

# Self-Service Holds in Libraries

## *Is Patron Privacy Being Sacrificed for Patron Convenience?*

*The increased use of self service holds, a holds system where a patron is notified that a requested book has arrived and the patron retrieves it from a publicly accessible holds shelf without assistance from library staff, raises new questions about user privacy. In response to concerns about possible violations of patron confidentiality with this practice, in 2011 ALA passed a Resolution to Protect Library User Confidentiality in Self-Service Hold Practices. Michigan libraries were surveyed to determine the number that use self-service holds; why or why not they choose to implement them, and, if they did, what methods they used to protect the privacy of their patrons. The results show that between 15% and 27% of Michigan libraries currently use self-service holds and more libraries plan to implement them in the future. The survey responses suggest that methods employed to protect patron privacy are not sustainable, not cost effective, or simply not effective. The identity of the requesting patron of 85% of the items placed on self-service holds shelves in responding libraries can still be discerned by other patrons.*

**W**hen the USA Patriot Act was passed six weeks after September 11, 2001,<sup>1</sup> librarians were at the forefront of the battle for the privacy

rights it threatened. Over the span of three years, the American Library Association (ALA) issued three resolutions addressing issues of privacy violations within this Act, one in 2003, one in 2005, and then one in 2006. The increased use of self-service holds, a holds system where a patron is notified that a requested book has arrived and the patron retrieves it from a publicly accessible holds shelf without assistance from library staff, raises new questions about user privacy.

In response to the emerging practice of self-service hold shelves, ALA passed a *Resolution to Protect Library User Confidentiality in Self-Service Hold Practices*.<sup>2</sup> It states that “U.S. Courts have ruled that when an individual’s personal data is shared with a third party or the public, the individual no longer has an expectation of privacy in that data” and that “keeping a library user’s personally identifiable information and circulation record confidential is essential for preserving the library user’s expectation of privacy in his or her reading history.”<sup>3</sup> As a result, the resolution calls on libraries that have implemented self-service holds to adopt practices that prevent disclosure of “the library user’s personally identifiable information in connection with the materials being borrowed.”<sup>4</sup> The very fact

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that this resolution exists is evidence that there are privacy concerns in the implementation of self-service holds.

With a self-service hold system, patrons are notified when a book they have requested has arrived and the patron then retrieves it from a publicly accessible hold shelf at the library and checks it out either at a self-service check-out kiosk or at the staffed library circulation desk. Self-service pick up of library materials put on hold is just one of a number of new library services that have been implemented as libraries seek to better serve their patrons and to make wise allocations of their resources. As the idea of “self-service” has gained traction in recent years, libraries have begun to offer self-service options for accessing a range of library services. Self-service check out of books and the use of on-line catalogs and databases are just a few examples of ways that patrons can take advantage of library services without the intermediation of a library staff member. These services can be viewed as part of the trend towards “user-centered services,”<sup>5</sup> a level of convenience and service now expected by patrons who are used to instant results and services tailored to their individual needs.<sup>6</sup>

On-line catalogs and the movement towards linking of catalogs among regional and state-wide consortia of libraries have allowed patrons to be put on a waiting list for books at their home libraries, or to request books from other libraries and have the books delivered to the library that is most convenient for them. The technological advances that led to a patron-driven hold system provided a platform for the next step, allowing patrons to not only request materials without librarian help, but to also pick them up and check them out of the library without the need for assistance by staff members.

Although the practice of self-service holds appears to meet the goals of both efficiency and patron convenience, it raises serious issues relating to patron privacy. Some libraries attempt to limit the identifying information attached to books held on openly accessible shelves, but many display the books, with the names of the people who have requested them, on shelves that can be viewed by anyone who comes into the library.

While some librarians may advocate the use of self-service hold shelves as a service to patrons, there does not seem to be any serious dispute among librarians that the practice of placing a book on an open shelf of the library with a patron's name on it has privacy implications. When books are kept on self-service hold shelves in such a way that anyone who chooses to peruse the hold shelves (including someone who may simply be looking for a requested item) can match the title of the book with the name of the person who requested the book, there is a disclosure of private information relating to a patron. It is the equivalent of leaving copies of patrons' circulation records in the open where anyone can view them. This practice appears to violate one of the basic tenets of patron privacy established by both state laws and by library association ethical guidelines, namely that the library must keep its circulation records confidential and must ensure that there is no outside access to an individual patron's circulation records.

