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A Case for Integration of Interlibrary Loan and Reference

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Abstract

The on-going debate of whether the Interlibrary Loan Department (ILL) should be autonomous or a function of other departments is revisited in this paper. Though much of the literature on this topic advocates ILL merging with the Reference Department, early surveys shows mixed findings. The authors reveal results of a recent survey from 324 participants that includes library personnel from public, academic, and special libraries throughout the United States. The outcome of the survey supports the literature that ILL personnel strongly believe that their work is more closely related to reference than that pertaining to circulation or technical services.

This paper revisits the on-going debate of whether interlibrary loan (ILL) should be part of the reference department, part of another department, or on its own. While a majority of literature on this topic advocates ILL merging with reference, earlier surveys showed mixed results: some placed ILL in other departments, while others established ILL as its own department or merged ILL into reference. To obtain current data on this issue, a survey was conducted online. Participants included librarians, library staff, and directors/deans of academic, public, and special libraries. The answers from 324 participants indicate that many libraries are merging ILL with reference, and a majority of the participants believe that the merger is a sound idea because:

- 1) The skill set needed by ILL librarians is similar to that of librarians in reference. Conducting reference interviews, providing support to remote users and distance learning students, administering on-demand user education or information literacy instruction, performing complex searches, etc., are skills required of both reference and ILL librarians; and

- 2) Joining ILL with reference, libraries can streamline their workflow and maximize the skills of the human resources currently available to them.

The results of this survey indicate that some libraries have found a way to work around budget cuts without sacrificing too much on the service front. They are merging ILL with reference. We hope this paper will encourage more libraries to look at merging similar departments as a sensible way to maintain the highest level of service for all library users.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Interlibrary loan as a concept has existed since 1916 when libraries in the United States embraced an idea first proposed in 1876 by then-director Samuel Green of the Worcester Free Public Library (Massachusetts). Green believed that reference libraries ought to share their collections with each other to answer difficult and/or esoteric questions from their patrons. He proposed his idea in the September 1876 issue of *Library Journal*, in which he wrote:

It would add greatly to the usefulness of our reference libraries if an agreement should be made to lend books to each other for short periods of time....I should think libraries would be willing to make themselves responsible for the value of borrowed books, and be willing to pay an amount of expressage that would make the transportation company liable for the loss in money should the books disappear in transit (Green, 1876).

While this concept was well received and gradually implemented over the years in many libraries across the country, it also generated a conundrum that continues to this day: the controversy over where ILL should be located in the library. Much has been written about this debate, and many surveys have been conducted over the years to gauge the sentiments of librarians about the issue and to find out what libraries are doing to address this. The focal point of this debate is where ILL functions should reside, usually in reference or circulation, sometimes in technical services or elsewhere. In a 1965 survey of 45 college libraries, 50% of the respondents reported that ILL was important reference work and placed this function in the reference department in their libraries to preserve service continuity and maintain department efficiency (Porterfield, 1965). Subsequent studies

revealed fluctuating results (LaGuardia and Dowell, 1991; Gilmer, 1994; Bustos, 1993; and Sanchez, 2009):

- 1988: 36% in Circulation; 30% in Reference
- 1992: 23% in Circulation; 18% in Reference
- 1993: 24% in Circulation; 30% in Reference
- 2009: 28% in Circulation; 21% in Reference.

Despite these varied results, the surveys also reveal many views ILL librarians share in common about their work; that is, their work is so much more than just retrieving materials and processing requests. ILL librarians strongly believe that their work is more closely related to reference work than other areas (e.g., circulation or technical services) because they:

- Are well trained in reference interviewing. As any experienced librarian can attest, most library users want what they know, but they do not necessarily know what they need. It is the job of ILL librarians to conduct a reference interview to determine what the users need and locate the resources that would meet their needs;

- Know how to track difficult-to-find materials. Technological improvements may allow patrons speedy access to information, but unmediated searches often result in erroneous hits or too many irrelevant hits. ILL librarians are professionally trained to search for “grey materials” or ephemeral documents, conference proceedings, series, title changes, government documents, and self-published works that are either poorly cited and/or not indexed in popular reference sources. This skill is especially well-honed when the librarian has been a cataloger or has working knowledge of metadata because he or she can limit the search to specific metadata elements mandatory in all bibliographic records to yield more accurate results;

