

Academic Library Web Sites as a Source of Interlibrary Loan Lending Information

A Survey of Four- and Five-Year Colleges and Universities

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We surveyed library Web sites of four- and five-year colleges and universities to determine the extent to which interlibrary loan (ILL) information is provided to users not affiliated with the institution, specifically ILL staff at other colleges trying to find lending policies, contact information, and holdings.

The Web has penetrated academia to such an extent that we are now surprised when a college lacks a Web site. Many institutions now consider their Web sites to be a major means of communicating with constituencies in and out of the institution. This is also true for academic libraries whose Web sites are an effective way to provide remote services and electronic database access. The majority of academic libraries have Web sites, which usually emphasize the services available to faculty and students and offer descriptions about the libraries.

Library Web sites provide information to visitors not affiliated with the college. Colleagues at other libraries seek information on library programs, services, and policies, and with its availability of information, the Web has become a preferred means of obtaining that information. In the area of ILL, librarians have traditionally consulted a variety of sources to find the lending policies and procedures of other libraries, including such tools as the Name-Address Directory (NAD) on the OCLC Online Computer Library Center, the *Interlibrary Loan Policies Directory* (Morris 1999), or policy directories specific to a particular consortium. Our goal in this survey is to determine how useful library Web sites are as a source of ILL policy, contact, and holdings information.

This issue is important for two reasons. The use and acceptance of the Web as a multifaceted source of institutional information is rapidly changing how people in different institutions communicate. Academic libraries are expanding their Web sites to carry information that was available only in print five years ago. Second, while librarians currently use a variety of printed and online tools to ascertain ILL policies and procedures, the Web offers potential convenience and accessibility worth investigating. ILL staff can call the lending institutions to determine lending policies, but this can be time consuming and disruptive for both parties. Certainly the use of OCLC's NAD is common, but not all libraries use OCLC, nor is OCLC access always readily available to an ILL staff member—

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Manuscript received February 11, 2000; accepted for publication March 23, 2000.

when an ILL librarian is on the reference desk, for example. Printed directories, such as Morris (1999), are an option, but some libraries do not have entries in this directory, and not all libraries have this source either. Library consortia often have ILL policy directories, but this information is not readily available to those outside the consortium. Library acquisition, cataloging, and collection development departments have developed informational Web sites to assist in their work, and such sites might be useful in support of ILL activities.

Literature Review

Surveys of library Web sites in the literature primarily fall into two categories: articles in which technical aspects of Web design are examined, and articles in which the content of sites is analyzed. With regard to technical aspects, King (1998) surveyed the library Web sites of libraries in the Association of Research Libraries and focused on design issues, such as the use of backgrounds and document headers. Stover and Zink (1996) examined the physical layout of library Web sites and found that they did not adhere to fundamental design guidelines. Cohen and Still (1999) compared the content of library Web sites at research universities and two-year colleges. They identified the core elements common to the sites studied, such as contact information, descriptions of services, and links to search engines. More recently, Agingu (2000) studied the content of library Web sites at historically black colleges and universities to determine their usefulness as tools for disseminating information about the library and for providing services to its primary users on campus.

Many of these authors mentioned content that related to ILL, but they tended to focus on ILL as a service to the institutions' patrons. We determined that no previous research exists on ILL content from the perspective of ILL staff from another institution.

Research Questions

The purpose of the survey was to learn how useful library Web sites might be to ILL staff from other institutions looking for ILL information. We defined three categories of content that represent the kinds of information that library staff from borrowing libraries would find relevant. They are:

1. ILL Policies and Procedures: Is it possible to determine charges, loan types, loan lengths, etc.?
2. Contact Information: Can Web users find contact names, phone numbers, fax numbers, e-mail addresses, and postal addresses?

3. Book and Journal Holdings: Is it possible to determine whether a library owns a book or journal?

Method

During June and July 1999, we surveyed 300 college and university Web sites. We randomly selected the sample from a list of institutions of higher education from the 15th edition of *American Universities and Colleges* (American Council on Education 1997), a comprehensive directory of more than 1,900 American institutions offering bachelor's degrees or higher, which lists colleges and universities alphabetically. The sample was limited to American colleges whose highest degree offered is a bachelor's or master's degree. After we excluded law schools, medical schools, and doctorate-granting institutions from the population, 1,584 institutions remained. We selected every sixth college or university from this list.

We focused on bachelor's- and master's-granting institutions for the following reasons. First, these institutions are the most numerous institution of higher education in the United States. Second, most bachelor's- and master's-granting institutions have a main library, while doctorate-granting institutions have multiple libraries on campus. A study of these doctorate-granting institutions would require a different method from the one we employed.

