Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Evidence Summary

Study Fails to Link ILL Usage Patterns to Liaison Activities

A Review of:

Leykam, Andrew. "Exploring Interlibrary Loan Usage Patterns and Liaison Activities: The Experience at a U.S. University." Interlending & Document Supply 36.4 (2008): 218-24.

Reviewed by:
Scott Marsalis
Social Sciences Librarian
University of Minnesota Libraries
Minneapolis, Minnesota, United States of America
E-mail: marsa001@umn.edu

Objective - To investigate Interlibrary Loan (ILL) usage patterns, and connect them to liaison activities beyond collection development.

Design – Pattern analysis of ILL requests.

Setting – Library of The College of Staten Island, a mid-size, public university with predominantly undergraduate enrolment.

Subjects – 4,875 identifiable requests over a three-year period.

Methods – A data set of requests for ILLs of monographs over a period of three years was acquired from OCLC resource sharing statistics. This data was manually reviewed to remove duplicate records of the same request, but not multiple requests for the same item. The data included requestor status, department, publication date and subject classification of requested items.

Main Results – Differences in use across user statuses and departments were identified.

Conclusion – Usage Patterns can accurately illustrate trends in the borrowing behaviour of patrons, and be used to inform liaison librarians about user needs.

Commentary

Serious flaws both in the design of this study, and in the interpretation of results, limit its usefulness.

A primary problem with the study is its inclusion of ILL requests of monographs only, and the failure to consider that different disciplines rely upon monographic literature and serial literature to different extents. The author's conclusion that "high usage of ILL service seems to indicate not only research needs but also a greater awareness of the library and its services, and low usage seems to suggest limited awareness of ILL services" (222) not only fails to consider the disciplinary differences in relying on monographs, but also fails to examine the impact of the adequacy of the institution's own monographic collection in meeting the needs of the users. Since the study does not include information on awareness of ILL services by users/non-users, the conclusion is purely speculative.

The institution studied allowed the placing of requests by intermediaries, making it impossible to truly identify whether a request by a staff member, including library staff, was for their own research, or for a faculty member or student. Because 21% of requests were placed by librarians, this could have a significant impact on the veracity of the data in reflecting actual usage patterns.

Examination of the age of materials requested is not instructive because the publication data was examined solely by year, rather than age. Since the request data set spans a three-year period, from 2005-2007, an article published in 2005 could be anywhere from less than a year to three years old at time of request.

Also questionable is Leykam's assertion that "due to the heavy use of ILL by faculty, it is believed that ILL requests reflect individual research needs rather than general institutional needs," (221) which fails to acknowledge the ongoing nature of faculty and graduate research, and the impact of faculty research interests on the research interests of their students and advisees.

The originality/value statement in the article abstract states, "the current study links the assessment of actual ILL usage patterns with liaison activities beyond collection development"(218). This is an intriguing area of study, and ILL usage data shows potential for informing or improving liaison librarians' work. As Leykam's literature review covers, the potential for ILL usage to improve collection development is well documented (219). Unfortunately, nothing in the study collects information on liaison activities, nor does it extend beyond collection development. Further problems in the design, and questionable assumptions and deductions, keep the article from being useful for evidence based practice.