- Are specialists in citation verifications and online searching. Boucher (1989) called the professional librarian a “bibliographic reference practitioner” because, similar to reference librarians, the ILL librarian also needs to keep up-to-date with new technology, search strategies, reference sources, and reference tools to be an effective librarian. Besides, the reference desk is where reference sources and reference tools are kept for librarians to verify citations (Gilmer, 1994);

- Are good teachers of new technology by using their knowledge to provide on-demand user education to remote users and distance learners. They can introduce patrons to new tools for immediate and future independent research;

- Can be important players in developing reference collections or specialized collections because of their knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of the collections. Some ILL librarians possess an advanced degree in addition to an MLS or MLIS that enhances their ability to develop the reference collection, or they may speak more than one language, which can be a great asset;

- Can save their libraries money by demonstrating that there may be no need to hire additional employees to staff two separate units when their skills, knowledge, and labor are available for management to maximize.

So, why is there still a debate about this issue? An answer may lie in the theory-practice gap. In some libraries, ILL is a function of the reference department, because *all* librarians perform reference interviews, conduct user education and information literacy instruction, and search local databases and global bibliographic utilities to find what readers need. In other libraries, ILL is an extension of circulation or technical services, removed from anything related to reference. Another answer may be a preoccupation with the notion that some of the duties performed by ILL staff do not fully fit into the workflows of

reference, circulation, or technical services. Consequently, less attention is paid to the most important task: helping information seekers find what they need, in person or remotely.

SURVEY

Since the statistics cited above were collected many years ago, we were interested in current views among librarians in academia, public, and special libraries about this issue.

We posted a survey on seven online discussion lists:

- College Library Discussion List: collib-l@ala.org
- Gay Librarian Discussion List: gay-libn@usc.edu
- ILL: ill-l@webjunction.org
- New Librarians: newlib-l@usc.edu
- New York Libraries Information Network: NYLINE@listserv.nysed.edu
- Public Library Electronic Discussion List: Publib@webjunction.org
- Reference Librarians: LISTSERV@LISTSERV.KENT.EDU

Included among the questions on the survey were:

- 1) In your library, to which area does the ILL department belong?
- 2) To which department do you think ILL should belong?
- 3) If you are an ILL librarian, do you provide reference services?
- 4) Do you provide other services?

FIGURE 1: Departments that include the Interlibrary Loan function

We found that 33.3% of the respondents stated that ILL in their library falls under the umbrella of the reference department (see Figure 1), followed by the “Other” category at 28.6%. This “Other” group consisted of small libraries that had their ILL department split between the circulation department and technical services, or as part of a one-person library where the librarian did everything from interlibrary loan, circulation, and electronic resources to administration. This response was a departure from the 2009 study where ILL was found in circulation more often than in reference. But it was also a validation of our contention that ILL work is reference work and that it should be part of the Reference Department.

FIGURE 2 : Which department do you think ILL should be part of?

The second question asked the respondents about the appropriate place for ILL (Figure 2). A majority of respondents replied that ILL should be part of the Reference department: 34.5% Reference vs. 32% Circulation. This answer affirms our contention that placing ILL outside of Reference is not an optimal management practice or the best use of human resources.

FIGURE 3: ILL librarians providing reference services

Figure 3 illustrates the responses to the question, “If you are an Interlibrary Loan Librarian, do you provide reference services?” Fifty-one percent of the respondents replied that they provided reference services, proving that ILL librarians are familiar with reference

work, because they are already doing it. The ILL and Reference merger, therefore, would not radically change their jobs or the Reference Department workflows.

FIGURE 4: Other duties of ILL librarians

Figure 4 shows the replies to our question about the other responsibilities of ILL staff. A total of 103 respondents, almost one-third, replied that they perform reference duties in addition to ILL. This number is significant because it shows that, while not every library is on board with this idea, more libraries see the logic of this merger and are implementing it in their organizational structures.

CONCLUSION

The survey we conducted shows that some libraries are already consolidating similar departments to provide a single point of service, maximizing in-house talents and skills of staff to keep up with increasing demands for services in the midst of dwindling resources. The survey also reveals that many degree-holding librarians with experience in reference work were performing only ILL work, indicating that their talents are untapped and skills underutilized to the disadvantage of the organization.

Whether ILL has its own department, is in circulation, or in reference, one thing is undeniable: in this stagnating economy, libraries cannot afford to waste untapped human resources. So much has already been vested in employees through hiring and training, it is only logical and economically sensible to take advantage of available resources, while at the same time streamlining workflow and empowering librarians to be creative in their work. We hope that library professionals and managers will embrace this trend.

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