Although the intrusion on patron privacy resulting from placing patron materials on open hold shelves with identifying information displayed seems self-evident, there are no research studies examining how libraries are actually implementing this service and whether libraries are taking into account patron privacy when they place materials on open hold shelves. There is anecdotal evidence that suggests librarians are concerned about privacy implications of open hold shelves and are using a variety of methods to conceal identifying information on books placed on these shelves.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, anecdotal evidence suggests that libraries choose to implement self-service holds because of perceived cost savings and perceived value to patrons.<sup>8</sup> To date, however, no research studies have explored the factors that libraries consider when they decide whether or not to implement self-service holds and how privacy concerns shape the way that self-service holds are actually implemented. This study, therefore, addresses that gap by collecting information regarding the self-service hold practices of a sample of both public and academic libraries.

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### LIBRARY PATRONS AND PRIVACY: THE LEGAL CONTEXT

The scope of library patrons' privacy rights is mainly a matter of state law and thus varies from state to state. Some, like Robertson,<sup>9</sup> argue that the United States Constitution endows library patrons with privacy rights, but this view has not been endorsed by the courts.<sup>10</sup> Libraries, also, adopt their own privacy policies which may, at the discretion of the library, provide greater protections than those afforded by either library association guidelines or state and federal statutes. A total of 48 states have laws regulating aspects of library privacy either through an exception to their Freedom of Information statutes protecting library records or through a statute specifically addressing library privacy.<sup>11</sup> Some states provide for civil sanctions when libraries disclose patron information that is protected by statute. For example, in the State of Michigan, Mich. Comp. Laws § 397.603 provides that

a library or an employee or agent of a library shall not release or disclose a library record or portion of a library record to a person without the written consent of the person liable for payment for or return of the materials identified in that library record.<sup>12</sup>

Many other states have similar statutes that protect patron information contained in library records. The Michigan statute defines a protected library record as

a document, record, or other method of storing information retained by a library that contains information that personally identifies a library patron, including the patron's name, address, or telephone number, *or that identifies a person as having requested or obtained specific materials from a library* [emphasis added].<sup>13</sup>

The statute establishes a civil cause of action for statutory damages of \$250 and attorney fees (likely to be much larger than the \$250 in damages) against a library or library employee who violates these provisions. The practice of storing a book on a shelf with a patron's name on it where both the title of the book and the name of the patron are on public view appears to violate the provisions of this statute.

Although there is no federal statute guaranteeing privacy for all library patrons,<sup>14</sup> there are several federal statutes that have a bearing on a library's handling of patron information. The much-debated USA Patriot Act allows designated government agencies to subpoena library records as part of a terrorism investigation.<sup>15</sup> This Act is viewed by many as a significant erosion of library privacy rights. Other federal statutes have enhanced the privacy rights of certain categories of library users. Library circulation records of students at institutions receiving federal funding may fall under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act ("FERPA"),<sup>16</sup> creating special issues for those who work in academic libraries.<sup>17</sup>

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## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Privacy Implications of Self-Service Holds

The link between the use of self-service holds and patron privacy issues has been identified by several authors. Bowers has squarely addressed the privacy concerns raised by self-service holds, arguing that the manner in which self-service holds have been implemented in many libraries violates both the privacy provisions of the American Library Association Code of Ethics as well as many state statutes governing the privacy of library circulation records. Further, Bowers urges librarians to advocate for library policies that would protect user privacy in this area.<sup>18</sup>

Chmara echoes Bowers' concerns about materials placed on self-service hold shelves, stating:

The library must ensure that its hold policy does not encroach upon the privacy of patrons. For example, if the library places hold materials on an open shelf for patrons to peruse the materials to find their own hold requests, the library should consider using a wrapper that would cover the title of the work. Otherwise, other patrons will be able to discover what materials are being requested by particular patrons.<sup>19</sup>

Researchers have identified the direct connection between the display of hold material on publicly accessible hold shelves and invasion of patron privacy, yet this practice still exists.

### Research on Library Privacy

Numerous studies have dealt with aspects of library patron privacy, although none have dealt specifically with privacy issues in relation to material placed on self-service hold shelves. These studies include several that survey the historical, legal,

and policy aspects of the privacy of patron records.<sup>20</sup> Several authors have also written comprehensive guides to privacy and confidentiality issues that affect libraries and their patrons.<sup>21</sup> In addition, Magi reviewed scholarship from a variety of disciplines to identify common themes about why privacy is important to both individuals and to society.<sup>22</sup>

In a further study, Magi surveyed public and academic libraries in Vermont to determine whether the libraries had policies regarding confidentiality of library records and to assess the attitudes of library directors regarding strengthening state laws governing library privacy. Only 48% of the library directors who responded had formal privacy policies at their libraries, although 35% of libraries without privacy policies had plans to develop them in the near future. The study found, however, that the policies that had been adopted, in most cases, provided a high level of protection of patron privacy. In addition, although only 48% of libraries had formal policies, 74% of library directors supported the idea of amending state statutes to provide a greater degree of protection of patron privacy.<sup>23</sup>

