Acquisitions and Interlibrary Loan

In a 2003 meeting of the Interlibrary Loan staff of the fifteen public university libraries, Eastern Michigan University turned out to be the only institution where interlibrary loan was housed in Acquisitions: the rest are part of circulation or separate units. I think that the pairing of Interlibrary Loan and Acquisitions is a comfortable fit. We are trying to "acquire" resources for our patrons, either purchase or borrow. Our patrons usually do not care who ultimately owns something: they just want it.

Why Acquisitions? Here are some of the benefits:

1) The Acquisitions staff already has expertise in looking for and ordering resources in various formats. While you can borrow many items for your patrons, the Acquisitions staff can try alternative avenues for the unusual items.

   For instance, during the fall of 2003 semester, one of the students in our Historic Preservation Program requested the "Historic Window Guide: a brief illustrated history of window development from the Middle Ages to the present." No library in the world owned this title according to WorldCat. Rather than just rejecting the request, we wrote to the Tewkesbury Borough Council in Glasgow, and they graciously sent a free copy to us. We have had similar luck obtaining rare books and articles by taking the extra step.

2) Many of the titles being requested via interlibrary loan would be useful additions to the collection. We have established a separate fund to purchase recently published books as long as they fit our Collection Development Policy. The bibliographers are not penalized for these purchases from their regular subject funds. We order them expeditiously from several online resources, including Amazon.com, alibris.com, and Barnesandnoble.com. Other libraries, including those at Purdue University, the University of Wisconsin - Madison, and the University of Michigan - Ann Arbor, also have reportedly established similar procedures. We use a credit card to quickly buy a technical report, piece of music, or music compact disc.

   We generally do not buy textbooks; however, if we receive multiple requests for the same textbook via interlibrary loan, we will contact the professors to ask if they would like a copy placed on reserve. If the professor agrees, we will buy the book. Most institutions do not lend videos, so a faculty video request usually just becomes an order.

   Conversely, we also have the option of offering to borrow items if we decide we cannot purchase a particular title. For instance, we do not purchase items that are less than fifty pages for our collection. We can offer to try to borrow the title instead. Our faculty commonly requested that we purchase books that turn out to be out-of-print; interlibrary loan is the obvious solution in those cases you cannot obtain the material.

3) The Acquisitions department already handles the financial transactions. We are used to dealing with invoices, credits, and the rest. The Circulation Department used to send it bills for us to pay. It has simplified our world to keep track of both lending and borrowing financial agreements. While we prefer to use OCLC's Interlibrary Fee Management (IFM) system (monetary transactions between libraries are just added to or subtracted from your OCLC account), we can readily generate or pay bills.

   We are more consistent with the billing. While we are a member of LVIS (Libraries Very Interested in Sharing) and do not charge other LVIS libraries, we regularly receive requests from and send requests to non-LVIS libraries that charge us, and we were not always charging them back. Since we started to monitor our transactions closer, we are actually making money some months.

   Our Acquisitions Department also handles the mail. We use UPS to ship all of the books: we can match every UPS package to the OCLC ILL request number by noting every OCLC number in our UPS log.

4) The Acquisitions Department is located in a non-public area of the library, and we have few interruptions. One of the reasons that we took over the Interlibrary Loan operations from Circulation was that the patrons at the desk needed to be assisted immediately, and it was stopping the workflow. We have fortunately taken over Interlibrary Loan when almost all of the requests are submitted electronically, so most patrons are not even aware that we are not part of circulation. We are next to the Cataloging Department, so any books that are purchased from interlibrary loan requests are cataloged the same day they arrive. Our turn-around time for lending requests has been one-day for books and less than nineteen hours for articles.

5) Change is inevitable and important. My staff initially was not convinced that they could handle any additional work. It turns out they could by adjusting work assignments, and the staff members involved in interlibrary loan actually enjoy the new tasks. It is easy to get in a rut, and interlibrary loan forced us to look at our numerous procedures to review what work we could eliminate, outsource, or absorb. For instance, instead of spending hours putting plastic covers on paperback books, we pay our approval and major firm order vendors to put the Kapco covers on our paperbacks instead. My staff consists of seven support staff (six full and one half-time) with two FTE of students. We assigned one staff member to work full-time on borrowing and lending is split between two others in addition to their other duties. There can be financial rewards for the staff too; the interlibrary loan duties allowed one staff member to be reclassified to a higher pay grade.

   Having new eyes look at the operation allowed us to review and challenge common practice. Why are we doing this? For example we were purchasing dissertations for the use of graduate students if we could not borrow them. The dissertation was given to the students as if it was a journal article photocopy. It turns out when we had requests for the same dissertation, we would just buy another copy. We decided to commercially print and catalog the dissertations for our collection. This has saved us time and money. One interesting observation: other libraries regularly request to borrow our purchased dissertations.

What are the major drawbacks of an Interlibrary Loan/Acquisitions merger?

1) Interlibrary loan has enough idiosyncrasies that it may be too much for an Acquisitions librarian to handle if you are already spread too thin with electronic journal licenses, vendors negotiations, approval plans, and the rest of normal Acquisitions duties. The staff must be willing to take on the new responsibilities and be properly trained.

2) Another difference is the pace. Interlibrary loan requests usually have short deadlines: your patrons want everything yesterday. Other libraries are counting on a quick turnaround on their requests from your collection. The requests must be processed constantly. The usual monograph serial order does not have the same time restrictions; however it would be important to make sure normal Acquisitions routines are not set aside in order to handle Interlibrary Loan work. For instance our staff member who handles our approval plans is not involved with Interlibrary Loan.

   Intimes of budget cuts, interlibrary loan will become an even more important solution to acquire what your patrons need. Breaking down the barriers between Acquisitions with interlibrary loan may be one solution.