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Assessing ILL/DD Services Study: Initial Observations

by Mary E. Jackson, Director of Collections and Access Programs, ARL

What are the characteristics of a cost-effective interlibrary loan (ILL) and document delivery (DD) operation? To get a clearer answer to this question, ARL has undertaken a third study of the performance of ILL/DD operations in North American libraries. The current study, *Assessing ILL/DD Services*, collected data on the 2001-02 performance of mediated and user-initiated ILL/DD operations in 72 research, academic, and special libraries.

New to this study is a focus on user-initiated, or unmediated, ILL services. User-initiated ILL is defined, for this study, as requests that are initiated without ILL staff involvement and received directly by a potential supplier. This is the first comprehensive study of a range of user-initiated services: INNReach, URSA, Loansome Doc, ILLINET Online, RAPID, and user-initiated use of commercial document delivery suppliers. In addition, the project collected data on the performance of local document delivery services in 25 libraries.

The project measured unit cost, fill rate, and turnaround time for mediated and for user-initiated interlibrary borrowing and lending. Cost data includes the costs for staff, network/communications, delivery, photocopying, supplies, equipment, and borrowing fees. Turnaround time for borrowing, as in the previous study, was measured in calendar days from the date the user submitted the request to the date ILL staff notified the user that the item was available for pickup (or mailed the item to the user). Turnaround time for lending, a measure not included in the previous study, captures the elapsed time between a library receiving and shipping a request.

When the cost data are combined with performance data on turnaround time and fill rate, it is possible to identify the characteristics of the most cost effective interlibrary borrowing and lending operations and to showcase good practices that could benefit other libraries.

Results from Previous ILL/DD Studies

In 1992, ARL and the Research Libraries Group (RLG) collaborated in a joint project to collect detailed information on 1991 costs incurred by research libraries for ILL transactions.¹ That study found that research libraries spent an average borrowing unit cost of \$18.62 and lending unit cost of \$10.93.

In 1995, ARL conducted a second study that built on the 1992 study by measuring not only the cost but also several performance attributes of ILL/DD operations in research libraries and, for comparison purposes, in college libraries.² This study found that research libraries spent an average of \$18.35 on a borrowing transaction, \$9.48 on a lending transaction, and took an average 15.6 calendar days to receive a borrowing request.

ASSESSING ILL/DD SERVICES STUDY				
RESULTS FOR ARL LIBRARY PARTICIPANTS, MEAN VALUES				
	Borrowing		Lending	
	2002	1996	2002	1996
Unit cost, Mediated	\$17.50	\$18.35	\$9.28	\$9.48
Unit cost, User-initiated	\$2.04-\$14.70	NA	\$3.47-\$12.06	NA
Fill rate, Mediated	86%	85%	58%	58%
Fill rate, User-initiated	84-91%	NA	76%-88%	NA
Turnaround time, Mediated	9.29 days (loans) & 6.23 days (copies)	16.9 days (loans) & 14.9 days (copies)	1.75 days (loans) & 1.37 days (copies)	NA
Turnaround time, User-initiated (loans)	2.30-8.23 days	NA	0.57-1.45 days	NA

The Current Results

The accompanying chart presents the current findings for the 59 participating ARL libraries and compares the results with those for the 97 ARL participants in the 1996 study. It is important to remember that different libraries participated in both studies, which may result in discrepancies when comparing the two different studies. Additional analysis will be undertaken to compare the results of the 46 libraries that participated in both the 1996 and 2002 studies and the 29 libraries that participated in all three ARL ILL/DD studies.

The current study confirms informal, institution-specific studies and speculations that user-initiated services provide better service to users than mediated ILL. Overall, user-initiated services have lower unit costs, higher fill rates, and faster turnaround times than mediated ILL.

Mediated borrowing has improved compared to the 1996 study. The current study reports a unit cost for mediated borrowing of \$17.50 in 2002 dollars. When adjusted for inflation, that unit cost would represent \$14.88 in 1996 dollars, compared with \$18.35 in the previous study and represents a 19% reduction in constant dollars. Staff costs now represent less than 60% of the unit cost. Photocopy as a percentage of the overall lending unit cost has decreased and borrowing fees now represent a larger percentage of the borrowing unit cost.

Turnaround time for mediated borrowing has decreased as has the volume of mediated borrowing and lending compared with the 1996 study.

Bruce Kingma, Associate Dean, School of Information Studies, Syracuse University, and Tom Delaney, Head of ILL at Colorado State University, are collaborating with Mary Jackson, ARL, in the conduct and analysis of this study. For more information, contact Mary Jackson <mary@arl.org>.

1. *ARL/RLG Interlibrary Loan Cost Study: A Joint Effort by the Association of Research Libraries and the Research Libraries Group* (Washington, D.C.: ARL, 1993). [back to text](#)
2. *Measuring the Performance of Interlibrary Loan Operations in North American Research & College Libraries* (Washington, D.C.: ARL, 1998). [back to text](#)

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