Studies of libraries outside the United States have also revealed a lack of attention to policies addressing patron privacy. Schepman, Koren, Horvat, Kurtovic, and Grgic found that 75% of the libraries in the Netherlands and 72% of the libraries in Croatia did not have written privacy policies. They also found, that in many cases, librarians were not aware of the privacy implications of new technologies that they were considering for adoption.<sup>24</sup> A study of academic and special libraries in the United Kingdom revealed that an even lower percentage of these libraries (14%) had written privacy policies.<sup>25</sup> In another study examining library confidentiality and privacy in a global context, Shachaf surveyed codes of ethics of library associations in multiple countries and found coverage of these topics in most codes (27 out of 31 studied).<sup>26</sup>

Sturges et al. surveyed attitudes of library users towards confidentiality of information held by libraries. They found a high level of confidence among users regarding the security of data held by libraries, but that, "there exists a genuine gap between the privacy protection that the users believe they can expect from the library, and the preparedness of librarians for providing this protection."<sup>27</sup> Similarly, Sutlieff and Chelin found a high level of confidence among university students in the United Kingdom in their libraries' protection of their personal data which was not necessarily justified by actual library practices.<sup>28</sup>

Magi surveyed directors of public and academic libraries to identify the policies and practices that were in place at their libraries to protect patron privacy. She found a high awareness of privacy issues among directors, although a minority of libraries still engaged in practices, such as contacting patrons by postcard or leaving phone messages that could have led to a disclosure of patron circulation information to others besides the patron. She also found that library directors had a high level of confidence in their own ability to observe their libraries' confidentiality policies, but a lower level of confidence in the ability of their staff to do so.<sup>29</sup> Magi's study is one of the few

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that looks at actual library practices that affect patron privacy.

This review of the literature shows that the issues of patron privacy and confidentiality of library records are of great concern to librarians and researchers. The question remains as to how this concern translates into actual library practices. A second question concerns the strength of librarians' commitment to patron privacy when pitted against other values, such as service to patrons. This study explores both of these questions and examines actual library practices regarding self-service hold shelves.

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## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study examines the following questions:

1. How prevalent is the practice of using self-service holds in libraries?
2. What factors have led some libraries to use self-service holds?
3. How do libraries that use self-service holds protect patron privacy?
4. Why have some libraries decided not to use self-service holds?

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## SURVEY INSTRUMENT AND METHOD

### Target Population and Data Collection

The target population includes every public and academic library in the State of Michigan. Data was collected using a Google™ survey emailed in April 2011 to the directors of every public and academic library in the state. (See the Appendix A for the survey instrument.) Library directors were identified through the use of the Interactive Library Directory of the Library of Michigan.<sup>30</sup> The survey was distributed in electronic form by sending a link to the survey to the e-mail accounts of the directors of the target population as listed in the directory. In libraries with multiple branches, directors of every branch were surveyed. There are 756 libraries in the target population; 609 are public libraries or branches of public libraries, and 146 are academic libraries.

The target population excluded special libraries because the researchers determined that special libraries are sufficiently different from public and academic libraries that they should not be included in this study. The target population was limited to libraries in the state of Michigan because it was determined that a broader geographic study was not feasible due to time and other constraints. In addition, the researchers determined that there were a sufficient number of libraries in the population selected to obtain meaningful results.

In an effort to boost response rate, a follow-up email with a link to the survey was sent to all non-respondents on May 3, 2011. This email was sent from the personal email account of one of the researchers and it encouraged non-respondents to participate in the survey.

## Data Analysis

Survey responses were downloaded into a Google Docs™ spreadsheet and also exported to the software program SPSS for statistical analysis. Each of two researchers independently categorized the responses to every open-ended question that was recorded and an inter-rater reliability analysis using the Kappa statistic was performed to determine consistency among the two raters.

## Response Rate

Of the target population of 756 library directors, 70 emails were returned as undeliverable and one survey was inadvertently sent to a special library. These numbers were subtracted from the total making the number of surveys actually sent and received 685. Of these, 559 were sent to directors of public libraries and 126 to directors of academic libraries. Two hundred and eighty-four of the 685 library directors who received surveys responded, for an overall response rate of 41.4%. With this response rate, estimated percentages reported below for the total sample have a margin of error of +/- 5.93% with 95% confidence.

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## SURVEY RESULTS

### Prevalence of Self-Service Holds in Libraries

Table 1 describes the respondents by type and size of library. Out of the 284 respondents, 232 (81.7%) are public libraries and 52 (18.3%) are academic libraries. These percentages correspond to the percentages of public and academic libraries in the total population of Michigan libraries surveyed, 81.6% and 18.4%, respectively.

