

# Research Library Interlibrary Lending: An Isolated Drop or the Beginning of a Trend?

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The 1998-99 ARL Statistics<sup>1</sup> reveal an unexpected occurrence: a decrease in interlibrary lending from the previous year. In 1998-99, the 106 research libraries used for the time series filled a median of 26,688 interlibrary loan (ILL) requests, a decrease of 568 requests from the 1997-98 median of 27,256.<sup>2</sup> This slight drop in the median lending total is the first sign of slowing in the rate of lending since 1986 when the time series data began. As reflected in the [chart of "Supply and Demand in ARL Libraries,"](#) the aggregate lending increase since 1986 is 65%; this is a four-percentage-point drop from the previous year.

## Lending is Slowing?

During the second half of the 1990s, the rate of increase in the aggregate ILL lending by research libraries slowed. The average annual percent increase dropped from 5.7% in 1995 to 3.9% in 1999. The decrease may be the result of a larger total volume of lending, but the data were examined closely to look for any signs that this may signal the beginning of a trend.

A library-by-library comparison of the lending totals for the past two years reveals some interesting findings. Some of these findings may have contributed to this year's decrease, but others suggest that lending should have increased. For example:

- Last year, for the first time, an ARL member library reported filling zero lending requests.<sup>3</sup> That library, Colorado State University (CSU), noted a cessation in lending due to its September 1997 flood. However, CSU alone did not account for the decrease in the median lending; the median would have decreased even if CSU had filled ILL requests at their pre-flood level.
- A total of 52, or 47% of the 111 lenders, reported fewer lending transactions in 1998-99 than in 1997-98. The 52 libraries reported decreases ranging from only five requests to over 29,900 transactions. The footnotes to the ARL Statistics include several possible explanations for these decreases—submission of revised data, building renovation, and revision in methodologies for counting and reporting ILL statistics.
- On the other hand, 59 libraries (53%) increased their lending totals, by amounts ranging from 94 to 27,287 requests.

Are there other possible factors that may be influencing research library patterns of interlibrary lending?

## Choosing Lenders Differently

The Research Libraries Group's (RLG) Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN) ILL Favorite Lenders and OCLC's Custom Holdings enable borrowing libraries to have lenders randomly selected. In 1998 OhioLINK changed the algorithm used to select the owning library to which patron-initiated requests are sent. These system-generated selections of lenders suggest that lenders may be chosen on a more random basis. In all three cases, borrowing requests are being sent to a greater number of lending libraries, which may decrease the number of ILL requests received by some research libraries.

## Impact of Consortial Licensing of Electronic Resources

Are research library lenders finally seeing the beneficial effects of consortial purchases of electronic journals? ARL member libraries report only aggregate borrowing and lending totals; totals are not broken down by returnables (loans) and non-returnables (photocopies). Therefore, it is impossible to use these data to evaluate the impact of direct patron access to large collections of electronic resources. Such

expanded access could explain a drop in research library lending but, at the same time, it should also trigger a drop in research library borrowing because users have access to more, electronic materials. However, this drop is not reflected in the ARL data.

### **Use of Non-Library Sources**

When needing to fill rush ILL requests, some borrowing libraries now purchase books from Amazon.com or other online book sellers rather than sending loan requests to libraries. Some borrowers also permit their patrons to order copies of articles directly from commercial document delivery suppliers. As noted above, ARL does not ask member libraries to report lending by returnables and non-returnables, so it is difficult to measure in the aggregate the impact of using these non-library suppliers to fill ILL requests.

### **Buying Fewer Titles**

In 1986, research libraries purchased on average 16,312 serial titles and 32,679 monographic titles. By 1999, research libraries purchased 15,259 serial titles, or 1,053 fewer, and 24,294 monographic titles, or 8,385 fewer. To what extent does the reduction in the number of monographic and serial titles purchased by research libraries influence their level of interlibrary lending activity? Does the decrease in titles purchased directly decrease their lending volume?

### **Slowness of Lending**

Could the decrease in lending requests be a result of research libraries' slower lending turnaround time? Some research libraries are unable to fill lending requests as quickly as other research or college libraries. It is unlikely that this year's drop is caused solely by turnaround time that may be slower than academic or public libraries, but it is another factor to monitor.

