

## Characteristics of Interlibrary Loan Requests at the Library of Congress

*A study of interlibrary loan at the Library of Congress in 1976 showed that academic libraries were the most frequent borrowers, and requests were most often for materials in the humanities. The Library of Congress received proportionally more requests for old items than academic libraries did, and it filled 54 percent of all requests it received. Distributions of language and place of publication of requested items, as well as the time required for handling requests, were also investigated.*

AT THE BEGINNING of 1976 the new Librarian of Congress, Daniel Boorstin, initiated a full-scale review of the library's policies, organization, and goals. As part of this effort, the task force carrying out the review commissioned several user studies. Two focused on interlibrary loan: one a sample survey of interlibrary loan borrowers conducted by mail; the other a study of the characteristics of interlibrary loan requests received by the Library of Congress.

This paper presents the results of the second study, which had two primary goals: first, to provide a factual context for the more subjective information being solicited by means of the survey questionnaire; and, second, to furnish data about the needs of a specific user group in order to assist the

task force in dealing with problems of collection development.

The source of data for the study was the library's file of interlibrary loan requests for 1975, the most recent complete calendar year at the time of the study and, therefore, the most recent "dead" file. These requests were stored in folders within file cabinets; the folders were ordered alphabetically by the geographic origin of the request—either state or foreign country—then loosely alphabetically by city.

Since time and manpower were unavailable to perform a random selection from the individual documents in the file, groups of documents were first selected; then the final sample of documents was chosen from these groups. Specifically, the file was considered to be a collection of ¼-inch segments; a number was assigned to each segment, and 225 of these were selected by means of a random number table. These chosen segments were removed from the files, and five requests from each packet (sufficient to give about a 3 percent sample) were selected by means of a random number table.

The final sample consisted of 1,114 requests. From each request the following data were keypunched: type of library submitting request, subject area, date of publication, language of the item requested, number of days taken by the request to

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reach LC, whether or not the request was filled, the number of days taken by LC to fill the request, and, for cases in which the request was not filled, the reason for failure. Frequency distributions and cross-tabulations were produced using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The results of the study are discussed below, item by item.

## RESULTS

### *Borrowers.*

Requests came from every type of eligible library. Academic and research libraries accounted for 63 percent of the sample; federal libraries, 10 percent; other government libraries, 1 percent; special libraries, 5 percent; public libraries, 4 percent; and foreign libraries, 18 percent.

Since any library other than a secondary or elementary school library is eligible to borrow from the Library of Congress, one might expect that the above breakdown of borrowers by type of library would closely reflect the national borrowing population.

There are, however, several factors, related to the library's special position and regulations, which probably make this distribution specific to LC. First, at the time of the survey, the Library of Congress severely restricted borrowing by public libraries; thus, the proportion of public libraries is probably smaller than it would be without this restriction. Second, because the library once had a statutory obligation to lend to federal libraries, it continues to be the recipient of a large number of requests from them. Finally, many foreign libraries view the Library of Congress, the "national" library, as the logical place to send all requests, particularly since LC provides requesters with alternative locations when it cannot lend. Therefore, the proportion of foreign libraries may also be unusually high.

### *Subject of Requests.*

Humanities materials were the most frequently requested, accounting for 44 percent of the requests. Science materials were second (24 percent) and social sciences, third (19 percent).

The remaining 13 percent consisted of LC classes A—General Works (1 percent);

G—Geography, Folklore, Sports, etc. (2 percent); M—Music (3 percent); K—Law (2 percent); newspapers (4 percent); and manuscripts (2 percent). The difference in the sum of the percents listed here and the total given is due to rounding.

A cross-tabulation of the subject field of request by the type of library (table 1) showed a significant correlation. In particular, federal libraries requested far fewer humanities materials than one would expect on the basis of the marginal distributions alone, while academic libraries borrowed correspondingly more in this area. Federal and special libraries were higher than average in science requests, while academic libraries were lower.

### *Language and Place of Publication.*

The distribution of requests by language was essentially the same as that for the sample of academic libraries that Thomson examined in her study.<sup>1</sup> Only the fraction of requests for Russian materials differed noticeably: 8 percent of the Library of Congress' requests were in this language as opposed to 3 percent for Thomson's academic libraries (table 2).

