
Cutting Out the Middleman: Patron-Initiated Interlibrary Loans

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ABSTRACT

THE INTERLIBRARY LOAN PROCESS AT SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY, Carbondale, has undergone a major redesign since the late 1980s. Central to the redesign has been a move toward empowering patrons by providing them with choice and responsibility. In 1994, the library began facilitating unmediated borrowing from the forty-eight other members of a statewide library consortium through a shared online union catalog and circulation system to enhance service to its users. The elimination of intermediary steps has reduced turnaround time significantly and contributed to increased patron satisfaction. The authors will explain the forces that prompted the redesign, the use of technology, and the impact on staffing.*

INTRODUCTION

Interlibrary loan (ILL) is a phenomenon of the twentieth century, with the majority of its growth and development as a legitimate library service occurring within the last thirty years. Until recently, traditionalists believed that a library should provide materials for its clientele through purchase, if possible, resorting to borrowing from neighboring libraries only as a last resort. The National Interlibrary Loan Code ("Revised Code," 1940) reflects this less-than-liberal approach to borrowing, referring to interlibrary loan as a privilege and limiting it to researchers and scholars. This approach prevailed until changing methods and ideologies finally

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brought ratification of a liberalized code in 1980, which was further liberalized in 1993 (National Interlibrary Code, 1980, 1993).

Several factors together influenced libraries to make this change in ideology. The first was a substantial increase in the volume of publishing that occurred at a time when library funding could not keep pace. Libraries could no longer afford to purchase everything that their patrons wanted or needed. A second factor was the introduction of technology into the interlibrary loan process that increased efficiency in document delivery and reduced turnaround time to an acceptable level. Finally, the introduction of end-user searching of online catalogs, full-text databases, electronic journals, and the growth of commercial document supply services has made materials more accessible than ever before.

Morris Library at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale (SIUC), is representative of hundreds of libraries that have experienced phenomenal growth in interlibrary loan and document supply in recent years. Morris Library is a comprehensive research facility organized into four subject divisional libraries and an Undergraduate Library. It contains more than 2 million volumes and over 12,000 current journal subscriptions with access to numerous CD-ROM and online resources, multiple points of access to the Internet, and state-of-the-art projects in document imaging and distance learning.

Statistics show the phenomenal growth in interlibrary loan at Morris Library in just thirty-two years. In fiscal year 1964 (the first year that ILL records were kept), Morris Library processed 399 interlibrary loan borrowing and lending requests. ILL processing at that time was performed by the director's secretary. By fiscal year 1996, the number had risen to 88,521 filled requests including lending and borrowing. Staff had increased to one professional, five paraprofessionals, and 200 hours of student help. How has Morris Library coped with these phenomenal increases? Certainly, an increase in staff has helped, but other significant changes have had to be made as well. In the 1960s, the TWX was considered cutting-edge technology, and ILL departments across the nation, including Morris Library, adopted it as their own. In the early 1980s, OCLC's ILL subsystem revolutionized ILL, followed soon by fax and ARIEL. In each case, Morris Library implemented these technologies. Today remote access to other libraries' OPACs is being used by a growing number of libraries to speed the interlibrary loan process and deal effectively with the growing volume of borrowing. Again, Morris Library is on the cutting edge. Ironically, as each improvement in ILL access is made, ILL volume increases to negate any relief.

NAILDD PROJECT

The North American Interlibrary Loan and Document Delivery (NAILDD) Project (Association of Research Libraries, 1994) introduced

in 1993, addressed the issue of maximizing access to resources while minimizing costs. More specifically, it called for libraries to redesign interlibrary loan and document delivery processes by improving mediated services and introducing unmediated services in a networked environment. It was suggested that libraries could achieve this goal by:

- developing an environment in which users may exercise choice and responsibility;
- serving as a resource for comprehensive collections; and
- providing a gateway to services of other libraries and information providers.

The NAILDD Project designers realized that technical assistance is needed to support this environment, along with a comprehensive interlibrary loan package designed to serve libraries and their patrons. Many libraries began to review local interlibrary loan processes by asking their staffs to envision the "ideal" interlibrary loan environment. By identifying the elements in this scenario, libraries began to successfully reengineer the interlibrary loan process.