Table 1 shows further that 60 (21.1%) of the 284 directors of Michigan libraries who responded to the survey report that their libraries use self-service holds. Of the 60 libraries that use self-service holds, 56 (93.3%) are public libraries and four (6.7%) are academic libraries. Based on this sample, between 15% and 27% of Michigan libraries use self-service holds +/- 5.93% with 95% confidence.

As noted in table 6, eleven libraries (3.9% of total respondents) are considering implementing self-service holds in the future. Nine of these are public libraries and two are academic libraries.

Among public libraries that use self-service holds, 27 (48.2%) have been doing so for four or more years; 15 (26.8%) for two to three years; 10 (17.9%) for one to two years; and four (7.1%) for less than one year. Three (75%) academic libraries have been using self-service holds for four or more years and one (25%) academic library for less than a year.

Two-hundred and two (71.1%) of the librarians who responded to the survey have either a master's or doctorate degree in library and information science. In public libraries, the decision to implement self-service holds was made by library employees including directors and librarians with input from

Table 1. Responses by Type of Library and Size of Population Served (N = 284)

Public Libraries			Academic Libraries		
Population*	Responses	Use self-service holds	Population†	Responses	Use self-service holds
<10,000	102	10	<1000	7	1
10,000–24,999	55	11	1,000–2,999	18	0
25,000–99,999	51	19	3,000–9,999	18	1
100,000–499,999	21	15	10,000–29,999	6	2
>500,000	3	1	>30,000	3	0
Total	232	56	Total	52	4

\* Population is for the location served by the individual library or branch at which the respondent works, not for the library system as a whole.

† Population is based on the number of full-time equivalent students served by the respondent's library.

Table 2. Why Libraries Use Self-Service Holds (N = 60)

	Very Important	Moderately Important	Not Important	No Opinion
<b>Patron Convenience</b>	50 (83.3%)	10 (16.7%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
<b>Free Up Staff Time</b>	33 (55.0%)	21 (35.0%)	4 (6.7%)	2 (3.3%)
<b>Space Issues at Circulation Desk</b>	26 (43.3%)	20 (33.3%)	12 (20.0%)	2 (3.3%)
<b>Costs Savings (Labor/Other)</b>	23 (38.3%)	25 (41.7%)	9 (15.0%)	3 (5.0%)

nonlibrarian staff. Seventeen public libraries (30.4%) report that their boards were also involved in the decision.

### Why Libraries Use Self-Service Holds

The survey asked libraries with self-service holds to rank each of four options: space issues at the circulation desk; freeing up staff time for other work; cost savings (labor or other costs); and patron convenience as “very important,” “moderately important,” or “not important” to their decisions to implement self-service holds. Libraries were also given the option of answering “no opinion” to each of the four options. Table 2 summarizes libraries' responses to this question, with results displayed in order of the importance attached to each item.

Respondents also had the option of providing other reasons for why they implemented self-service holds. Only five respondents identified reasons other than those listed in table 2. Four reported that their purchase of a new integrated library management system was a reason that they decided to use self-service holds. One reported that, once an addition to the library had been completed, the library had space to accommodate bookshelves for self-service holds and decided to implement them.

### How Libraries Protect Patron Privacy of Self-Service Holds

As shown in table 3, libraries use various methods of identifying patrons on items being held on publicly accessible hold

shelves, the most common being by full first and last names of patrons. Twenty-seven libraries (45%) use this method. Twenty-four (40%) identify the patron by full last name and first initial(s). Seven (11.7%) use either a partial last name or a first name only. In total, 97.7% of libraries identify patrons with all or part of the patrons' names. Only two libraries (3.3%) identify the patron without a full or partial name; these libraries use library account numbers only. None of the libraries report using a nickname or alias chosen by the patron.

Table 4 shows the methods libraries use to conceal the titles of the items on self-service hold shelves. Twenty-two (37.3%) wrap the item to cover the title. Sixteen (27.1%) place the item, either spine down or facing back on the shelf. Eleven libraries (18.6%) use a combination of wrapping and placing the spine down or facing back on the shelf. Nine (15.3%) do nothing to cover the title and one library (1.7%) places hold items in cloth bags.

Table 5 shows the method used to conceal the title of the item placed on hold, if any, for libraries that identify patrons by all or part of the patrons' names. Out of the fifty-seven libraries that identify patrons by all or a portion of their names, 50 (87.7%) use some method of concealing the titles of items that are placed on self-service hold. Seven libraries (12.3%) that identify the patron by full first and last names or by full last name and one or two initials do not use any method of concealing the title of hold items. The two libraries that identify the patron only by library account number do not take any steps to conceal the title of the book and are not included in this table.