As would be expected, the distribution of places of publication was similar to the language distribution (table 3). Again, requests received by the Library of Congress closely resembled those received by academic libraries except in the case of Russian materials.

### *Date of Publication.*

Table 4 shows the distribution of requests by date of publication. This distribution is distinctly different from the pattern that emerged from the studies compared by Stevens.<sup>2</sup> Table 5 was adapted from Stevens' article with the addition of figures from this study. Although the time divisions are not identical, it is still obvious that the Library of Congress request pattern is decidedly different. As one would expect, it receives more requests for old materials than the other libraries compared and fewer requests for very recent materials.

### *Outcome of Requests.*

The analysis showed that the Library of Congress filled 54 percent of its requests.

TABLE 1  
CROSS-TABULATION OF SUBJECT OF REQUEST BY TYPE OF LIBRARY

Subject		Type of Library						Total
		Academic	Federal	Other Govt.	Special	Public	Foreign	
Humanities	Number	359	2	1	10	18	90	480
	Row Pct.	74.8	0.4	0.2	2.1	3.8	18.8	100.0
	Col. Pct.	51.8	1.8	33.3	16.7	45.0	46.6	43.6
Social Sciences	Number	129	27	1	8	6	41	212
	Row Pct.	60.8	12.7	0.5	3.8	2.8	19.3	100.0
	Col. Pct.	18.6	24.1	33.3	13.3	15.0	21.2	19.3
Science	Number	94	78	0	41	9	38	260
	Row Pct.	36.2	30.0	0.0	15.8	3.5	14.6	100.0
	Col. Pct.	13.6	69.6	0.0	68.3	22.5	19.7	23.6
Other	Number	111	5	1	1	7	24	149
	Row Pct.	74.5	3.4	0.7	0.7	4.7	16.1	100.0
	Col. Pct.	16.0	4.5	33.3	1.7	17.5	12.4	13.5
Total	Number	693	112	3	60	40	193	1101
	Row Pct.	62.9	10.2	0.3	5.4	3.6	17.5	100.0
	Col. Pct.	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Chi Square = 270.4 with 15 degrees of freedom Significance = 0.0

Number of missing observations = 13

Totals may not equal 100 percent because of rounding.

TABLE 2  
LANGUAGE OF PUBLICATION OF REQUESTS  
(IN RANK ORDER)

Thomson's Sample of Academic Libraries*	Percent	Library of Congress	Percent
English	67.1	English	64.0
German	10.3	Russian	8.4
French	9.0	German	8.1
Russian	3.3	French	6.7
Spanish	3.1	Spanish	4.6
Italian	2.3	Italian	1.7
Latin	.7	Japanese	.7
Japanese	.5	Latin	.4
Polish	.4	Danish	.4
Dutch	.3	Czechoslovakian	.4
Portuguese	.3	Polish	.4
Swedish	.3	Bulgarian	.4
Hungarian	.3	Chinese	.4
Chinese	.2	Korean	.4
Czechoslovakian	.2	Indonesian	.4
Others less than .2%		Others less than .4%	

\*Abridged version of Appendix XI, p. 119, in *Interlibrary Loan Involving Academic Libraries*.

TABLE 3  
PLACE OF PUBLICATION OF REQUESTED MATERIAL  
(IN RANK ORDER)

Thomson's Sample of Academic Libraries*	Percent	Library of Congress	Percent
U.S.	45.0	U.S.	43.8
Gt. Britain	12.2	Gt. Britain	15.1
Germany	8.6	USSR	8.0
France	7.3	Germany	7.5
USSR	3.4	France	6.0
Italy	2.3	Spain	2.1
India	1.3	Italy	1.9
Spain	1.2	Japan	1.2
Japan	1.1	Argentina	1.0
Netherlands	1.0	Netherlands	.9
Switzerland	.8	India	.9
Canada	.8	Denmark	.8
Belgium	.7	Canada	.7
Poland	.7	Rumania & Bulgaria	.7
Others less than .7%		Others less than .7%	

\*Abridged version of Appendix XII, p. 120, in *Interlibrary Loan Involving Academic Libraries*.