REDESIGN

SIUC's Morris Library realized that a redesign was necessary. What factors prompted the redesign? Certainly, increased patron demand for resources had a major impact. For several years prior to 1990, Morris Library borrowed about 5,000 items per year for its patrons. However, in 1990 that number soared to 9,896. By 1993, it had risen to 12,027 and, by 1996, it had risen again to 22,264 (see Figure 1). Another factor that helped to prompt the redesign was the revision of the library's mission statement in 1992 to emphasize patron services: "Library Affairs will assume a leadership role in providing intellectual, bibliographic, instructional, and physical access to information resources. Service to users is the first priority of the library" (Library Affairs, 1992, p. 1).

A third factor was the reallocation of funds to support purchase of photocopies and borrowing fees. As a member of a number of statewide and regional consortia, the library realized the vital importance of sharing resources among consortia members, especially in a networked environment. SIUC plays an active role in the Illinois Library and Information Network (ILLINET), the Illinois Library Computer Systems Organization (ILCSO), and the Big Twelve Plus (BTP).¹ Finally, the library is committed to its use of technology in optimizing access to a variety of information resources for its patrons.

Networks and commitment provide a solid base for redesign of the interlibrary loan process, but these alone are not enough. Heeding the call by the NAILDD Project, and mindful of the library's commitment to its patrons, SIUC's Access Services staff began to investigate ways to:

SIUC ILL Borrowing

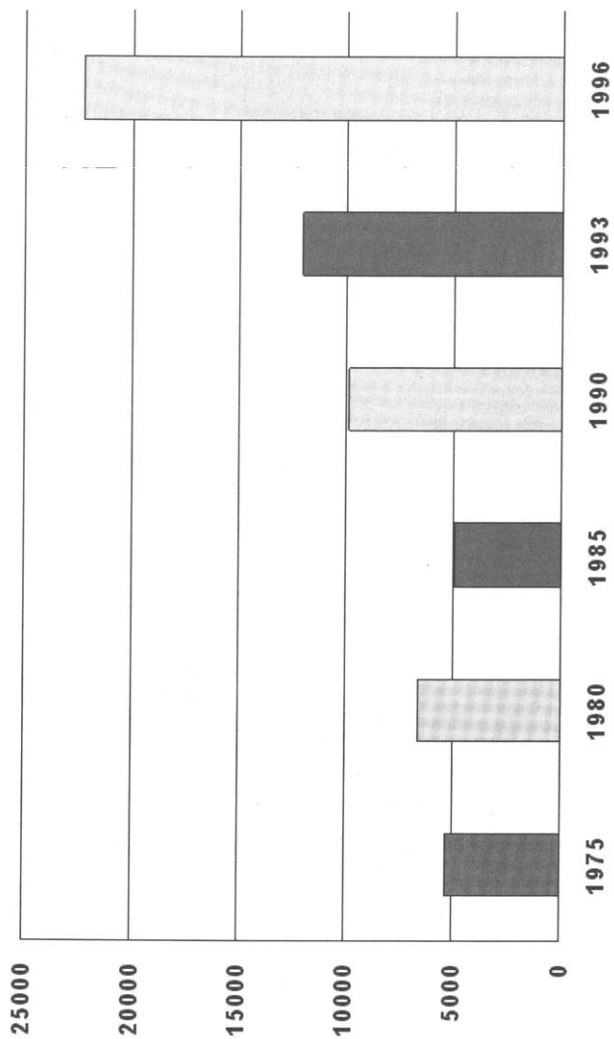


Figure 1.

- respond to the increased demand for access;
- provide the service in a timely and cost effective manner; and
- empower patrons (Association of Research Libraries, 1994b).

Two questions asked of the staff in the redesign process were: How can barriers be removed to make it easier for the patron to request materials? and How can internal procedures be streamlined?