Once we obtained the sample, we checked the Web for the existence of a site for the college. If no Web site could be found, the college was discarded from the sample and replaced by another institution. Fewer than 20 colleges were removed from the sample for this reason. We did not, however, remove a college from the sample if there was a college Web site but no *library* Web site. We were interested in determining how likely it was that a visitor would find a library Web site if the college, in fact, had a Web site. It is possible that a college might not have a Web site, but that the library maintains a site with a commercial Internet service provider or otherwise separate from the institution. We did not think this was likely to be a significant number and did not go in search of such Web sites.

From the list of institutions with sites, we then looked for library Web sites. Some colleges had more than one library. When presented with more than one library to choose from, we chose the main library. When presented with more than one choice at a site, we selected the Web site of the library whose collection appeared to represent the general collections. We did not select libraries whose collections represented a specific discipline or format, such as music, chemistry, law, or media. Because we were surveying non-doctorate-granting institutions, most of which had small to moderate-sized enrollments, this rarely presented a problem. The median enrollment of the sample was 2,188 students.

Ease of Finding Library Web Sites

We examined how easy it is to find library Web sites. In order for library Web sites to be worth consulting for ILL information, these sites must be fairly easy to locate. The first route we considered when trying to reach another library's Web site was to go to the college's page and find a link to its library. The URLs for many college Web sites are intuitive; for example, the URL for Neumann College's Web site is www.neumann.edu. While these instances are common, ILL staff cannot rely completely on the presence of straightforward URL addresses. Fortunately, there are several college Web site directories on the Internet, including Allaboutcolleges.com and Yahoo!'s college directory. These direct users to the main Web page of a college, so finding the library Web page always involves a second step. There are library directories, such as Vanderbilt University's Lib-Web-Cats (<http://staffweb.library.vanderbilt.edu/Breeding/libwebcats.html>), which take the user directly to the library's Web site, thus eliminating that second step when access is via the college Web site. In general, we did not find it difficult to locate college Web sites using these various directories.

Once at the college or university Web site, we found that 240 (80%) of the institutions had library Web sites. We examined these institutional Web sites to find whether and how the library Web sites were linked to the main or home page of the college. Not every college had a link from its main page to the library. Of the 240 colleges with library Web sites, 151 (62.9%) had a link from the main page to the library Web site. The remaining 89 (37.1%) did not have this direct link to the library but did have a link from a category on the institutional main page, usually "academics" or variations thereof, to the library Web site. We concluded that college Web sites were easy to find and subsequent navigation to their respective library Web sites was also straightforward.

Another phenomenon we observed is what we shall refer to as the "omnipresent series of links" on many Web sites. This refers to a sidebar, extra frame, etc., which appears on every page within that Web site. The intention is to ease navigation and provide a consistent avenue to important pages on the site. We discovered that of the 240 colleges with library Web sites, 85 (35%) had such links on their sites. Of the 85 colleges with this feature on their Web site, 38 (44.7%) placed a link to the library Web site in this group of links.

ILL Policies and Procedures

Many library Web sites contain information on borrowing materials from other libraries for campus students and faculty. Such policies include basic information such as eligibility, renewals, and late fees. These are certainly of great value

to campus users, but ILL staff from other libraries are concerned with finding policies and procedures regarding lending and borrowing between libraries. They want to know what materials the library will lend, what the library's renewal policy is, and whether there are charges for lending.

In our sample of 240 library Web sites, only 8 library Web sites (3.3%) contained ILL policy and procedure information relevant to ILL staff in other libraries. Six of these libraries included this information amidst their policies for their students and faculty, while two had a separate page devoted to lending policies.

Contact Information

A common reason to visit any organization's Web site is to find contact information for people. We found that 128 (53.3%) library Web sites offered the name of a person in the ILL department, although a telephone number or e-mail address of that person was not always provided. Overall, 131 (54.6%) of libraries provided an e-mail address of a person identified with ILL or a generic departmental e-mail address, in some cases without a person's name explicitly stated. Department or staff telephone numbers were provided by 129 (53.8%). We counted only those e-mail addresses and telephone numbers that were associated with ILL activities. We recognize that library addresses and telephone numbers can provide access to ILL departments but we were looking for a direct listing. Also, telephone numbers without area codes were not counted as valid telephone numbers. Likewise, extensions with no readily available three-digit prefix were not counted as valid telephone numbers. If we could find both the area code and the three-digit prefix anywhere on the library Web site, we did indeed count it as a complete telephone number, although its components were separated. We were surprised at how much time we had to spend hunting for area codes and three-digit prefixes.

