

Measuring the Performance of Interlibrary Loan and Document Delivery Services

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FINDING: On average, the unit cost to research libraries to borrow an item on interlibrary loan is \$18.35, and the cost to lend an item is \$9.48. Average borrowing turnaround time is 16 calendar days, the borrowing fill rate is 85%, and the lending fill rate is 58%.

FINDING: The ten research libraries with the best performance for borrowing, e.g., lowest costs, highest fill rates, and fastest turnaround times, recorded unit costs of just less than \$12.00, filled 90% of all requests from local patrons, and received material in 13.5 calendar days or less. For lending, the ten research libraries with the lowest unit costs and highest fill rates incurred direct unit costs of just less than \$7.50 and filled 75% of all lending requests received.

FINDING: On average, ILL operations in college libraries have better performance measures than ILL operations in research libraries.

These findings and others are emerging from the Interlibrary Loan and Document Delivery (ILL/DD) Performance Measures Study, a two-year effort to measure 1995/96 performance of ILL departments in North American research and college libraries. The Study examined four performance measures: cost, fill rate, turnaround time, and user satisfaction. The Study also examined the differences among libraries and identified characteristics of low-cost, high-performing ILL operations to suggest strategies for other research and college libraries to improve local performance. The project was funded by [The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation](#) and conducted in collaboration with the [Council on Library and Information Resources](#).

The 119 participants of the ILL/DD Performance Measures Study included 97 research libraries, largely members of ARL, and 22 members of the Oberlin Group, an informal affiliation of highly competitive liberal arts colleges in the U.S. Most participants (108) submitted data from a central ILL department; the other 11 participants were either branch or departmental libraries. A total of 21 of the 97 research libraries are private universities, as are all of the Oberlin Group participants. Sixty-four of the research libraries also participated in a 1992 ARL/RLG ILL Cost Study.

As the performance measures of ILL/DD operations in research and college libraries are sufficiently different and because participants are interested in comparing their own performance with peer institutions, findings of each group are reported separately. Data from the 97 research libraries were used to calculate aggregate data for research libraries; data from the 22 Oberlin Group libraries were used to calculate aggregate data for the academic libraries. However, to assure confidentiality of institutions, data on libraries in the highest (90%-100%) and lowest (0%-10%) ranges are excluded from published charts and graphs. For example, the table accompanying this article summarizes the range of findings for the middle 80% of the participants.

The Findings: Research Libraries

As the accompanying table illustrates, there is a wide range of performance among ILL operations in research libraries. However, on average, a research library spends \$18.35 to obtain an item for a local patron. A borrowing request takes on average 16 calendar days to be filled, and the borrowing fill rate is 85%. The patrons who used ILL during a six-week sampling period were overall very satisfied with ILL services.

Of the 16-day average turnaround time, research libraries take four days to send a request to the first potential supplier, 11 days to receive the item, and one day to notify the patron. Requests for books and other returnables take on average two days longer than requests for copies of journal articles and other non-returnables. In seven days or less, research libraries secure one-quarter of borrowing requests for book loans and one-third of photocopy requests.

On average, a research library spends \$9.48 to fill a lending request from another library, and has a 58% fill rate as a lender. Therefore, assuming that both the borrower and lender are research libraries, the average cost for a completed ILL transaction in 1996 was \$27.83.

An objective of the study was to isolate and understand the characteristics of best practices of ILL/DD lending and borrowing operations. The first step toward this objective was identification of libraries with a combination of lowest unit costs, highest fill rates, and fastest turnaround time. Since the measure of user satisfaction proved almost uniform across all participating institutions, it was not a significant variable in this part of the study. Among all 97 research libraries participating, the ten with the best borrowing and the ten with the best lending performance were identified for closer analysis. The ten borrowing operations with the best performance measures have unit costs of just less than \$12, fill rates of 90% of all requests from local patrons, and received material in 13.5 calendar days. The ten high-performing lending operations in research libraries have unit costs of just less than \$7.50 and fill 75% of all lending requests received. Site visits to "best performers" are currently underway to interview staff about work flow and other characteristics of the operations. These findings will appear in the final project report and will be summarized in a future article in this newsletter.

The Findings: College Libraries

College library interlibrary loan performance was better overall, comparable only to the performance of the top performing research libraries. A college library spends on average \$12.08 to obtain an item for a local patron. A borrowing request is filled on average in 11 days, and the borrowing fill rate is 91%. As with the ILL users at research libraries, the college library ILL users sampled during the study also reported satisfaction with interlibrary loan services.