Rather than focusing only on the processing of requests, the staff was asked to review interlibrary loan procedures from the point-of-view of both the external and internal customer. The first project implemented in the redesign effort, and the one that forms the basis for this discussion is the introduction of unmediated patron borrowing from the other forty-eight Illinois libraries that share a common circulation system. While other projects were also implemented successfully, including the use of the interlibrary loan component in FirstSearch and the in-house development of interlibrary loan Web-based forms, the use of ILLINET Online (IO) as a source for unmediated borrowing serves as the cornerstone for the redesign effort.

PATRON-INITIATED BORROWING

ILLINET Online serves as the statewide online catalog for over 800 Illinois libraries that subscribe to OCLC's cataloging services. It contains over 10 million bibliographic records representing materials held by those 800 libraries and serves as the online catalog for the state of Illinois. It also serves as a circulation system for forty-nine Illinois libraries that constitute the Illinois Library Computer Systems Organization (ILCSO). This group includes all of the state-supported universities in Illinois, several private universities and colleges, five community colleges, a state-supported high school for gifted students in mathematics and the sciences, and the Illinois State Library. The IO circulation module also serves as an interlibrary loan system for ILCSO members, Illinois' twelve regional library systems, and other libraries holding ILLINET membership. IO serves as a central component of the state's resource sharing initiative. In 1995, over 600,000 interlibrary loan transactions took place over IO.

While all ILCSO members have the option of letting their patrons use Illinet Online as a source of unmediated borrowing, only five libraries have elected to invoke this option. SIUC implemented the unmediated borrowing option in fall 1993. The use of this service clearly supports three of the objectives of the NAILDD "Overview and Vision Statement" to enable libraries to:

- Search a variety of local and remote catalogs.
- Transfer a citation into an electronic request or order.
- Direct a request or order to . . . a local or remote library ILL/document delivery department. (Association of Research Libraries, 1994b, p. 1)

This service allows patrons to borrow materials from other ILCSO libraries on a "self-serve" basis. Patrons are free to select the library from which to borrow and to check out materials from that library's circulating collection unassisted by library staff. However, with this freedom comes responsibility. Since library staff have not been involved in placing the request, the patron must assume responsibility for monitoring the request's progress and paying any fines or processing fees incurred if the item is not returned in a timely manner.

When the service was implemented in 1993, the library mounted a publicity campaign to encourage its patrons to try this new service. Workshops, handouts, and notices in the university's newspaper announced the introduction of the service. Word-of-mouth and encouragement from library staff to try the service also contributed to its acceptance. While a workshop dedicated exclusively to the self-serve feature is no longer offered, it is one component of the "Interlibrary Loan Workshop" that is offered regularly as part of SIUC's Library Affairs Seminar Series.

Patrons may access ILLINET Online on computers located in SIUC's Morris Library and from personal computers that have a telnet connection in their home, office, or dorm room. Anyone affiliated with SIUC, including students, faculty, and staff, can self-charge, renew, or recall items from any of the member libraries through an easy-to-use pop-up box that facilitates the procedure. SIUC library's Web page provides a link to IO and instructions on how to charge items through IO. If a patron submits a paper ILL request or a Web-based ILL form for an item located in another ILCSO library, an Access Services staff member charges the item to the patron's identification number, notifies the patron of the charge, and sends a brochure explaining the self-charge option.

Once a charge is initiated, the lending library receives a computer-generated page slip indicating that the item has been requested for an individual at a remote site. The library then pages the item and sends it, through the statewide delivery system, to the borrower's home library. If the item cannot be provided, the transaction is discharged, and notification is sent to the patron's home library that the item will not be sent.

Since ILLINET Online does not generate notification letters, the SIUC staff developed a program tied to its ILLWeb Program that produces a notification letter and a book band. This program tracks all borrowing requests and serves as a record of items received from other ILCSO libraries.

This service has had a significant impact on the number of interlibrary loan transactions processed by Morris Library's Access Services staff (see Figure 2). In 1993, Morris Library borrowed 3,048 returnables from other ILCSO libraries. That number rose to 6,430 returnables in fiscal year 1994, an increase of 111 percent. Total filled requests also rose 50 percent during that time period. The number of items self-charged increased again in fiscal year 1995 but not to the extent that it had previously.

