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Insights from Library Information and Resource Sharing for the Future of Academic Library Collections

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Collecting, Sharing and Connecting

Although all library functions offer unique services by design, librarians can best meet user information needs by working together in practice. The relationship between library resource sharing (LRS) and academic library collections, for example, is so symbiotic as to be axiomatic. Clearly, the ability of interlibrary loan services (ILL) to lend and borrow – which is the traditional, but not the only, method of library resource sharing – could not exist without robust and well-managed collections. At the same time, given that not even the largest academic research library collection can ever be complete, interlibrary loan services are necessary to fill inevitable collection gaps. And, it is only because librarians support local collections and participate in the ILL system as lenders of these collections that their communities can access the collections of other libraries, on a reciprocal basis, as borrowers.

Therefore, when envisioning the future of library collections in an evolving information landscape, cooperation between LRS and collection management must not be neglected; rather, it should become even more intensive and intentional. This evolving landscape includes the development of discovery, limited budgets, potentially unlimited information needs for local and global resources, and the advent of digital information, big deals, social sharing sites (both legal and illegal), and open access publishing. And, it still requires traditional interlibrary loan services, as well, with millions of annual print and digital transactions being processed more quickly and cost-effectively than ever.

Beyond traditional ILL, LRS specialists today also facilitate access to locally unavailable, or locally available but hard-to-find, information, in other ways as they respond to information needs that their local academic library collection alone cannot. When given enough support in

terms of budget, staff and responsibility, they can provide instruction about using library catalogs to successfully search for holdings in both local and distant library collections. They can help people connect to full text sources in library databases. They can identify open access sources. They can initiate purchases directly, in response to borrowing requests, when that is less expensive, quicker, and/or appropriate for their local collection. Or, they can route these requests through acquisitions or send ILL request data to collectors for them to consider.

Meanwhile, library collection management remains concerned with the health of library collections, which consist of digital, print and other physical formats, as well as licensed and purchased material. These collections represent substantial investments of time, money and the attention of librarians past and present, and their value is minimized if information seekers who want to use them are unable to do so. Increasingly, academic library collections also encompass more than just the contents of a physical space (or several spaces) on campus. Librarians are building and maintaining off-site collections, as well, meant for local users, but also available to others through ILL. Here, the experience of ILL specialists with searching, requesting, and delivery policies and procedures can enable better access to locally available materials and, as a consequence, can make local collections more valuable and impactful.

In addition, more libraries are participating in cooperative collecting and shared print depositories, which are designed for the shared use of local and distant information seekers, through shared catalogs, and for even more library users, through ILL. These cooperative ventures are already essential for many libraries and will become important for even more in the future as librarians deal with limits in campus space, high building costs, and more and more published information available at increasing costs. And, as these collections evolve, library resource sharing specialists seek to encourage the development, creation and adoption of interoperable, vendor-neutral systems through which all collections can be accessed and all requests can be managed.

By clarifying the connections between library resource sharing and library collections, which are more varied and complex than meets the eye, we discover that changes in one have implications for the other that are crucial for information seekers. This is why future collection models can and should be developed in tandem with library resource and information services, rather than in isolation from them. ILL offers the flexibility that traditional library collections

cannot, and is intrinsic, not ancillary, to academic library collections and other library services. The perspective of ILL also offers insights into how libraries have successfully leveraged their collecting and collections in the past, what limitations and challenges library collections face today, and what is at stake as collecting models and collections evolve. Indeed, questions concerning the future of academic library collections can only be properly understood when approached as inextricably related, in practice, and connected, by design, to library resource sharing.

How Library Resource Sharing and Library Collections Connect

Library resource sharing and library collections already work in concert to address basic challenges in accessing information. And, it is this implicit, historical, so-obvious-as-to-often-be-unspoken relationship between ILL and library collections that lays the foundation for solving current and future information access conundrums. As libraries evolve, librarians need to examine premises and assumptions that may not be (or may never have been) valid. For example, libraries are more than just their collections. Collections are more than print stacks – they are digital journal subscriptions, licensed software and databases, e-books, special collections, institutional repositories, multi-media, and much more. ILL experience demonstrates that while damage and loss of materials does happen, it is rare, and is certainly no more common than through local circulation of materials. ILL requests demonstrate that many library users still have a preference for print. ILL services offer more than just routine lending and borrowing from existing library collections; with automation, ILL can deliver scans in minutes, rather than days or weeks. ILL transactions, by relying on consortia and technology can also be very cost effective, although some requests remain costly, and none are completely without cost. In fact, both ILL costs and collection costs are complex to determine but whenever quantifying costs, value is equally important to qualify.

