ILL trails” evidence of areas not yet covered by existing library collections or research interests beyond the scope of the collection.

Example uses of overview statistics:

- For example, a three-year total count of ILL requests (reflecting articles and monographs), broken down by academic area of study, provides an at-a-glance overview of total requests for each area.
- The quick overview points to areas of heavy borrowing, which warrant further examination — either by detailed information within the academic area, or a year-by-year comparison of borrowing volume by academic area, or both.
- If an institutional program begun in the last two years has an ILL trail of heavy borrowing, then that academic area’s requests should be scrutinized in detail in order to determine whether the requests reflect specialized research beyond the program’s scope or a core component of the program not yet adequately covered in the library’s own collection.

Example uses of detailed information — some scenarios:

- A given area’s academic programs are changing and/or expanding. Professors are requesting titles for their research and course preparations while acquisitions efforts to address these new curricular-support needs are already underway. In this case, these interlibrary-loan requests provide a pool of further titles to consider for purchase.
- A language professor is interested in researching art and borrows a book covering an important artistic movement that the library’s current collection does not address. From an acquisitions standpoint, if it is known that this area is taught on campus, the book is pursued for the library’s own collection.
- A math professor at a primarily undergraduate college is interested in researching the life of a perfume house for a specific project. Perfume-making is not among the college’s programs and adding such a program is not on the horizon. Moreover, the particular professor is the only perfume researcher on campus. In such a case, despite the library’s desire to accommodate the clientele, acquisitions would not seek to buy books supporting one person’s one-time research area.
- Articles from a certain journal have been borrowed to such an extent that the copyright fees exceed the actual cost of purchasing and housing this journal. Questions to ponder: Are these articles being ordered mostly by the same person? What type of library patron is requesting these journal articles? (This helps identify what perspective is driving the need for articles from this journal) Faculty member? Graduate student? Undergraduate student? Or are they being ordered by numerous people from one or several overlapping programs/departments? Are these requests clustered around a specific semester or academic year, or are they consistent over a period of several years? Are these ILL article requests directly related to the university’s active academic programs? Such a scenario warrants exploring whether the repeat requestor needs for the library to subscribe to this journal, especially if the article requests consistently originate from the academic area as a whole.
- If an institution is involved in collaborative collection development with other (usually nearby) institutions, ILL data sorted by lender can reveal sustained heavy borrowing in certain subject areas from a fellow library of the cooperative collection development agreement. As this collaborative agreement comes under its periodic review, knowledge gleaned from ILL data sorted by lender can provide decision support toward formally delegating these borrowed subject areas to the respective participating institutions.

Detailed data therefore provide case-by-case support for acquisitions decisions, especially in cases where some context-specific further examination is necessary. Especially in smaller libraries, the case-by-case look is important in determining what is being ordered for specialized research as opposed to filling a true collection gap.

continued on page 26
Policies and Strategies for Addressing the Needs Identified through ILL Data

No two libraries are the same, and appropriate practices vary with the size and philosophy of each library. The linkages between ILL and acquisitions must be meaningful for the library's own community rather than try to emulate someone else's policies. However, some guiding principles can provide a helpful starting point. Although there is no "one size fits all" approach to determining these linkages, ILL data are generally used both qualitatively and quantitatively. Evaluating ILL requests for monographs tends to be more philosophical and qualitative in nature than the task of analyzing article requests.

Serials

While article requests are also qualitatively reviewed to determine how closely they connect to supporting the curriculum, the decision of whether to commit library funds to in-house subscriptions to journals rests primarily with cold cash: If the copyright fees and delivery costs associated with accommodating article requests for a particular journal exceed that journal's subscription price (over a sustained period of time), the decision of whether to buy is heavily influenced by these financial factors.

Monographs

Glimmer gaps: If the library has an approval plan, systemic collection gaps revealed through ILL data can be addressed by incorporating the topmost of these gaps into the approval-plan profiles to begin systematic coverage. Area-targeting immediate selections can quickly address the gap. In libraries where all monographs are firm ordered, bibliographers can use the awareness of the ILL-identified collection gaps to specifically seek out publications in these areas.

Examples of library policies implemented for the sake of consistency (and to reduce the need to examine all ILL requests on a title-by-title basis) at various libraries include:

- Automatic ordering of ILL-requested books published within the current or previous year, at the same time as requesting the item through ILL (Peterson, 2003).
- Rush purchase of new ILL-requested books which are sent to the patron through Interlibrary Loan, upon return they are processed into the regular library collection. (Wray, 2003)
- Automatic ordering when the same title is ordered a second time.
- Automatic ordering of non-book formats, such as new instructional videos.
- Automatic ordering if the title is within scope. (Ward et al, 2002)
- International libraries: It is important to compare the advantages of purchasing versus borrowing the book. Exploration should be drawn from quantitative analysis of the costs and by qualitative analysis of determining if a book is within the university's scope and likely to be requested several times. In the latter instance, purchase is comparatively advantageous despite high costs of shipping, customs, and per-item handling costs. Customs fees and shipping costs for libraries on other continents can raise the cost of buying the item far above the actual purchase price, and curricular-pertinent patron satisfaction becomes a powerful qualitative factor that is weighed against purely monetary costs of purchasing. A "borrow or buy" cost-benefit analysis undertaken at Hong Kong University Libraries yielded the conclusion that customer satisfaction was higher when the library bought the item, primarily because ownership meant repeat use for the patron. Turnaround times for purchase could be accelerated (express shipping at higher cost) in many cases faster than borrowing (Chan, 2003).

Systematically analyzed interlibrary loan data continued on page 28

References


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The Intersection Where Collection Development and Acquisitions Meet Interlibrary Loan

by Maria Silva Kuhn (Coordinator of Acquisitions and Collection Development, Harvey Andrus Library, Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania, Bloomsburg, PA 17815) <mkuhn@bloomu.edu>

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 with trepidation 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 C39.50 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 no 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...