This time the increase was by 38 percent and, by fiscal year 1996, the increase had slowed significantly to 19 percent, with 10,642 returnables received from ILCSO libraries. However, one must note that the number of returnables borrowed from ILCSO libraries in 1996 exceeds the total number of requests filled in 1993 by 393 items. Furthermore, the total number of items borrowed (returnables and non-returnables) rose 125 percent between 1993 and 1996. This increase was, of course, fueled by the number of self-serve requests generated by SIUC patrons.

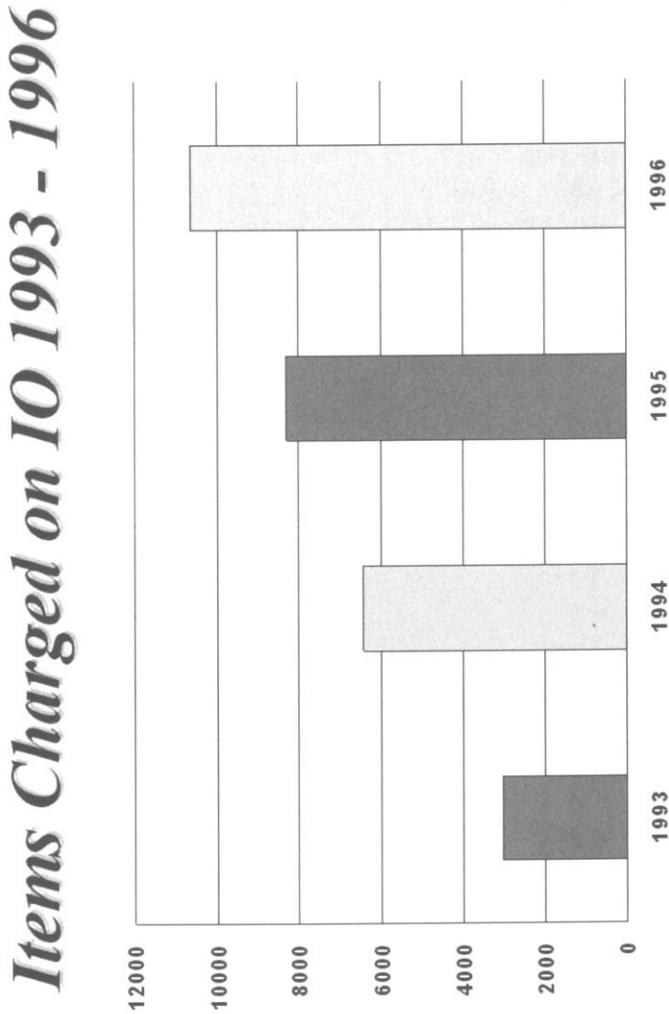


Figure 2.

OTHER REDESIGN EFFORTS

Two other patron-directed projects that were initiated in response to the NALDD Project and the library's emphasis on better service to its patrons also contributed to the increase in ILL activity. OCLC's FirstSearch ILL option was activated in Fall 1994. While the requests received by this option are few when compared to items directly charged by Morris Library patrons, it does provide the option of initiating a request from a catalog and sending it directly to Morris Library's Access Services Department for processing. This speeds the submission of requests and assures Interlibrary Loan staff that they are working with accurate bibliographic data.

The library also initiated a project called Interlibrary Loan on the Web in fall 1994. It allows patrons who have access to a personal computer and a Web browser to submit interlibrary loan requests from any location day or night. This program began initially as an e-mail messaging system but has been revised to include Web forms that can be easily edited and transmitted to OCLC's ILL subsystem.

STAFFING ISSUES

How did the increase in filled requests impact staffing? In 1993, borrowing staff in the interlibrary loan unit consisted of one librarian, two FTE paraprofessionals, and seventy-five hours of student help. At that time, divisional librarians did the preliminary processing of requests, and the ILL librarian reviewed and approved each request before it was sent. By 1996, three years after the introduction of the self-serve option, the number of staff in borrowing had changed significantly. It now consists of 3.5 FTE paraprofessionals and 103 hours of student help (including 50 hours of graduate assistant help). The Assistant Access Services Librarian and librarians in the five divisional libraries now devote fewer hours to the ILL process. It is clear that the increase in self-serve interlibrary loans has increased the number of items borrowed, but it is also clear that the self-serve option does not require the extensive amount of professional time required previously to process requests. The emphasis on questioning procedures, streamlining operations, and reallocating resources has resulted in an operation that requires less professional staff time but results in better service. It is the question of better service that prompted the authors to study turnaround time as it applied to the various parts of its operation.