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### Why Libraries Do Not Use Self-Service Holds

Libraries that do not use self-service holds were asked whether they had ever considered using self-service holds. Forty-eight libraries reported that they had considered using self-service holds and 172 libraries reported that they had not considered using self-service holds. Eighty-four of these 220 libraries responded to a follow up question asking them to explain why they had decided against using self-service holds. This suggests that some of the 172 libraries that had answered “no” to the first part of the question had, in fact, considered self-service holds. From the 84 responses, the researchers identified 103 separate reasons that libraries did not implement self-service holds. These reasons were evaluated and assigned to the categories reflected in table 6. The interrater reliability was found to be Kappa = 0.89. According to Landis and Koch this is almost perfect agreement.<sup>31</sup>

The most common reason given for not implementing self-service holds was lack of space, followed by concerns for privacy, and lack of self-service checkout facilities.

Space concerns included both allocation of space within the library as well as overall lack of space. Some libraries reported they would have to give up valuable shelf space for circulating materials. Several said they simply did not have enough room. One respondent said the library would “have to gut a bathroom” to make room for them.

Libraries that do not use self-service holds expressed concerns about privacy that were tied to specific privacy laws or library confidentiality policies, while other libraries identified specific ways in which the use of self-service hold shelves could lead to a breach of confidentiality. One respondent said “it [self-service holds] is a violation of the Library Privacy Act”

**Table 3. How Patron is Identified on Self-Service Hold Item (N = 60)**

Full first and last name	27
Full last name w/first initial(s)	24
Three to five letters of last name	6
First name only	1
Library account no.	2
Total	60

while another said the library was located in a “very small town [and] everyone knows just about everything about everyone. If they want to know what someone is reading they would just as soon look on the hold shelf as ask them, and [they] occasionally do.” Another small public library director noted that “items . . . could still be perused by other library patrons.” A director of a university library stated that “placing a hold book with a person’s name attached in a public area would violate confidentiality protection.” A director of a public library with a service population of between 25,000 and 99,000 indicated that the library actually discontinued the use of self-service holds because “people picked up the wrong items that belonged to other patrons and tried to see who was requesting what.” The library stated, “We considered it a privacy issue and decided to go back to having holds requested at the Circulation Desk.”

At least one public library indicated that it did not implement self-service holds due to its board’s concerns about privacy. The respondent stated “In the past self-service holds were not implemented due to patron privacy. We have had complaints about privacy in the past and the Board expressed concern.”

The connection between self-service holds and self-service checkout was also noted by a number of respondents. “Even if we did have space, without self checkout it didn’t seem a good option. . . . It only seems to make sense if your library has self-check—otherwise what point is there in getting an item off a public hold shelf, only to have to stand in line at the circ desk to check it out.”

**Table 4. Methods Used to Conceal Titles of Self-Service Holds (N = 59)**

Wrapped to conceal title	22
Spine down or facing back on shelf	16
Combination of wrapped & spine down or back	11
No protection	9
Cloth bag	1
Total	59

Note: One library that uses self-service holds did not answer this question on the survey

**Table 5. Methods Used to Identify Patron and Conceal Title (N = 57)**

How Patron is Identified on Item	Method Used to Conceal Title of Hold Item				
	None	Wrapped	Spine down or back	Wrapped & spine down or back	Placed in cloth bag
Full first & last names	6	11	6	4	
Full last name w/first initial(s)	1	7	9	6	1
Five or fewer letters of last name		4		1	
First name only			1		

Note: One respondent identifies the patron by the first three letters of the last name and numerically. This respondent did not indicate whether or not it also conceals the title of the item.

**Table 6. Why Libraries Considered but Decided Against Using Self-Service Holds**

Space issues	27
Patron privacy concerns	19
No self-service checkout/RFID	11
Security of items on hold	9
Low volume of holds	8
No demand for service	4
Other	14
Total	92

Note: Some survey respondents gave more than one reason for not implementing self-service holds; Eleven libraries reported that they are considering implementing self-services holds in the future.

Security concerns included both concerns regarding theft of library materials and concerns about patrons taking items that were on hold for a different patron. One library commented, “Many holds items come from other library’s (sic) and we are not comfortable letting them get too far from our sight while we’re waiting for the patron who requested them to come pick them up.” Another cited the “potential for somebody to swipe somebody else’s high demand item.”

One of the themes that emerged from the 14 responses classified as “other” was the concern over losing personal contact with library patrons. A public library with a service population of fewer than 10,000 does not use self-service holds because “our patrons really like the one on one contact with staff.” Another small public library said “We are never too busy to wait on patrons...this is a good opportunity to give them personal attention.” Three libraries said they did not have the staff to service such a system. Other reasons given for non-implementation included a collection that does not circulate and one that is entirely on-line. Two libraries answered that self-service holds would cause confusion for their patrons.