We were less strict with fax numbers and postal addresses. We could not assume that every library's ILL department had its own fax machine. Therefore, we counted any library that provided a library fax number with an area code, even if the number was not explicitly associated with ILL and assumed that a fax sent to a general library number would be delivered to the ILL department. The same principle should apply to postal addresses. We did not insist that a postal address be associated with ILL, but counted as valid those library Web sites that contained a complete postal address anywhere on the site. Undoubtedly, an envelope marked "Attn: ILL department" delivered to a general library address will be sent to that department. We found that 68 (28.3%) of library Web sites provided a fax number and 100 (41.7%) provided their full postal address.

Ariel (an electronic ILL document delivery tool offered by the Research Libraries Group) addresses were virtually nonexistent, although we cannot determine how meaningful this is because we do not know how many of these libraries use Ariel.

Access to Book and Journal Holdings

We found that 180 (75.0%) library Web sites had links to online catalogs. We only counted online catalogs that were readily available to remote users. If the online catalog was protected by a password and the library Web site did not offer that password, we did not count it.

ILL librarians look for two types of information in online catalogs: book holdings and periodical holdings. Online catalogs contain complete book holdings that include title and volume holdings. Most books are single volumes or multiple volumes issued together, but in any case, the general practice among libraries is to add book volumes to the record on arrival. Regarding periodicals, 165 (68.8%) of the 180 library Web sites with online catalogs provided searchable periodical titles and holdings either in the online catalog or in a periodical list posted on a Web page separate from the online catalog. The majority of libraries listed periodical title and volume holdings in the online catalog. In addition, we found that 37 (15.4%) of libraries with Web sites provided a page that listed periodical titles owned by the library. Twenty-four (10.0%) of the libraries offered periodical holdings both in the online catalog and in a separate list on a Web page.

Discussion and Recommendations

Overall, the demonstrated usefulness of library Web sites as sources of ILL information is variable with the most usefulness seen in response to information on library book and periodical holdings. Eighty percent of libraries in this study had Web sites and 75% of the Web sites had direct links to the library's online catalog. Thus, book holdings information was easy to locate and readily available. Approximately two-thirds of the time (68.8%), periodical holdings were also available.

However, the library Web sites were surprisingly deficient regarding the amount of contact information that was available for the ILL department. Less than half of the library Web sites offered postal addresses anywhere on their sites. Other research indicates that this not just a deficiency of four- and five-year college library Web sites. Cohen and Still (1999) found that only 46% of two-year colleges and 53% of Ph.D.-granting institutions provided postal addresses on the library main Web page. We were able to find com-

plete phone numbers, with area codes, only about half of the time. Fax numbers were rare. Plus, we often had to sift through an entire Web site to find contact information. Names of ILL staff were only provided about half of the time, a deficiency that seems easy to correct and should be a priority for ILL departments. Although the assumption that local users will readily travel to the library or communicate via e-mail, it also seems reasonable to assume that contact information for phone and address would be useful to on-campus library patrons as well.

On the question of finding ILL lending policies and procedures on the Web sites of four- and five-year college libraries, there is not much information available. Merely 3.3% of these libraries provide policy information on what the library will lend or not lend to external borrowers. While the absence of complete contact information might be a matter of oversight, the absence of ILL lending information makes it clear that the intended audience is the primary local clientele. ILL librarians are not designing Web sites for outside users.

We found in our sample that library Web sites of four- and five-year colleges and universities are not good sources of ILL policy, procedure, and contact information, but might be worth visiting for book and periodical holdings. ILL workflows are unlikely to change to include searching library Web sites.

The following recommendations are designed to increase the potential usefulness of library Web sites for ILL policy and contact information. Libraries should post the following lending policy information on their Web sites:

- The materials a library is willing to lend, and under what circumstances. For example, a library should indicate whether it will lend bound periodicals or microfilm. A library should indicate whether lending is contingent upon consortium membership. A library should indicate whether it will lend these.
- The services the library will supply if the library will not lend a certain medium of material. For example, libraries should indicate whether they will photocopy articles from microfilm if they will not lend the microfilm itself.
- Any charges associated with the service.

With the addition of consistent contact, holdings, and lending policy information on library Web sites, we believe that library Web sites could easily become a viable place for ILL staff to find ILL information. Such a development is needed given the rapid increase in the use of Web-based information not only by library users but also by library staff. While the usual resources are clearly needed and used, a Web site has the potential to expand access at low cost. This is an easy matter to accomplish. ILL staff needs to inform

library Web masters of information to link to or post. Our survey did not extend to doctorate-granting institution libraries and it is unknown to what extent ILL policy and contact information is included on their Web sites.

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