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Overhauling Interlibrary Loan Procedures at a Small Community College to Increase Efficiency and Decrease Waste

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Increasing Efficiency and Decreasing Waste by Overhauling Interlibrary Loan Procedures at a Small Community College

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Abstract: While the ideal of a paperless library may be unobtainable, striving for a paperless interlibrary loan department is both possible and desirable. Interlibrary loan departments at smaller academic libraries are often understaffed and overworked. In this environment, streamlining and efficiency become priorities; implementing practical changes that save time, effort and money are critical. Changes may include going paperless, improving shipping techniques, using custom holdings wisely, and training staff for efficiency.

The ability to multitask is an essential characteristic of librarians in smaller academic libraries. Heartland Community College, located in Normal, Illinois, serves a population of 5,000 matriculated students and 6,000 students taking non-credit courses. Three full-time librarians divide all professional and many of the clerical library duties. On any given day, a librarian might be found teaching information literacy in the classroom, working at the reference desk, sending out fine notices, scanning electronic reserve, checking out books, and managing interlibrary loans. Interlibrary loan is handled by one librarian supervisor and one part-time student worker, and no more than 2 or 3 hours per day can be devoted to interlibrary loan. This level of staffing is common in smaller library settings and represents one of the major challenges in providing excellent interlibrary loan services.

Two years ago, the Interlibrary Loan Department at Heartland was in disarray. Antiquated procedures and frequent staff turnover led to the need for a reevaluation and complete overhaul of procedures. While examining the workflow, the recurring phrase was, "There must be a better way."

This article describes the "better ways" that were discovered in the course of revamping the Interlibrary Loan Department. It is likely that interlibrary loan managers who have kept their procedures up-to-date will not find many earth-shattering revelations. On the other hand, most small and medium libraries with

limited budgets and limited staffing should be able to acquire at least a few new ideas on how to increase efficiency and decrease waste.

THE QUEST FOR PAPERLESS INTERLIBRARY LOAN

Corporate America has sometimes resisted the Green movement, claiming that sustainable practices will drive up costs and decrease the ability to compete in the global market with countries not held to the same regulations. The irony is that many forward-looking companies realize that investing in sustainable practices actually saves money and increases efficiency over the long run. One can view an interlibrary loan department, regardless of its size, as a microcosm of the factory environment. The library assembly line involves product retrieval, packaging, shipping, and receiving. Even on a small scale, the potential for a significant amount of waste is apparent. Heartland Community College's original procedures required making multiple printouts of all lending and borrowing requests. The requests were filed and re-filed into different folders depending upon their status. This paper shuffling was a waste of time. The final step, after a request had been completed, was to archive paper copies, which seemed both unnecessary and probably not in accord with copyright guidelines. Nor are libraries required to keep records of requests forever. CONTU guidelines only require retaining records on article requests for the current year plus the previous three years (Hilyer, 2006)**.** A library could go completely paperless by relying on the OCLC statistics module. As long as a library maintains some sort of accounting system for article requests, then it does not need hard copies.

Heartland Library started its reorganization by investigating the possibility of creating a paperless interlibrary loan department.

The first order of business was to determine if getting rid of all paper files was feasible. The lending and borrowing process did not seem to absolutely require a paper copy. A question about going paperless posed at a small regional conference determined that many other institutions were still using paper-based systems to some degree, but at least one had gone to an almost completely paperless system. One gets the sense that hanging onto the paper is mostly rooted in tradition and "the way it has always been done" rather than necessity.

Emboldened by the knowledge that someone was making paperless interlibrary loan work without creating chaos in the interlibrary loan world, staff gave this method a trial. The biggest challenge faced was just where we went to look for information about any item. The old process involved rooting through the files to find the correct paper copy of the interlibrary loan transaction. The first major change in Heartland Library's procedures was to begin looking at the active record in OCLC's Resource Sharing module as the authority, instead of the printed record. The old system for loans required printing two copies of the request. One copy went into the labyrinth of file folders and the other was made into a book strap, rendering it inaccessible. The book straps required careful folding and cutting, and were completed by hand. The department members were very happy the day that OCLC implemented printable book straps and stickers. Libraries with actual interlibrary loan budgets that purchase

subscriptions to second-party interlibrary loan management software like CLIO or ILLiad have had this functionality for years, but it has proved to be a huge time and paper saver for libraries that operate on a shoestring budget. With the new loan procedures, staff only have to print a single 3x4 inch removable sticker and then write in the due date by hand. Book straps are only used on rare or damaged items, and these items are rarely sent via interlibrary loan anyway.