### Changes in Procedures after Implementing Self-Service Holds

Libraries that use self-service holds were asked whether they had changed or modified any of the procedures they use to prepare materials for placement on the shelves after they began using self-service holds. Of 26 total responses to this question, 23 described general changes to processing the holds, including changes in how the library generates hold slips and where self-checkout stations are located. Only three responses described changes that were implemented to better protect patron privacy. One respondent said that the library “gradually went to covering more of the book to help with privacy concerns, and another said that the library was “more secure in hiding titles.” A third library said that it was placing items backwards on the shelf to protect privacy and discourage browsers.

### Other Comments about Self-Service Holds

The final survey question asked all respondents whether they had any additional comments about their library’s approach to and practices regarding self-service holds. Eleven of the 24 libraries that offered comments emphasized patron and staff satisfaction with self-service holds. According to one library, “[patrons] honestly don’t care a smidgen if there is a privacy law, they just want convenience.”

One respondent said that its check-out lines are shorter. Another said that, as a result of offering this service, the number of holds in the library has increased greatly and consequently so have the library’s circulation statistics. Three libraries mentioned increased theft of items from their hold shelves, particularly video games.

Nine libraries mentioned privacy issues. Several noted that they locate their hold shelves near the circulation desk to discourage browsing and to allow for monitoring by staff. Three described incidents where patron privacy was actually compromised by another patron.

## DISCUSSION

A small, but significant, minority of libraries in Michigan (15 to 27%) use self-service holds. Both public and academic libraries have implemented self-service holds. Study results suggest that libraries serving a larger population are more likely to use self-service holds. However, because the study collected data separately from each main and branch library within multi-branch systems, it is not clear whether branch libraries with smaller service areas have adopted self-service holds because of a system-wide policy. Further research could assess adoption of self-service holds by library system as well as by individual location. Identifying the frequency of use of self-service holds as a percentage of total library circulation might also allow for more meaningful comparison between different sizes and types of libraries.

Half of libraries with self-service holds have implemented them in the last four years. This suggests that the use of self-service holds is a relatively recent phenomenon. Since some libraries that do not currently use self-service holds are considering using them in the future and only one library discontinued the use of self-service holds after adopting them, it can be expected that there will be growth in the use of self-service holds, although an exact rate of growth cannot be determined from the data collected in this study.

Libraries perceive a number of benefits of using self-service holds, including patron convenience, freeing up staff time, relieving space issues at the circulation desk, and cost savings. Responses to closed-end questions show that patron convenience is the most important reason libraries use self-service holds. Every library identified patron convenience as an important factor in the decision to use self-service holds. In addition, the most prevalent themes in the responses to the question asking for additional comments about self-service holds were patron and librarian satisfaction with self-service holds.

Given that many libraries are going through a period

of financial stress,<sup>32</sup> one might have expected that a major reason for implementing self-service holds would be cost savings. However, libraries attached less importance to cost savings than to patron convenience or freeing up staff time. While libraries cited freeing up staff time as a reason for using self-service holds, the additional step of wrapping covers of items before they are placed on the self-service hold shelf, a practice used by many libraries, adds to the staff time needed to process the hold, particularly in large libraries that process many holds. This could offset any savings in staff time resulting from having patrons retrieve their own hold items. Space issues were identified by a number of libraries as a reason for using self-service holds, but other respondents indicated that space issues were a factor in their decisions not to use self-service holds. This suggests that importance of this factor in a library's decision to use self-service holds depends on the particular layout and design of each library.

It is noteworthy that less than one-third of public libraries that use self-service holds reported that their board was involved in the decision. Many in the profession of library science would argue that implementing a self-service hold system is a service policy matter that should be taken to a library board for discussion and approval,<sup>33</sup> especially given the privacy implications of this decision.

Most libraries that use self-service holds acknowledge the privacy concerns created by this practice, either directly through their responses to open-ended questions or indirectly through their use of methods of preventing disclosure of patrons' identities or disclosure of the titles of items placed on hold. However, some libraries make no attempt to either conceal patrons' identities or the titles of self-service hold items. These libraries are displaying items circulated to specific patrons in public view, a breach of patron privacy.

While other libraries do take steps that appear to protect patron privacy, it is clear, upon closer examination, that the efforts are ineffectual. Eighty-five per cent of libraries that use self-service holds identify the requesting patron by last name and either full first name or initials. This provides no privacy protection for patrons. Others use truncated last names. This does little or nothing to conceal the patron's identity. If a patron has a short last name, the full last name may be visible. Otherwise, enough of the name may be visible that the identity of the patron can be discerned. While "nickname or alias chosen by the patron" was an option on the survey, not one respondent chose this answer. Only two of the sixty libraries with self-service holds use a method of identifying patrons that completely prevents disclosure of their names: putting only the patron's library account number on the hold.