THE STUDY

What was the turnaround time for patron-initiated interlibrary loans? This question of course has many variables:

- Which library did the patron select as the lending library?

- What type of material was requested?
- Was the request ever filled?

Since the ILLINET Online system is a circulation module of an OPAC, it does not provide the statistics that could have answered these questions. However, we are able to determine the length of time it takes to fill a request once a patron has initiated it. We can also determine what types of monographic formats are being charged directly (nonreturnables cannot be requested through the online catalog). The study began on August 20, 1996, and concluded on December 24, 1996, the course of one semester. Each interlibrary loan request that was filled during that time period was counted and classified according to the following criteria:

- method of submission;
- format; and
- turnaround time.

This process was done easily for the requests submitted through FirstSearch, the Web form, and cards. Items received as the result of patron-initiated requests were considered submitted on the day the circulation record showed that the item was charged. A total of 7,325 returnables were received during the test period including 5,464 items received from ILC SO libraries as a result of the self-serve option (see Figure 3).

Percentage of Borrows Self-charge vs. Traditional

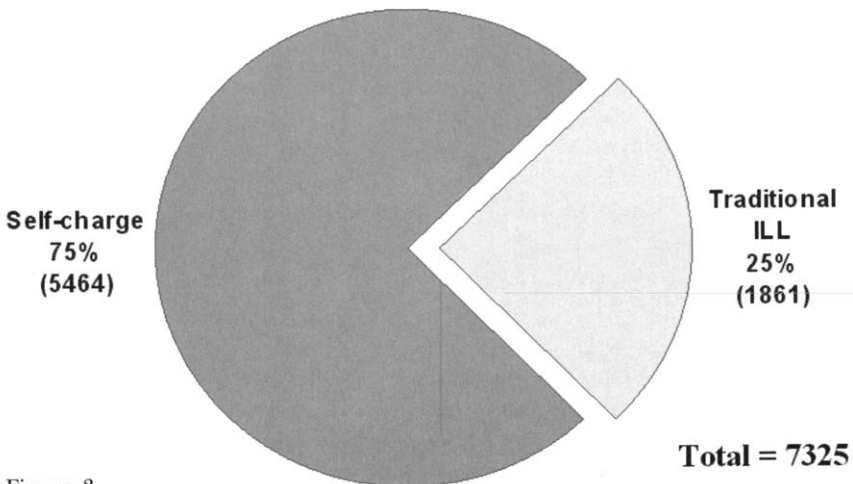


Figure 3.

The data clearly show that items received through patron-initiated requests were received more quickly than items requested through typical interlibrary loan methods. Patrons who direct charged items received their materials in an average of 8.4 days. Patrons who submitted the request through the Web, card, or through FirstSearch had to wait closer to three weeks for their materials (see Figure 4).

PATRON SATISFACTION

A second part of the study was a survey of patrons who charged their own interlibrary loan materials during a three-week period. A brief questionnaire was distributed to 200 patrons when they picked up interlibrary loans at the service desk. Forty surveys were returned. Despite the small return, the results give an indication of the use of the self-charge feature and patron satisfaction. The questions inquired about the location of the computer used to request materials (library, home, or office), frequency