Many institutions, both small and large, have had a difficult time phasing out paper interlibrary loan request forms. To solve this problem, Heartland Library has gone to two types of electronic requests for students and faculty. The preferred method is for patrons to use the interlibrary loan button in WorldCat to initiate a request. This fills out the form correctly for the patron. The library also has an online form that is somewhat easier to use for requesting articles. This form is forwarded to an email account that is read by staff. Eliminating paper request forms reduces redundancy and gets items into patrons' hands faster.

The Heartland Library has not been able to go completely paperless, but is quite close to it.. The only paper used in the Interlibrary Loan Department is for removable book stickers that are placed on loaned and borrowed items and shipping labels. This simple change has increased efficiency and almost eliminated paper waste.

PACKAGING AND SHIPPING PRIMER

In a small library setting, packaging and shipping costs for interlibrary loan can become a significant financial burden. Adequately protecting items during shipment should always remain the first criteria in choosing packaging. Interlibrary loan managers should also keep in mind that according to the American Library Association's *Interlibrary Loan Code for the United States,* "the requesting library should package material to prevent damage in shipping and should comply with any special instructions stated by the supplying library." If the lending library wants their paperback romance novel returned bubble wrapped in a box, the borrowing library must comply. Packaging choices for standard books and audiovisual materials are straightforward; prefabricated boxes or padded envelopes are required. Standard sizes of either should run between $0.40 and $1.00 for each box. Heartland Library's preference is to use boxes whenever possible because they are more durable, can be re-used more times, and are easy to recycle. The library purchases pre-formatted boxes from a company named *Uline*. Bubble-lined envelopes are another option, but their major shortcoming is that they cannot be recycled. Envelopes padded with recyclable material are a good choice, but do not hold up to many uses. Re-usable packaging such as plastic cases or vinyl bags has the potential to be cost-effective solutions, but in practice it is difficult and time-consuming to keep track of the special packages that must be returned with specific items.

The real cost-savings in shipping can come from re-using packaging materials. Many interlibrary loan departments adhere to the principle of "keep

using it until it is dead." It is not unusual to encounter boxes that have been used 10 or more times. Staff should avoid spending a long time removing tape and labels or trying to repair a box for just one more use. We all want to save the planet, but if it takes staff five minutes or more to get a box ready for re-use, the wasted time has cost the institution more in salary and productivity than using a new box. To trim costs and help the environment, ask around the campus for empty boxes that can be re-used. More often than not, you will find many more boxes than you can use. Another simple, but ingenious shipping solution, is to turn pre-formatted boxes (such as DVD and VHS boxes) inside out to get a few more uses out of them. Constraints in physical space will also dictate how much used packaging a library can hold on to for possible re-use. A cluttered work area cannot be an efficient work area. Through a combination of methods, libraries will find that they can actually get away with purchasing very little packaging.

MORE EFFICIENT THAN A PRIUS

The Toyota Way is a set of management principles conceived by Toyota. The cornerstone of the system rests on the concept of *kaizen*, which roughly translates as "continuous improvement" (Magee, 2007). In any environment based on repetitive activity, streamlining and workflow analysis are essential to improving efficiency. Interlibrary loan departments tend to be very process-oriented, and repeated inefficiencies add up. There are a number of small, practical changes that can increase efficiency. The place to start is with a dedicated barcode scanner. Without a scanner, staff are required to hand-enter

request identifiers both when receiving and returning items. Inefficiencies like this build up over the long run. As a corollary to this, all items sent out should have the request identifier printed out in barcode format, so that other libraries can process items more quickly.

A second simple timesaver is to always use the batch function in resource sharing software. Batching allows staff to scan in any multiple request identifiers and process them all at once. For example, staff can scan in request identifiers for all the "Completed" items that have just been returned. Using the batch function is actually much faster than scanning items in one-by-one. Another practical suggestion is to keep the interlibrary loan processing area well stocked and well organized. Interlibrary loan requires a good deal of clear space to move around stacks of items in various stages of processing, and having all forms and packaging materials nearby can greatly improve workflow.