Instead of using more effective ways to conceal a patrons' identities on items on hold shelves, libraries with self-service holds appear to rely instead on various methods of concealing the titles of hold items. Methods used for concealing the titles of requested items include wrapping items with paper, turning the spine of the item down or facing backward to make reading the title difficult, or a combination of both. Wrapping may provide an impediment to the accidental disclosure of

a title but would not stop someone determined to find out what another patron had requested. Placing an item spine down or facing back provides virtually no concealment of the title from public view and does not stop other patrons from tipping the item back to view the title. The combination of wrapping and spine down or facing back provides more protection, but anyone could easily pull the item from the shelf to determine its title. Nothing prevents a patron, especially in a busy library, from taking a book from the shelf to another part of the library. Even cloth bags can be breached in this way.

While the majority of libraries with self-service holds have implemented this service with weak or no privacy protection for patrons, other libraries have decided not to implement self-service holds specifically because of privacy concerns. Some librarians even identify the use of self-service holds as a breach of state law. This represents a clear divergence in thought and practice between librarians.

The marked difference between librarians' perceptions of the propriety of using self-service holds may be explained by how individual librarians strike a balance between two competing values: patron privacy and patron convenience. Klinefelter notes that "libraries now face challenges of providing modern public services while protecting user privacy."<sup>34</sup> As Klinefelter observes, patrons now expect an ever-increasing array of library services that parallel services that are available commercially. Meeting this demand, especially the demand for service based on new technologies, can lead libraries to be in the position of gathering personal data from patrons that is linked in a way that was previously unheard of, creating the possibility of intrusion on patron privacy rights.<sup>35</sup>

Klinefelter advocates for libraries to adopt policies protecting patron privacy, but suggests that privacy concerns should not necessarily override patron convenience, stating: "These approaches may not fully protect privacy, but if the alternative is for the library to lose its patron base because services are not adequate, compromise is necessary. It would be foolish for librarians to waive [*sic*] the privacy flag on the way down with the ship."<sup>36</sup> Klinefelter is not alone in giving great weight customer service. A study of academic and special librarians in the United Kingdom found that 57% of librarians surveyed ranked service as their first priority, while only 6% ranked privacy and confidentiality as their top concern. This study also shows the high value that librarians place on patron convenience and on patron satisfaction with library services and a lack of vigilance on the part of librarians in protecting patron privacy rights.<sup>37</sup>

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## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Researchers can build on this study by examining other aspects of self-service holds. One important area of future research is patrons' perceptions regarding the use of self-service holds. Are patrons concerned with breaches of privacy resulting from the use of self-service holds? Are self-service holds a

service that patrons value? Future research could also explore whether librarians have consciously chosen to ignore privacy breaches resulting from self-service holds in an attempt to provide greater service to patrons or whether privacy breaches are simply inadvertent. Finally, studies could measure the impact of the ALA's 2011 *Resolution to Protect Library User Confidentiality in Self-Service Hold Practices* on libraries' use of self-service holds.

## CONCLUSION

This study of libraries' practices with respect to self-service holds reveals that self-service holds have been established as part of the array of services offered by both public and academic libraries and that there are clear breaches of patron privacy in the way that they are being implemented at almost all libraries. Libraries in Michigan that offer self-service holds risk violating patron privacy and the Michigan Library Privacy Act if they put patrons' name or a portion of their names on hold items that are placed on publicly accessible shelves. The practice of organizing hold items in alphabetical order actually increases the odds that someone other than the requesting patron will be able to learn the titles of the books that have been requested by another individual. Only libraries that use a library account number or a nickname or alias that does not include a recognizable portion of a patron's name do not put patron privacy at risk.

The observed privacy breaches may be partially due to the fact that self-service holds are a relatively new library service and that libraries need more time to refine their practices in order to provide greater security for patron information that can be exposed through use of a self-service hold shelf. This study was conducted prior to the 2011 ALA *Resolution to Protect Library User Confidentiality in Self-Service Hold Practices* and that resolution may spur libraries to address the privacy gaps in the way they use self-service holds. More can be done to educate librarians about the privacy implications of self-service holds and ways to avoid breaches of patron confidentiality.

Preserving patron privacy and providing convenient up-to-date services for patrons are not mutually exclusive propositions. Some libraries protect patron privacy with respect to self-service hold materials by identifying patrons by number rather than by name. Current library management systems offer other options, such as allowing patrons to create nicknames or user names to be used on hold items. Circulation software system-created features such as Innovative Interfaces, Inc.'s "patron alias" feature allows libraries, not the patrons themselves, to create an alias that will print out on hold slips to conceal patrons' real names on self-service hold shelves. None of the respondents directly identified this feature by name as an option to conceal their patrons' privacy, however, the four libraries that indicated they use a combination of patron name and account number may be using system generated patron aliases. For such a system to

provide complete patron anonymity, the patron's name must not be discernible.

