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Circulation in a Consortium

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Introduction

Circulation is one area of librarianship where each library can best demonstrate its individual nature as expressed through its policies. Whereas catalog librarians have shared standards and codes, acquisitions librarians have institutional rules and policies applied in standard business practices, and reference librarians must face each question with an established set of reference tools and personal ingenuity, the circulation department primarily serves as the expression of a library's service ethic, the face of the library. Ask the person on the street what they think a librarian does, and the response may be that this is the person who checks out books.

Planning for a cooperative venture, therefore, becomes a much more sensitive matter when different libraries join together to provide shared access to their collections while at the same time trying to retain their unique policies. The University of Idaho Library (UI), University of Idaho Law Library (UI-Law), and North Idaho College's Molstead Library (NIC) learned this recently as the libraries joined catalogs in an attempt to enhance service to their patrons. As part of an LSTA demonstration grant, these libraries agreed in principle that the best service to their libraries would be through a shared database.

This LSTA funding was meant to promote cooperation between partnering libraries as a pilot project for statewide resource sharing. This grant was given to a consortium that included the three Idaho academic libraries and Washington's Gonzaga University Library, Gonzaga Law Library, and Whitworth College. This group was in the process of migrating to Endeavor's Voyager system, a change that permitted a reconsideration of certain fundamental philosophies.

Joint Catalog

During Endeavor's training, structural decisions for database organization were determined. The Idaho academic libraries committed at that point to combining their records into a single database. At that time, Voyager lacked features that have since been added that would have facilitated cross-database borrowing (as are now found in Universal Catalog and Universal Borrowing). If those features had existed, the decision

to join catalogs might never have been made, and some of the other elements of shared borrowing might not have been scrutinized.

But at that training session, we bought into a vision. It was a vision of open access, of less structure, and more sharing. A shared database would clearly show our patrons what resources were available without additional layers of searching. A shared database would, we presumed, put the onus on the libraries to create policies to enable our readers and our books to find one another. The shared database would be a service-driven rather than a staff-driven enterprise.

Getting to Know You

One of the key elements to the success of any project is the ability to communicate openly and respectfully. While this basic element seems obvious, it is also true that a project that does not begin there is doomed to failure. The three libraries had empowered the circulation unit heads to make decisions that would lead to smooth implementation. This was, indeed, a critical piece, as none of us had yet discovered how different each library and each learning community really was.

The process of intermingling our circulation policies without losing individual institutional goals was a study of diplomacy. The individuals closely involved with establishing circulation policy learned much from one another, particularly that college libraries have widely varying populations under the umbrella of “academic libraries”. Our commonalities included serving faculty expectations, similar academic calendars, and reserve collections. We were also fortunate to have similar loan periods, making some of the changes less visible.

From here, we discovered how our policies diverged. Our students have very different approaches to education. The University of Idaho Law Library serves a population of on-campus graduate students and faculty, with a number of guest patrons sprinkled into the mix. North Idaho College describes itself as a “comprehensive community college serving Idaho’s five northern counties.” Their primary patron groups include their students and faculty, and they offer a terminal degree of Associate of Arts. Finally, the University of Idaho Library patron group includes all of the above, as well as off-campus users. UI is located in Moscow, Idaho but it also has a campus in Coeur d’Alene, home to NIC, where the UI students use NIC’s library services. These types of patrons all use information differently. Graduate students, for example, gather every resource available for their research, while lower division undergraduates are much less organized in their search strategies. This is an obvious difference in values and approach that needs to be addressed in circulation policy.

Each library came to the discussion of a joint catalog with circulation policies based on their user groups. NIC, with a smaller collection, had limitations on the numbers of books that a patron could borrow and did not use holds or recalls. Additionally, they have no institutional support for collecting fines and fees systematically, so the library was forced to impose blocks for any borrower who owed money to the library. NIC also is working with a much more intimate climate; they have a personal relationship with their patrons. UI had circulation goals expressed in a very different way. They wanted to encourage circulation of materials, so there were no limits on the numbers of items borrowed. They also have institutional support for collecting fines and fees, so all charges

were sent to the bursar as holds against the students' accounts. Finally, they have patrons that they have never seen in the library, and so they apply a much more impersonal tone to the business transactions. UI also had been using holds and recalls extensively to ensure equal access to its collections, and had used on-shelf holds before entering into the shared environment. UI Law expressed a desire to match UI policies whenever possible to avoid conflicts, since both institutions are on the same campus. UI Law uses reserves as their primary collection and has specific needs for this type of circulation.

Endeavor's Voyager system permits libraries to have different circulation policies. The structure is based on location, patron type, and item type. This knowledge was important when we came together in the first of many meetings, as it allowed us to be flexible in decision-making. Additionally, we all subscribed to the notion that we could adjust our thinking and make dynamic policy changes later on, should situations arise that we could neither anticipate nor tolerate.