BALANCING THE LOAD

Interlibrary loan, like many areas of academic librarianship, can be either feast or famine. Peak periods put stress on the staff in small interlibrary loan departments. At Heartland Library, staff struggle to keep up with requests from high-use patrons. One day, staff discovered more than 100 requests from the same patron for vampire-romance novels, something difficult to provide. The solution was to implement a 5-per-day request limit. Heartland Library also allows patrons to prioritize requests. This helps spread out the workload. Unlike many libraries, we do allow our patrons to request new audiovisual titles and

bestsellers. However, staff cautions them that it is a slow process to find libraries

willing to loan these items. We have also barred students from requesting

textbooks. Textbooks were problematic because they are very difficult to obtain;

plus students want to keep them the entire semester regardless of the due date.

Implementing these relatively minor policy changes has gone a long way towards

creating a more balanced workload.

FREE LOANS FOR EVERYBODY.

Matthew Lesko is known for his infomercials. He wears a two-piece suit

covered in question marks and has written a series of books about getting free

stuff (*Free Money to Pay Your Bills, 1001 Free Goodies and Cheapies, Gobs and

Gobs of Free Stuff*, etc.). Like many small libraries, Heartland's interlibrary loan

department does not have a budget to pay interlibrary loan fees charged by other

libraries. Frustrated trying to get free loans, we often wish Lesko had turned his

attentions to writing an interlibrary loan manual.

Through trial and error, we discovered a couple tricks that have allowed us to

get almost every borrowed item free. The place to start is with your own

institution; if a library is not willing to provide free loans and copies to other

libraries, it is going to have a hard time difficult time borrowing materials for free.

Be sure to clearly state your lending charges, if any, in the *OCLC Policies

Directory* and in your *Lending Information* constant data within the OCLC

Administrative module.

The next step towards free interlibrary loan is identifying the networks, consortia and reciprocal borrowing agreements that your library has established. Sometimes networks are based on geographic regions, such as ASERL (Association of Southeastern Research Libraries). There are also nation-wide groups such as Libraries Very Interested in Sharing (LVIS). LVIS, established in 1993, is a group of libraries who agree to provide free loans and photocopies for up to 30 pages per citation. For more information about LVIS, visit their website: http://www.cyberdriveillinois.com/departments/library/who_we_are/OCLC/programs_and_services/lvis_description.html. It is important that libraries list memberships in the *Group Affiliations* section of the OCLC Policies Directory so that other members can find them.

Creating custom holding paths in the OCLC Administrative Module is the final step in getting free materials, but it definitely builds on the first two. Two years ago, the Interlibrary Loan department at Heartland Library was not using the custom holding paths function. Implementing and refining these paths was the single greatest time saver that the Heartland Library has put into practice. For those unfamiliar with this function of WorldCat Resource Sharing, custom holdings paths allow staff to select which libraries they request from in rank order. For example, Heartland is located in Illinois, which has an excellent in-state delivery system funded by the State Library. Therefore, we set our custom path to borrow first from Illinois libraries that are also LVIS members. Next, we go to other Illinois libraries, then to nation-wide LVIS libraries and so on. Other benefits to requesting from nearby libraries is that materials generally arrive more

quickly and the carbon footprint of that particular loan is reduced since it is transported a shorter distance.

Many practitioners would agree that obtaining free loans of audiovisual materials is the bane of interlibrary loan. After struggling with finding the right groups of libraries that will lend these materials free, we found *Lloyd's List.* Originally created by the late Lloyd Peterson of the *Heartland Regional Library Network* in Missouri, it lists over 500 LVIS members who loan audiovisual formats at no charge as well as non-LVIS libraries who do not charge for loans. The complete list, including a breakdown by state, is available at: http://www.shareill.org/index.php/Lloyd%27s_List OCLC also offers a good online tutorial for setting up custom holdings lists: http://www5.oclc.org/downloads/tutorials/firstsearch/rs/customholdings.html

IT'S NOT IN MY ACCOUNT

A challenge for many interlibrary loan departments is getting interlibrary loan items to display in integrated library systems, so that patrons can view what interlibrary loan items they have and when those items are due. This is the only area of Heartland's interlibrary loan procedures where staff implemented changes that *decreased* efficiency. It is a disservice to patrons for their interlibrary loan items not to show up in their accounts along with all their other materials, as they usually wish to check one place to see what they have out and when it will be due. Heartland uses the *Voyager* integrated library system from Ex Libris, and the solution to getting interlibrary loan items into patron accounts

was to create a series of *dummy* barcodes on laminated cards. The time consuming element is attaching titles to the dummy barcodes using the integrated library system. The upside is that this allows patrons to see the item titles and due dates in their online accounts. Depending on the integrated library system, there are a number of other solutions to this problem. Many libraries create a short or brief *bibliographic* record for each interlibrary loan item. Whatever your solution, be sure it is the most efficient option that still provides your patrons with all the information that they need.