In order to facilitate access to information, LRS specialists are grappling with a variety of existing and emerging challenges, such as copyright guidelines, license terms, publisher embargoes, high publisher paywalls for article access, and the existence of both legal and illegal social sharing. They also, of course, rely on library collections. Unfortunately, when librarians develop collections that are largely duplicative, it is more difficult to find libraries that hold less

popular material. Since many academic institutions support similar curricula and research needs, or rely on standing orders for well-reviewed material from respected academic presses, ILL specialists see some material with hundreds of holdings. By collecting the same material as peer institutions, more local libraries have access to more core material for more local use, which is clearly essential. But, not all of these holdings are likely to be in use all the time, and so ILL can help by efficiently delivering material that is in high demand at one university but sitting idle on another academic library's shelves. Or, when such resources are not available, ILL can help by identifying, through the analysis of ILL request data, a need to purchase more copies of some material; similarly, ILL data can be used to support the need for development of appropriate open education resources.

ILL can also help provide access to less commonly collected material, as needed, if it is collected and preserved in some library collections. There will always be materials that are rarely, if ever, used locally, but are still worthwhile and may be in demand someday, somewhere, for some researcher, either locally or via ILL. In seeing the need for information from around the world, as well as the so-called long tail of information, ILL specialists can serve as an important reminder of the value in collecting and maintaining less popular and less used material, and ILL experience helps make the case for keeping such information in more library collections, or in shared print storage facilities or consortial collections like the Center for Research Libraries, in order to support potential information needs.

In addition to supporting common academic courses and information needs, academic library collections often also include archives, special collections, and holdings of local interest and authors. Librarians work to share this material by supporting both ILL lending and digitization. There are ILL procedures to safeguard their use in supervised spaces and to track, ensure and insure their delivery by certified mail carriers. And, when material in special collections (or other non-circulating items in reference or reserve) cannot be loaned, but copyright, policies and workflows allow it to be scanned, it can be turned into a digitization request that is either sent to special collections or handled directly by ILL staff.

Data about ILL lending requests, in addition to borrowing requests, are also valuable for making collection de-accessioning decisions. With more information being generated and published, and space in local libraries being reimagined as study or work space, rather than

library stacks, weeding remains an important part of collection maintenance. And, there is little need for copies of the same material in many libraries, as long as several copies are available and pledged to be maintained somewhere, whether in local collections or shared remote print storage. When many libraries have similar collections, or weed the same material, it will be more difficult to find and share certain resources, but with proper discovery, request and delivery services, ILL makes it possible. The experience and workflows of ILL departments can inform shared print operations because both require the same sorts of tracking and staffing. At the same time, better online search and discovery of collections, including shared print collections, offers librarians an efficient way to manage space, materials and the costs of access and preservation.

Another way that ILL departments can contribute to shaping library collections is by buying, rather than borrowing, material requested by local library users. There are cases, particularly with new books, but also sometimes for older material, when that is quicker and/or less expensive in the short-term, or judged to add long-term value to the local collection. Purchase-on-demand policies, for print or e-books, are shaping collections already and ILL can facilitate the process through their established procedures for requesting material and communicating with library users. As libraries focus on this kind of just-in-time access, versus just-in-case collecting, library resource sharing staff can facilitate workflows that transform ILL borrowing requests into purchase on demand requests. Working with acquisitions departments, either informally or by using shared software that tracks requests and enables communication with requesters, they can request individual purchases when needed material meets certain criteria (such as age or price or availability or subject area). Since budget accounts, payment methods and permissions need to be considered when designing such workflows, ILL can either manage this process entirely, route requests to acquisitions or collection development colleagues to make such determinations, or they can create periodic request reports for subject specialists to act upon. At the same time, however, ILL specialists recognize that patron driven acquisition should not be the only basis for collection development, because, again, if few or no libraries collect more broadly than just what is currently popular, the interests of future users, or the more unique or specialized interests of current users, will be unmet by any library collection or ILL.

Of course, both library collections and library resource sharing today focus increasingly on digital information, in addition to, or even in place of print. Such resources pose their own

benefits and challenges for both collecting and sharing. Librarians need to develop mechanisms for sharing data sets and software, for example, as well as other e-resources that need to be collected, shared and preserved. As for e-book sharing, it is not as well developed as print book sharing. Even though it is possible to facilitate short term loans (through projects such as VIVA or Occam's Reader) or to share chapters from e-books, the ability to share library resources is effected by restrictive license terms, as well as by DRM, e-reading technology and procedures for sharing. Both ILL and collection development specialists need to take the lead in negotiating with publishers for terms that enable sharing. And, all librarians need to promote the development of better technology and procedures to facilitate e-book sharing or chapters or short term loans.

Academic library collection models today also rely on licensing access to e-journals, rather than purchasing them. This generally enables librarians to afford more information. But, again, there are challenges when so many libraries license similar, or the same, big deal packages, cancel print subscriptions, and accept embargoes of recent publications. As fewer libraries maintain access to certain material, more becomes left behind costly publisher paywalls, rather than accessible through more reasonable ILL fees. Licensing information also brings into question how it will be preserved for future use, which is of concern for both library resource sharing and library collections. In addition, publishers may track the use of information, whereas ILL, like library circulation, should be protecting patron privacy. So, as libraries license material, it is essential that they sign contracts with terms that protect their ability to share and preserve such information, as well as protect user privacy. And, as copyright laws are debated and legislated, librarians should advocate for at least the same copyright and fair use guidelines that exist for print now, if not for broader rights to share for educational use.