Changing to Serve You Better

For UI and UI Law, changes in policy were made that reflected the proximity of the institutions. Their patrons used the same cards, were subject to the same financial rules, and shared the same patron database. As such, UI adjusted its reserve policies to align more closely to those of UI Law; UI Law revised their circulation periods to match UI, which expanded the privileges of their students so they had semester loan periods; and both libraries instituted policies to block "bad citizens": patrons who ignored or missed recall notices or had overdue interlibrary loan accounts. Additionally, patrons who had three or more books in lost status were blocked, to ease the relationship between NIC and UI/UI Law. And UI Law further agreed to permit on-shelf holds and implemented electronic delivery of notices, completing the adjustment of services to match the UI profile.

NIC did not have the same geographic impetus for conformity. First, NIC is located 90 miles north of UI and UI Law. There is less walk-in traffic than is shared in Moscow. While UI students in Coeur d'Alene use the NIC library, they rarely have the UI card. Because of the concern for abuses of NIC by patrons who owed money to UI, UI and UI Law revised their policies for guest patrons to match NIC's policy. NIC dropped their limitations on borrowing, and began to permit on-shelf holds. This element was critical to the resource sharing vision.

With these policy revisions in place, the three libraries embarked on the new venture. It should be noted that for each library, service was improved to the primary patron groups (institutional group members), which is a key to successful implementation. The one important unresolved issue is accounting for overdue fines and lost book fees. The current agreement is that the library who successfully acquires money for overdue fines retains it; money for lost books is returned to the library who suffered the loss.

After sixteen months (and some fine-tuning), the results show that our library users have taken advantage of the new services. All students are borrowing materials from libraries without regard to the library's location. NIC and UI process about 20-30 items each day. The three libraries use a courier service to deliver books and the turnaround time is approximately three days. The timing cannot be shortened under the

current structure. We have experienced only the rare lost book (and only one in transit), which goes a long way to ease the fear of sharing.

And Growing

Our consortium, WIN (Washington Idaho Network of Libraries), has expanded as well. WIN added VALNET (representing central Idaho's public, school, and academic libraries) and CIN (representing the northern Idaho public, school, and medical libraries) to its membership. The consortium now numbers sixty libraries. These libraries use the same courier system and are willing and eager partners in resource sharing. The libraries, while not sharing one catalog, have adopted on-shelf holds as a means of intra-consortial borrowing. This is being done by library staff rather than unmediated public access. During the first month, libraries from both new groups have used this service and it appears that over 600 titles have circulated this way in the past year.

There is one new addition to the Idaho database, Lewis-Clark State College Library. Their records have recently been added to the shared catalog, and we are revisiting circulation policies with our new partner. The latest addition has enabled us to rename our database the Northern Idaho Academic Libraries, which we hope is yet one step closer to an Idaho catalog.

Lessons Learned

There are always lessons to be learned. We could have learned more from the existing library literature. After our initial agreement, most of our time was spent learning how to implement the new library system instead of exploring the pitfalls and advantages of shared systems. We would have learned, for example, that having common loan periods was recommended by some systems. However, having negotiated our positions, there became ownership in the product as well as the process. And it seems as if our efforts have yielded solid successes. This is due in large part to the support of the library administrators, the commitment to a vision by the planners, and support and flexibility by the staff to undertake such a change.

As we move to the future, the question of applying this to a larger group must be addressed. We see this as a model for multi-type libraries. There are concerns: accounting, collection ownership, equity of access, leveling of workloads. These are common fears, but fears that can best be approached with open, regular communication.

There are great differences between these different libraries, from the complex academic library to the single-person staff. We need to strive towards understanding and patience, as a person who handles fifty requests a day will see the situation very differently from the person who handles one transaction every three months. We need to strive for a position which, as one librarian explains it, will "do no harm" to the participants.

Geography in Idaho is such an obvious obstacle to service that we often neglect to mention it. In the center of the state is the largest roadless area in the lower 48 states, the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness. We have one highway that connects the north to the south, but none that traverses the heart of the state to connect north to east. The mountains that give Idaho its rugged beauty also effectively disrupt efficient

transportation corridors. When librarians discuss delivery services, it is often in theoretical terms as many carriers have not been able to make a profit transporting materials throughout the state. This is a tremendous barrier to service.

Librarians in Idaho still hold fast to a vision of universal borrowing. The WIN consortium is working through many circulation policy issues so this can become a reality. Communication, sensitivity, and flexibility are key elements to creating successful circulation policies that can achieve the goal of putting our books into the hands of our readers. The circulation policies that we have consensually developed reflect a strong commitment to serving the various needs of our users, and this is the face of the library that we want Idahoans to see.