TRAINING & PROCEDURES

It is essential to maintain an up-to-date interlibrary procedures manual that can be given to new student assistants. Some larger libraries have used wikis for their procedures manual, but this might be overkill for smaller libraries. Having a current procedure manual is the best training tool in an interlibrary loan department's arsenal, but there are also a few other sources to assist in the training of new student workers. OCLC maintains a very good selection of web-based tutorials on all aspects of Resource Sharing: http://www.oclc.org/support/training/firstsearch/tutorial/. Having new staff members complete the tutorials one-by-one is worthwhile. Library staff can also check with their state libraries and library consortia for additional training opportunities.

Once training is complete, it is essential for smaller departments to develop and maintain good communication. Often the interlibrary loan supervisor and the student workers are not in the library at the same time. Good communication via email, sticky notes, an interlibrary loan dry erase board (or any combination of these) is very important to keeping things running smoothly. Ideally, each person employed in interlibrary loan will be able to process materials fully, never leaving an item partially processed for another staff member to finish. But in the real world, there are interruptions and time constraints that force staff to stop in the middle of processing. While not ideal, this situation is manageable through the use of good, detailed notes passed along at shift change

WHERE TO GO FOR HELP

There are many articles and books that focus on both the practical and philosophical aspects of interlibrary loan. Because of the rapidly changing nature of the field, much of what is available is already dated. The following section identifies of a few resources that Heartland Library has found to be the most helpful.

BOOKS

The only book we purchased and frequently consult is *Interlibrary Loan and Document Delivery: Best Practices of Operating and Managing Interlibrary Loan Services in All Libraries* by Lee Andrew Hilyer. Published in 2006, this is a superb, all-in-one volume for any size interlibrary loan department. The author

covers management of day-to-day interlibrary loan functions in good detail. Hilyer also includes sections on copyright as it pertains to interlibrary loan and a thorough annotated bibliography. Appendices contain national and state interlibrary loan codes, a sample reciprocal agreement, and a variety of templates.

JOURNALS AND ARTICLES

Two journals cover interlibrary loan specifically. The *Journal of Interlibrary Loan, Document Delivery, & Electronic Reserve* is published by Taylor & Francis. *Interlending & Document Supply* is published by Emerald Group Publishing Limited. Other journals cover interlibrary loan issues sporadically. To research a specific interlibrary loan problem or question, it is best to use a library-specific database such as *Library Lit*, *LISA* (*Library and Information Science Abstracts*), or *LISTA* (*Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts*).

WORLD WIDE WEB

Due to the rapidly changing nature of interlibrary loan, the best resource may be one that is easy to update. By far the best website for interlibrary loan information is ShareILL http://www.shareill.org. This web site covers all aspects of interlibrary loan, and is set up in the easily editable wiki format. Add it to your favorites list for easy access..

LISTSERVS

OCLC-Sharing-L https://www3.oclc.org/app/listserv/sharingl/

This broadcast-only list periodically announces the latest news, changes and enhancements from OCLC's Interlibrary Loan and resource sharing line of services. Subscribe to stay abreast of problems or new features.

ILL-L http://lists.webjunction.org/mailman/listinfo/ill-l

This listserv is the primary discussion forum for interlibrary loan practitioners in all types of libraries. It is a very active list with international subscribers. The searchable archive can be an invaluable research tool for interlibrary loan managers.

CONCLUSION: BETTER WAYS

It is with good reason that libraries and academia in general are highly concerned with assessment; it helps to determine what is working and what is not. Taking a step back from the daily routines of interlibrary loan and formally assessing how the department operates is a worthwhile undertaking, because working at maximum efficiency is a necessity in most small libraries. Managing interlibrary loan requires a willingness to change or try new things, and the resources listed above can help staff keep abreast of new ideas and developments in the field. The entire process of overhauling Heartland Library's procedures came from a desire to find that elusive "better way" of doing things. In a repetitive environment, even small changes can make a big difference over the

course of months and years. They have at Heartland, and can do the same in

other interlibrary loan departments

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