Libraries could also offer patrons the ability to opt out of the self-service hold system and have their hold items kept behind the circulation desk. This would be preferable to forcing patrons with privacy concerns to forego using the holds system entirely. This would also be consistent with the ALA's emphasis on offering patrons choice in how their person information is used.<sup>38</sup> The first step towards protecting patron privacy is to recognize that current self-service hold practices permit inappropriate and possibly illegal disclosure of confidential patron information. Once this is acknowledged, libraries can take any one of a number of steps to end the breach of patron privacy and to allow patrons to have access to the service of self-service holds without comprising their privacy.

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## APPENDIX. SELF-SERVICE HOLDS SURVEY

You are invited to participate in a survey of directors of public and academic libraries regarding library policies on patron self-service holds. Please follow the link below to the survey, which should take about five minutes to complete. Your response is very important to us, as we need a strong response to get an accurate picture of library policies in Michigan.

Thank you in advance for taking the time to participate in this survey.

[Names of researchers omitted]

### Survey Description

Introduction: This survey is being sent to directors of public and academic libraries in Michigan as part of an academic study of library policies relating to self-service holds. For purposes of this study, "self-service holds" are defined as a system whereby patrons are notified when an item they have previously requested is available for pick-up at the library. Library staff places the requested item on shelves that are identified as containing hold items. These hold shelves are accessible to the public. Patrons can retrieve their requested item without further intervention by a library staff member. Whether or not such items must be checked out at a circulation desk or at a self-service checkout station is not within the scope of this study. Results of the survey will be tabulated and made available publicly, so that libraries will be able to benefit from the study.

Informed Consent: You are asked to voluntarily provide the requested information through this web survey. You may stop participating at any time. The purpose of the survey is to gather aggregate data regarding library policies. Individual libraries and individual respondents will not be identified by name in published results of the study. Nonetheless, it is theoretically possible that you or your library may be identifiable to the researchers and readers of the published results based on identifying factors, such your job title and the size of your library.

### Name of Library

Include district and branch if applicable. If you work for a specific branch of a larger library system, please answer the remaining questions with respect to that branch rather than the library system as a whole.

### Your Job Title

Your role at your library

### Do you have a masters or doctorate in library and/or information science?

- Yes
- No

### Public or academic library?

- Public
- Academic

**Size of population served by your public library or library branch**

- <10,000
- 10,000–24,999
- 25,000–99,999
- 100,000–499,999
- >500,000

**Size of your academic library**

Based on number of full time equivalent (FTE) students

- <1,000
- 1,000–2,999
- 3,000–9,999
- 10,000–29,999
- >30,000

**Does your library use self-services holds?**

Self-service holds are defined as a system whereby patrons

are notified when an item they have previously requested is available for pick-up at the library and the patron can retrieve the item from shelves that are accessible to the public.

- Yes
- No

**Has your library ever considered using self-service holds?**

- Yes
- No

**If your library considered but decided against using self-service holds, please explain why.**

**How long has your library been using self-service holds?**

- Less than 1 year
- 1–2 years
- 2–3 years
- 4 or more years

**To what extent did each of the following factors play a role in your decision to implement self-service holds?**

	<b>Very important</b>	<b>Moderately important</b>	<b>Not important</b>	<b>No opinion</b>
<b>Space issues at circulation desk</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>Free up staff time for other work</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>Cost savings (labor or other costs)</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>Patron convenience</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**If self-service holds were implemented in your library for any other reason, please describe.**

**Who within the library was involved in deciding to implement self-service holds? Select all that apply**

- Library Director
- Library Board
- Librarian(s)
- Non-librarian staff
- Other

**How is the patron identified on the hold item?**

Select one of the following

- By full first and last name
- By first initial(s) and full last name
- By library account number
- Nickname or alias chosen by patron
- Other

**What, if any, methods do you use to protect patron information on the hold item?**

Select all that apply

- Wrapping the book to conceal the title
- Placing the book spine down on the shelf
- None
- Other

**Since your library started using self-service holds, have you changed or modified any of the procedures you use to prepare materials for placement on the hold shelves? If so, please describe.**

**Do you have any additional comments about your library's approach to and practices regarding self-service holds?**

**You are almost done!**

Thank you very much for completing this survey. We are very interested in how self-service holds are being employed in Michigan libraries. Your response will be very valuable.

Please click submit to send your responses.