ILL specialists recognize that a distributed system of cooperative collection development with intentional duplications, as well as shared print and digital efforts, is the safest way to ensure both the preservation and the use of information, lest something happens to any one library, network, publisher or aggregator. This approach distributes risk, rewards and responsibility. It is also a challenge, as evidenced by a history of efforts that yielded valuable, if limited and incomplete, results. Perhaps the greatest lesson from LRS for cooperative collections stems from the experience of ILL specialists with cooperation, networks, and making and

strengthening connections among libraries. Their successful history of consortial and cooperative effort has developed what is today a solid system of trust and mutually beneficial services. This experience includes, but is not limited to, participating in regional, consortial, cooperative collection development, taking responsibility for different collecting areas, relying on other libraries that collect in other areas, and using ILL or request and delivery systems through shared catalog and circulation systems. These activities are all informed by the ILL mindset of sharing, a mindset that can and should also consciously inform collections and collection policies within and across institutions.

The Value of Library Collections and Connections

Library collections have historically been considered the heart of academic libraries, much as libraries have been said to be the heart of the university. As for, library information and resource sharing, it represents the soul, or shared ethos of librarians, and can potentially unite the collections of libraries of all types and the collective work of all departments within them. Individual libraries exist to serve their community's needs in different ways. But, the academic library system as a whole is able to connect people with information because of both distributed collecting and liberal sharing. Just as academic library collections differ, so do ILL services. Some libraries are net lenders, others net borrowers; some libraries charge for loans (some even charge their own users for borrowing), others lend (and borrow) for free; some offer ILL to everyone in their community, others limit it to only faculty or graduate students. The costs of both collections and of ILL are real, but, so is their value, and that is how they should be judged.

The sustainability and value of future academic library collections requires a multi-faceted approach. Besides collection management and library resource sharing there are, for instance, institutional repositories and open access publishing efforts that are shaping what a library collection includes and that will require the cooperation and expertise of all librarians within and among all libraries. This is why, in envisioning the future of academic library collections, librarians in collection management and library resource sharing, as well as in all other library functions, need to talk about their shared concerns and projects on an ongoing basis. Proposed plans and policies need to complement each other, and librarians need to collaborate even more, rather than operating in traditional functional silos. While every library department

contributes to library success, neither collection development nor interlibrary loan alone is the answer to all challenges faced by academic libraries. Nor is purchase on demand. Nor is open access publishing. Whatever limits and challenges librarians face, future success will result from pooling resources such as staff, time, budgets, space, access, and preservation efforts. It is by working together with all other library functions, all other libraries, and all other stakeholders in the information world that librarians can continue to manage collections and offer services that serve information seekers.

There is a historical tension between collection development and interlibrary loan services that can be expressed in terms of collections focusing on the needs of local users and ILL focusing on the needs of other library users. This thinking echoes the historical debate between access and preservation, which represents another case in which librarians must support multiple, sometimes even conflicting, goals, as one without the other is of significantly less value. Because, in fact, both ILL and CM focus on both local and distant library users, sharing resources as lenders and as borrowers in order to leverage limited collection budgets and access the wealth of information that exists in library collections and beyond them.

If ILL and collections are viewed as rival services that must compete for resources, then the health of one or the other is likely to unduly suffer. For example, while cost savings may be realized from new collection development models, such as those that license more digital data, this may mean that in order to access embargoed articles, ILL budgets need to be increased. Given different collection models, librarians need to consciously consider what is at stake, not only in terms of local collections but also in terms of information access through traditional ILL and more innovative library resource sharing. As collection development decisions are made and local academic library collections evolve, librarians need to consider the role of ILL and the repercussions of such decisions on ILL, and thus on library users today and in the future. Finding the ideal balance of services for the lowest overall cost is always a challenge. But, the best response and solution to limited resources is more cooperation and collaboration. And, the library resource sharing community excels at cooperating and collaborating with colleagues in in order to meet information needs.

While a short-term perspective towards managing academic library collections in response to user requests, or weeding material that has not circulated, or licensing big deal

packages can yield immediate benefits, such policies can also leave everyone with less access to information in the long run. There is no group better suited to maintaining a broad, long-term perspective than academic librarians. This means that collecting, maintaining, preserving and sharing information should remain their shared mission. Even as the global information landscape evolves, the mission of librarians to steward the world's information and knowledge remains. Librarians collect more than just bits of information; library collections, incomplete as each may be, together represent the sum of human knowledge. Future information seekers may only ever experience library collections as fully integrated, comprehensively inclusive, transparently accessible information treasure troves in works of inspirational fiction. But, although this may remain a wishful aspiration rather than an operational objective, the more that library resource sharing and library collection management librarians cooperate, the closer librarians and library collections can come to connecting information seekers with the information they seek and approaching this still powerful and meaningful goal.