Accentuate the Positive

Bernhardt, Beth R., Hinds, Leah H., Strauch, Katina P.

Published by Purdue University Press

Bernhardt, Beth R., et al.
Purdue University Press, 2013.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/66983.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/66983

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2369615
Positive Feedback: Using Interlibrary Loan Data to Enhance Collections and Collection Development Practices: Part 2

Forrest Link, Acquisitions Librarian, The College of New Jersey

Abstract

At the College of New Jersey, researchers examined the relationship between books borrowed and books subsequently bought, likewise looking to refresh the dialogue between selectors and patrons. Researchers sought to answer two fundamental questions: What do ILL book requests and circulation data tell us about our collection and our patron needs? Can these data help us shape our collection development policies to better serve our patrons? To answer these questions, several comparative analyses were completed using recent ILL and circulation data to determine the effectiveness of purchasing methods and to examine differences in usage patterns and subject interests among undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty.

Introduction

One of the more underappreciated benefits of the integrated library systems used by most academic libraries today is their ability to maintain usage data. These data (including purchasing records, circulation transactions, and interlibrary loan requests) can offer sometimes startling insights into how well—or poorly—a library’s collection is meeting user needs. Additionally, sharing these data among work groups can have an impact upon future collection decisions by providing selectors with actual user feedback.

This study of The College of New Jersey (TCNJ) Library, conducted with the help and guidance of Cathy Weng, Head of Cataloging, and Yuji Tosaka, Cataloging/Metadata Librarian, sets out to investigate how well the book purchases made by TCNJ Library have met our user needs. It does this through a review and analysis of user data collected from our Voyager ILS comparing our collection patterns to circulation records and ILL requests. It seeks to answer to questions: What do ILL book requests and circulation data tell us about our collection and patron needs? And how can an analysis of ILL data inform our collection development decisions?

The study was originally inspired by a presentation by Cornell University Library’s Richard Entlich at the 2011 Charleston Conference where Entlich outlined some of his approaches to data mining the Voyager ILS to inform collection strategy. It was further propelled by the hiring of a new Access Services/ILL Librarian at TCNJ, Bethany Sewell, who brought to the Library a keen interest in pursuing better ways to serve our ILL clientele and in fostering cross-departmental communication.

Preliminary Assumptions

For the purposes of this study, it was assumed that user needs are represented by titles circulated from the Library’s collection and by titles not owned but borrowed via ILL. Thus, by identifying circulated titles, it was assumed that these books met our user needs. Likewise, it was assumed that filled ILL book requests denoted user needs unmet by our collection.

Data Collection and Scope

Using Access reports, our Cataloging Librarian worked with 4 years of Voyager data (July 2008–June 2012) to extract a list of books purchased within the study period. He also collected data on the circulation of these titles during the study period. Finally, he assembled a list of books borrowed through ILL during the study period.

Our Cataloging/Metadata Librarian devised the scope of data collection which included all transactions for books circulated or borrowed via ILL having an imprint date of 2007 onward. LC classes A, C, S, U, and V were eliminated because of very low acquisition rates. Although the baseline for the study was 4 years of acquisitions, ILL, and circulation data, fiscal year (FY) 2008 to
2011, we included 2007 imprints because we were still buying some in FY 2008 and would have just begun to circulate and make ILL requests for lending 2007 imprints in the following year. We wanted to have an apples-to-apples comparison by examining circulation and ILL requests for the post-2007 imprints. The final data set (Figure 1) represented 82% of the books purchased and 30% of the books obtained via ILL during the study period.

**Initial Findings**

Taking the list of acquired books and breaking them down by LC class, we discovered that TCNJ Library purchased most heavily in the H and P LC classes. Twenty-one percent of the titles purchased were in class H and 14% in class P. Not surprisingly, these two classes also accounted for our largest percentages of circulated titles, 23% and 14%, respectively, of titles circulated.

The findings become quite interesting when ILL records are compared to acquisitions. Fifteen percent of the unique titles borrowed were in class B, 14% in class H, and 24% in class P. These three classes accounted for over 50% of our ILL borrowing.

**Another Way of Looking at the Data**

These early findings led to a reconsideration of just what constitutes user need. If library lending in toto (titles coming both from the library collection and ILL) equals user need being met, then it can be suggested that the part of this total lending coming from ILL equals user need unmet by the collection. Thus, a close examination of ILL borrowing might reveal defects in our collection strategy.

Accordingly, two figures were created to highlight by LC class what part of total book lending was accounted for by ILL. The first figure utilized figures for overall lending numbers, taking into account sometimes multiple loans of the same title (Figure 2). The second figure accounted for unique title lending (Figure 3).

---

**Data Set**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acquired Books:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Books Acquired 2008-2012</td>
<td>16,575</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007 and later imprint</td>
<td>13,571</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ILL:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books Borrowed</td>
<td>5,636</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007 and later imprint minus LC class A,C,S,U,V</td>
<td>1,682</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unique Titles 2007 and later imprint minus LC class A,C,S,U,V</td>
<td>1,483</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circulation:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books Circulated</td>
<td>127,374</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unique Titles Circulated</td>
<td>60,273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total books loaned 2007 and later imprint minus LC class A,C,S,U,V</td>
<td>10,269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unique titles 2007 and later imprint minus LC class A,C,S,U,V</td>
<td>5,043</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 1. Data Set*
Strikingly, these figures indicate very high ILL usage in classes B and P, where approximately 35% of our total lending originated as ILL.

**But What Do the Data Tell Us?**

Looking at these data, we began to wonder if we really did have deficiencies in our collection or if the high number of “P”s in particular might simply indicate a larger universe of titles in languages and literature which our collection could never hope to adequately fill. And we wondered about all of the “T”s. Was there a problem, or were we looking at the “Long Tail”?

Chris Anderson, in an article in Wired Magazine and in his subsequent book, coined the term “Long Tail” to describe changes wrought by technological improvements in the discovery and distribution of products. In concrete terms, the term describes how demand for a book, for example, can be driven by improved visibility on
websites like Amazon either through broadening the database or even through user recommendations. This idea has subsequently been applied to library collection development and circulation, effectively updating the old 80/20 rule. So, as a result of better library discovery tools, patrons are exposed to much more than just the local collection. This, along with increasingly sophisticated library lending networks, has driven up the use of ILL.

The Lightbulb

We decided that a closer look at the ILL records themselves might help us answer the question. The T class gave us some clues.

During the study period, we borrowed 66 titles in the T class, technology. Thirty-two or 48% of these titles, it turned out, were directly related to knitting. TCNJ does not teach fashion design or textile work. Evidently, these books were borrowed by avid hobbyists.

Early Conclusions

It would appear that the study began with some inaccurate assumptions. All user need is not necessarily equal when judged by the mission of the library. That is, if an academic library is buying and borrowing books to meet user need, perhaps buying decisions should be based on definable user profiles. The question then becomes not “What should we buy?” or “Should we be buying (within reason) everything that is requested by our patrons on ILL?” but, simply, “Should we buy?” We cannot pre-judge the usefulness of a book without expert mediation by selectors.

Post-Study Questions

This study has led to the consideration of broader questions for future consideration: What constitutes a good academic collection? Should ILL requests continue to be seen as user needs or as part of the “Long Tail?” If ILL requests represent more than just the “Long Tail,” should the library re-examine its collection development policy?