ILL Communication: Analyzing five years of Iowa State University’s print Interlibrary Loan requests

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Abstract
Interlibrary Loan (ILL) is a service offered by libraries to supply patrons with materials which are not immediately available for lending. This could be for many reasons; the library might not own the item, the library may own a copy but it is already checked out to another patron, or the assignment of a required but expensive textbook spurs high demand for a particular title.

Disciplines
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Background

Interlibrary Loan (ILL) is a service that provides patrons with materials which are not immediately available for lending. The library may not own the work, or it may be too new, too rare, or already checked out. Review of historical ILL requests allows librarians to identify trends, leading to more informed collection development practices. Understanding ILL data can reveal gaps in the collection’s coverage or highlight areas where the campus community may find the collection lacking.

Data Analysis

This study is an analysis of 18,841 print ILL requests from 2013-2017 at Iowa State University.

Data available included loan author, title, year, publisher, edition, and lender library. Patron information included departmental affiliation and status.

Which departments request?

The most active department on campus turns out to be NO ISU Dept. Affiliation is self-reported and skewed by users who don’t select a department when setting up an account for the first time.

Monograph-heavy fields in the social sciences and humanities then follow, such as History and English.

274 requests in this five year period (14%) were unable to be filled (Notification B). University of Iowa’s Hardin Library for the Health Sciences filled 10.6%, TAMU, BYU, UoW each filled 2.5-3.5%, local public library filled 2%.

Which EGR departments request?

Focusing on engineering departments yields 2,219 total requests. CCEE had 569 and was top in four of the five years studied. ECpE & ME had consistent yearly numbers, while IMSE made 75% of its requests in 2016 and 2017.

What peer libraries fill the requests?

What titles are most requested?

Many textbooks - "Value Added..." requested 17 times in 2017 by IMSE and AeroE graduate students, now on Course Reserve. "Fundamentals..." 17 times in 2016 by IMSE graduate students.

"Basic..." written by ISU author, used in 500-level course with mix of majors, and now out of print. 83% of titles requested once, 10% twice, 6% 3 or more.

Who is requesting materials?

Mostly Graduate Students and Faculty. Undergraduate interest (blue) is particularly strong in CBE and AeroE.

No further patron information is recorded, so unable to determine how many requests come from the same patron or what percentage of people in a given department submit ILL requests.

Limitations

This analysis considers ILL requests for print books only. The scope does not include electronically delivered journal articles, book chapters, or conference proceedings. It also does not consider the lending of ISU materials to other libraries.

The dataset used for this analysis does not contain LC call numbers for the requested books in the majority of cases, as those are provided voluntarily by the lending library. Having call numbers would enable additional analysis, as liaison librarians could search by assigned call number range to easily see what books were requested in addition to who requested it.

Recommendations

User’s status and departmental affiliation is self-reported and not verified. Recommend to auto-populate user’s department and status automatically using the credentials they used to log in.

Encourage lending libraries to supply the LC call number information when filling an ILL monograph request as much as possible.

Conclusions

Successfully filling an ILL request requires a broad support across a large set of libraries and allows institutions to focus on strengthening their collection in specific areas.

This study provides a detailed look at books being requested at ISU, but can also serve as a starting point for other libraries to conduct similar studies. Graphs were created in the statistical software JMP, and the procedure to recreate the plots (and more) has been saved and uploaded for others to use at their home institution at:

https://github.com/eschares/ILL-analysis