Turnaround Time

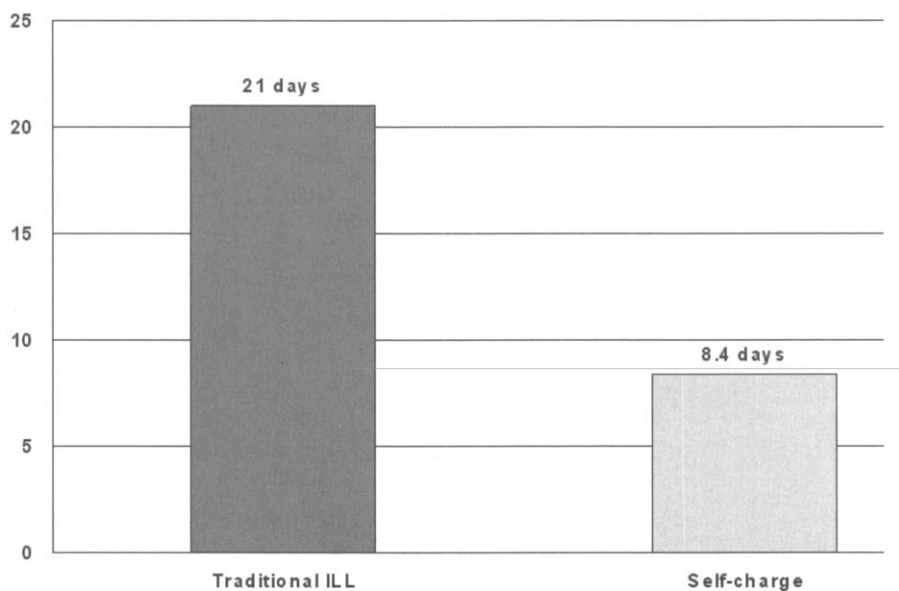


Figure 4.

of requests, and satisfaction with turnaround time, notification, appropriateness of the materials received, and user-friendliness of the system. A final question provided an opportunity for comments. Of those responding, 53 percent indicated that they used computers in the library to charge materials, leaving the other 47 percent of the respondents divided about equally between home use (25 percent) and office use (22 percent) (see Figure 5). The significance of these data is the fact that almost half of the respondents using the self-serve interlibrary loan service do their work someplace other than the library.

A question concerning frequency of use indicates a group of long-term consistent users. Of the total respondents, 83 percent indicated that they use ILLINET Online to acquire materials from other libraries at least once a week. Another 12 percent indicated that they use it once a month, while only 5 percent indicated that this was a first-time use (see Figure 6).

In general, patron satisfaction was high. Of those responding, 75 percent indicated that they received the requested materials in an acceptable period of time (see Figure 7); 95 percent indicated that they were

Where Transactions Occurred

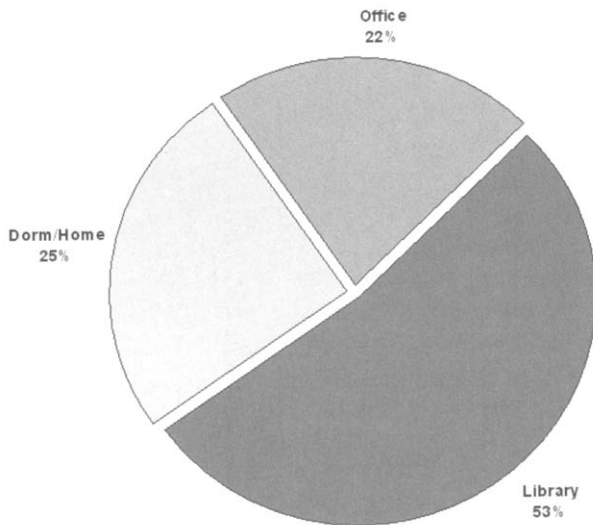


Figure 5.

Frequency of Use

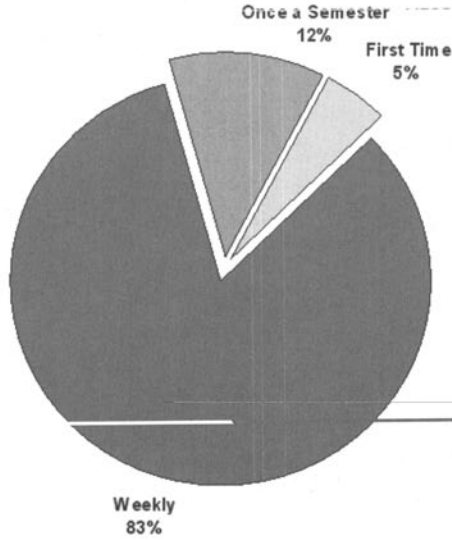


Figure 6.