Of the 11-day average turnaround time, college libraries take 2.5 days to send a request to the first potential supplier, eight days to receive the item, and half a day to notify the patron.

Requests for books and other returnables take on average one day longer than requests for copies of journal articles and other non-returnables. In seven days or less, college libraries secured one-half of all borrowing requests.

College libraries spend \$7.25 on average to fill a lending request, and their lending fill rate is 65%. The average cost for a completed ILL transaction between two college libraries in 1996 was \$19.33.

Comparing Research and College Library ILL Performance

Comparing the performance of the 97 research and the 22 college libraries highlights a number of differences: volume of requests filled; unit cost; fill rate; and, for borrowing, the average turnaround time.

On average, research libraries fill nearly twice the number of borrowing requests (13,407 to 6,858) and five times the number of lending requests than college libraries (27,722 to 5,109).

The average borrowing unit cost for research libraries (\$18.35) is one-third higher than the average for college libraries (\$12.08). For lending, research libraries incur 30% more costs on average than do college libraries (\$9.48 to \$7.25).

The average borrowing fill rate for college libraries is 6% higher than research libraries (91% to 85%) and the average lending fill rate is 7% higher (65% to 58%).

College libraries also recorded faster turnaround time. For loan requests (returnables), college libraries received items in 11.4 calendar days, compared with the average 16.9 days for research libraries, nearly six days faster. For photocopy requests, college libraries received items in 10.4 calendar days compared to 14.9 calendar days for research libraries, nearly five days faster.

The only measure in which the performance of college and research libraries was very comparable was that of user satisfaction. Patrons of college and research libraries ranked timeliness of receipt of material, quality, and satisfaction with staff equally high.

Other Characteristics of ILL Operations

The ILL/DD Performance Measures Study asked a series of detailed questions about the character and nature of local ILL operations. On average, research library borrowing was evenly split between returnables and non-returnables, while their lending was one-third returnables and two-thirds non-returnables. College libraries, however, process different levels of loan and photocopy requests. On average, 40% of college library borrowing is for the loan of books and other returnables while nearly 60% of their lending is filled by lending a book or

other returnable.

Most libraries transmit and receive ILL requests via one or more electronic messaging systems. OCLC is the most commonly used messaging system for U.S. participants; ENVOY and other email-based systems reflect the Canadian preference for point-to-point communication. College libraries use OCLC ILL-related features such as the ILL Fee Management (IFM) service more extensively than research libraries.

Most of the 119 participants use document delivery suppliers to fill photocopy requests. On average, document suppliers fill 15% of college libraries' photocopy requests and 12% of research libraries' copy requests.

Understanding the Findings to Improve Local Performance

All participants received an Individual Institutional Analysis Report comparing the performance of their local operation with aggregate data from their research or college library peers. The final report of the ILL/DD Performance Measures Study, including analysis of all the major findings, will be published by ARL in early 1998.

To assist libraries in evaluating both the findings of their own performance and the overall findings, a series of workshops is planned for 1998. The workshops are designed to review the general findings of the Study; examine the characteristics ("best practices") of low-cost, high performers; and provide a framework for attendees to improve their own ILL operations. A briefing on the Study's findings will be held on January 9, 1998, prior to the ALA Midwinter Meeting in New Orleans. Additional information about the Study, the status of the final report, and the planned workshops is on the ARL web at <http://www.arl.org/access/access.html>.

Range of ILL/DD Performance in Research and College Libraries, 1996

ILL Volume & Performance Measures	Research Libraries			College Libraries		
	Low	Mean	High	Low	Mean	High
Total Transactions	12,967	40,571	69,124	5,449	11,968	19,053
Borrowing	3,457	13,407	25,263	2,448	6,858	13,645
Lending	6,893	27,722	47,974	2,049	5,109	7,880
Unit Cost						
Borrowing	\$9.76	\$18.35	\$27.84	\$6.39	\$12.08	\$18.50
Lending	\$4.87	\$9.48	\$16.34	\$4.75	\$7.25	\$10.08

Fill Rate						
Borrowing	75%	85%	93%	85%	91%	97%
Lending	43%	58%	78%	54%	65%	87%
Turnaround Time (days)						
Total	10.2	15.6	22.0	6.7	10.8	16.9
Returnables	10.4	16.9	25.8	6.6	11.4	18.0
Non-returnables	9.8	14.9	22.4	6.3	10.4	16.6
User Satisfaction						
Timeliness	88%	94%	99%	84%	92%	99%
Quality	94%	97%	100%	94%	98%	100%
Staff	85%	95%	100%	94%	98%	100%

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