



*Evidence Summary*

**Interlibrary Loan Rates for Academic Libraries in the United States of America Have Increased Despite the Availability of Electronic Databases, but Fulfilment Rates Have Decreased**

**A Review of:**

Williams, J. A., & Woolwine, D. E. (2011). Interlibrary loan in the United States: An analysis of academic libraries in a digital age. *Journal of Interlibrary Loan, Document Delivery & Electronic Reserve*, 21(4), 165-183. doi: 10.1080/1072303X.2011.602945

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**Abstract**

**Objectives** – To determine the number of interlibrary loan (ILL) requests in academic libraries in the United States of America over the period 1997-2008, and how various factors have influenced these rates. These factors included electronic database subscriptions, size of print journal and monograph collections, and the presence of link resolvers. Data were collected from libraries as both lenders and borrowers. The study also looked at whether the number of professional staff in an ILL department had changed during the period studied, and whether ILL departments led by a professional librarian correlated positively with rates of ILL.

**Design** – Online questionnaire.

**Setting** – Academic library members of the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC) ILL scheme in the United States of America.

**Subjects** – A total of 442 academic library members of the OCLC ILL scheme.

**Methods** – An electronic questionnaire was sent to 1433 academic library member institutions of the OCLC ILL scheme. Data were collected for libraries as both lending and borrowing institutions. Data were analyzed using a statistical software package, specifically to calculate Spearman's rank

correlations between the variables and rates of ILL.

**Main Results** – Responses to the electronic questionnaire were received from 442 (31%) academic libraries. There was an overall increase in the number of ILL requests in the period 1997-2008. The number of ILL requests which were unfulfilled also increased during this period. There was a positive correlation between rates of ILL and all of the variables investigated, with the strongest correlations with size of print monograph collections and size of print journal collections. The numbers of staff in ILL departments remained relatively static during the period covered by the study, although the majority of staff working in ILL was composed of paraprofessionals. There was a weak positive correlation between numbers of ILL requests and whether ILL departments were headed by a professional librarian.

**Conclusions** – Access to full text electronic databases has not decreased the numbers of ILL requests in academic libraries in the United States of America. In fact, ILL requests have increased, probably due to the fact that students and staff of academic libraries now have access to a larger number of citations through online databases and other information sources. The authors suggest that the increase in unfulfilled ILL requests is also due to this increased access. Libraries with large print collections are more likely to receive ILL requests precisely because they have more material to lend out, and may make more ILL requests due to the research output of their presumably larger institutions. There may be a higher number of ILL requests fulfilled by departments headed by a professional librarian because a librarian has more knowledge of sources to fulfil requests.

### **Commentary**

This study was done as part of a previously conducted, larger scale study in the area of ILL research, and the authors give a good summary of earlier literature. It aimed to discover whether a series of factors correlated positively with numbers of ILL requests

conducted over a number of years in the United States of America. The data covers a wide range of scenarios: separate datasets were recorded for ILL requests made and fulfilled, and for libraries as borrowers and as lenders.

The presentation of the data makes it difficult for the reader to interpret the results. The authors use a coding system to represent ranges of numbers of ILL requests. All of the figures and tables are presented in this way, so the reader must continually refer back to the coding, and in some cases the code numbers are divided into decimal points, meaning the reader must calculate for themselves what the actual figures are. The coding is also misleading as the numerical range covered by each code number varies widely. The scales used on the graphical representations of the results also vary, which makes it very difficult to compare among them.

The results of this study do not give the reader the full story. Although a great number of institutions were surveyed, every institution did not answer every question, and there is no explanation of this in the text. Furthermore, information is not given about the size and distribution of the institutions surveyed. This makes some of the conclusions which the researchers draw somewhat shaky, as they do not discuss how these factors may also have a bearing on the results. There are other aspects which the researchers did not cover in their conclusions, such as the fact that the presence of link resolvers may facilitate the ILL application process, and that non-fulfilment in many cases may be due to library users' inability to find items in the collection.

This is an interesting research area, and the authors suggest that further study could be undertaken into the declining numbers of ILL requests being fulfilled. Further studies could also look at the staffing question touched upon by the authors, such as a smaller scale comparison of the success rates of professionally qualified staff and paraprofessionals in the fulfilment of ILL requests. A study similar to that carried out by Bernardini & Mangiaracina (2011), who

investigated the types of items that are being requested by ILL after the introduction of subscription bundles in Italy, would also be an interesting addition to the literature. ILL is a rapidly changing area of librarianship, particularly with continuing technological advances such as e-books, so it is an area which requires continual research. Implications for practice include the importance of providing information literacy

training to library users to ensure they can access the available material.

### **References**

- Bernardini, E., & Mangiaracina, S. (2011). The relationship between ILL/document supply and journal subscriptions. *Interlending and Document Supply*, 39(1), 9-25. doi: 10.1108/02641611111112101