Turnaround Time

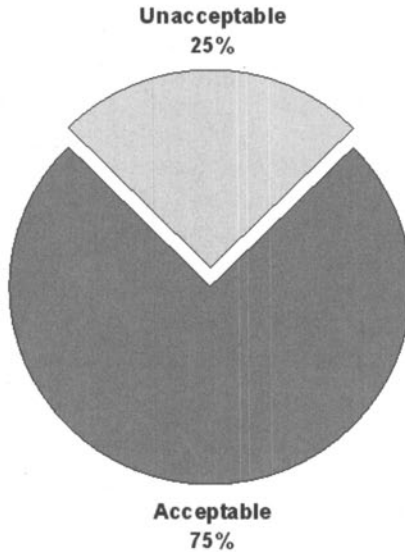


Figure 7.

Notification

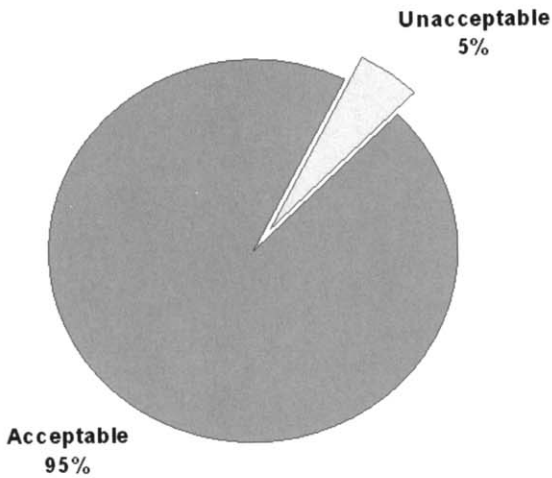


Figure 8.

Accuracy

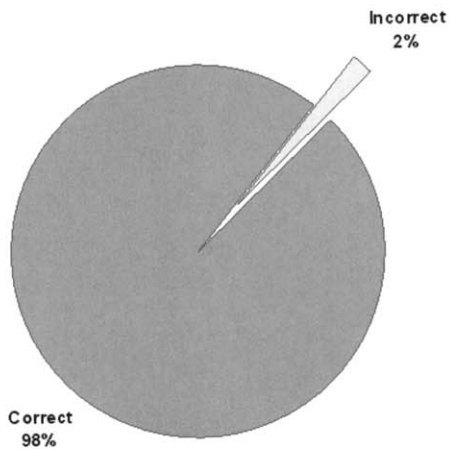


Figure 9.

notified promptly of its arrival (see Figure 8); and the correct item was received 98 percent of the time (see Figure 9). Everyone (100 percent of the respondents) agreed that the system was user-friendly and easy to use.

CONCLUSION

While this survey was directed toward a subset of patrons, it is important to note that they indicate overwhelmingly that they are satisfied with initiating their own interlibrary loans. In fact the popularity of this service is clear from the number of items borrowed and the steady increase in borrowing as patrons learn the advantages of self-serve interlibrary loan. More importantly, by cutting out the middle person, we have empowered the user.

A benefit to the library is the reduction in time required of the Assistant Access Services Librarian in processing routine requests. More time can now be devoted to planning, review, and other management responsibilities and to searching of problematic interlibrary loan requests.

As user expectations change, individuals want more materials in a more timely manner and perceive that they can get what they want more quickly by searching and charging what they want for themselves. The self-charge option helps remove many of the barriers, questions, and negative perceptions that pervaded interlibrary loan arenas for many years. Optimized technology, system interoperability, and locally developed programs have heightened patron awareness of available resources. By strengthening our existing alliances, as with ILLINET Online, ILCSO, and BTP, and by redesigning our interlibrary loan operations, we can provide better access to the resources that our patrons need.

NOTE

- ¹ ILLINET is a network of 800 Illinois OCLC-based libraries that share a statewide online catalog, ILLINET Online. ILCSO is a group of forty-nine libraries that use ILLINET Online for local circulation and interlibrary loan operations. BTP is a group of eighteen Midwestern libraries that are committed to sharing resources.

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