### **Lending Fees**

The continued popularity of LVIS (Libraries Very Interested in Sharing) <sup>4</sup> --a reciprocal, no-charge agreement--enables libraries to find and send requests to libraries that do not charge to fill ILL requests. The preference to use libraries that do not charge may reduce the numbers of requests sent to research libraries, which traditionally have charged to fill lending requests.

### **Lack of Up-to-Date Serial Holdings**

Another possible cause of the drop in lending is the lack of current serial holdings in the RLIN and/or OCLC catalogs. Lending requests may actually be increasing, but filled requests decreasing, as libraries are opting not to keep their serial holdings current on the national bibliographic utilities. There are no cost-effective ways to transfer holdings via tape load, FTP, or other electronic means. As a result, most research libraries have concluded that it is too labor-intensive, and therefore too costly, to maintain serial holdings in their online catalog and in one or more national bibliographic utilities. Libraries with declining lending could examine their unfilled lending requests to determine how many of the unfilled requests could stem from the lack of current serial holdings information in RLIN or OCLC.

### **Lack of Ariel or IFM**

Another possible factor in the decrease in lending is that some research libraries do not use RLG's Ariel software to send all, or even some, of their non-returnables. Some research libraries using OCLC ILL do not bill via OCLC's Interlibrary Loan Fee Management (IFM) service. Borrowers looking for fast delivery or ease of payment prefer to use Ariel and/or IFM libraries.

### **Staff Shortages**

Some ILL lending operations are understaffed and have established policies to accept only the number of lending requests their staff are able to process in a timely manner. These lenders reject a high

percentage of requests and, as a result, many borrowers avoid those lenders.

### **Patron-Initiated Transactions**

The introduction of systems that allow patron-initiated borrowing often results in a significant increase in interlibrary lending and borrowing. The instructions to the ARL Statistics Questionnaire state that libraries are to include patron-initiated transactions as ILL transactions rather than circulation transactions. In the past year, several research libraries recorded significant increases in lending that likely reflect the introduction of patron-initiated systems. These sharp increases would suggest an increase, rather than a decrease, in overall lending. However, it may be possible that some libraries are reporting patron-initiated lending as circulation, not ILL, transactions.

### **On the Other Hand, What about Borrowing?**

Although the median lending has dipped for the first time in over a decade, research library borrowing continues to show steady increases as recorded in previous years. In 1999, research libraries borrowed 169% more than they did in 1986. On average, borrowing has increased 7.9% per year from 1986 through 1999. This increase may be a reflection of the continued challenges faced by research libraries to provide research materials to their users. Although research libraries have increased their spending on library materials on average 6.7% per year since 1986, and are now spending over \$6.2 million per library, research libraries are collecting less due to reduced buying power.

Historically, research libraries have been more likely to borrow from another research library because those libraries were thought more likely to own needed material. It is possible that research libraries are beginning to shift some of their borrowing to non-research libraries, which would result in a drop in lending. Changes in research library borrowing patterns and preferences could also be contributing to changes in research library lending.

### **Conclusion**

There is no single, obvious explanation for the decrease in this year's ILL lending. Individual libraries can only look for anecdotal explanations and speculate on factors that may have caused a decrease. One year is not a trend, but the unexpected decrease in the median lending volume provides an opportunity to examine lending behavior in detail and try to isolate factors that may be influencing the current year's lending levels.

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### **Endnotes**

1. "Table 3, Supply and Demand in ARL Libraries, 1986-1999," *ARL Statistics 1998-99* (Washington, DC: ARL, 2000), 11. The time-series data track the 106 libraries that were ARL members since 1986.
  2. The median is the number in the middle of the range of lending totals. Calculating averages rather than medians also shows a decrease but a very slight one (from 34,139 in 1997-98 to 34,094 in 1998-99).
  3. "Rank Order Table 14, Total Items Loaned (ILL/DD)," *ARL Statistics 1998-99* (Washington, DC: ARL, 2000), 70.
  4. Additional information on the LIVS agreement may be found online at [this link is no longer active].
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