TABLE 4  
PUBLICATION DATE OF REQUESTED MATERIAL

	Absolute Freq.	Relative Freq. (Pct.)	Adjusted Freq. (Pct.)	Cum. Freq. (Pct.)
Pre-1700	4	0.4	0.4	0.4
1700-1799	15	1.3	1.4	1.7
1800-1899	165	14.8	14.9	16.7
1900-1949	420	37.7	38.0	54.7
1950-59	100	9.0	9.1	63.8
1960-69	162	14.5	14.7	78.4
1970-72	123	11.0	11.1	89.6
1973-74	103	9.2	9.3	98.9
1975	12	1.1	1.1	100.0
Date Unknown	10	1.0	Missing	100.0
Total	1,114	100.0	100.0	

Valid Cases 1,104

Missing Cases 10

TABLE 5  
CUMULATED PERCENT BY REGENCY OF MATERIAL

Study	Last 3 Years (Percent)	Last 10 Years (Percent)	Last 15 Years (Percent)	Last 70 Years (Percent)	Last 75 Years (Percent)
<b>Stevens' Article*</b>					
Palmour	21	58		92	
Taylor	17	49		94	
Reynolds					
U. of Washington	19	54		?	
Washington State Library	25	70		99	
<b>This Study</b>					
Library of Congress	10		35		83

\*Stevens, "A Study of Interlibrary Loan," p.339. Citations from Stevens to studies compared in the table are:

A *Study of the Characteristics, Costs, and Magnitude of Interlibrary Loans in Academic Libraries*, comp. by Vernon E. Palmour and others, prepared for the Association of Research Libraries by Westat Research, Inc. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1972), p.39.

David W. Taylor and others, *An Operations Research Study of the Pacific Northwest Bibliographic Center* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Office of Education, 1972), p.25.

Maryan E. Reynolds, *A Study of Library Network Alternatives for the State of Washington* (Olympia, Wash.: Washington State Library, 1970), p.9.

This rate can be compared to success rates ranging from 64 percent to 83 percent found for libraries compared in Stevens' article.<sup>3</sup>

A cross-tabulation of the number of requests successfully filled by type of library showed that all types of libraries were about equally successful in obtaining loans (table 6), with special libraries somewhat less successful than the others. As shown in table 7, requests for humanities materials were filled slightly more often than requests in the other subject areas.

In the case of the unfilled requests, three reasons accounted for almost all the failures:

1. Material was noncirculating (35 percent). Noncirculating categories at the Library of Congress include rare materials, materials in poor condition, local history and genealogy, periodicals, unusually large size materials, and "in print" items.

2. Material was "not on shelf" or charged to a user (32 percent). "Not on shelf" is the library's designation for items in short-term inside use, and no charges are maintained on these items. Only 2 percent of the figure consists of items with known charges. Part of the other 30 percent may also be items with charges, but what proportion is unknown, because in most cases only the location is checked for the item; and no check of the charges is made.

3. Material was not owned (24 percent).

The second category—"not-on-shelf" materials—has been discussed by Goodrum, who analyzed the "not-on-shelf" problem at

the Library of Congress as a whole.<sup>4</sup> Among the factors Goodrum cited as generally affecting the "not-on-shelf" rate, three in particular seem likely to have a disproportionately high impact on this rate for books requested on interlibrary loan.

First, the high volume of circulation results in interlibrary loan requests being more difficult to fill than requests from other users. Congressional requests are placed on a waiting list if the book is unavailable, and requests from readers using the reading rooms can be resubmitted frequently. It is more difficult, however, for interlibrary loan requests to be repeated easily and often.

Second, the fact that a larger number of older books are requested through interlibrary loan causes retrieval problems. Whereas only 17 percent of the books requested by the Congressional Research Service and from the general reading rooms were published prior to 1950, more than 55 percent of the books requested on interlibrary loan fell into this category. Thus a greater proportion of the materials desired for interlibrary loan may have been adversely affected by heavy use and are thereby more difficult to retrieve.

Third, as determined by a Loan Division study, a percentage of books requested for loan were in place on the shelves but were not pulled in response to requests for them. At the beginning of the study (August 1975) 33 percent of the books reported "not on

TABLE 6  
CROSS-TABULATION OF SUCCESS IN FILLING REQUEST BY TYPE OF LIBRARY

Outcome		Type of Library					Total	
		Academic	Federal	Other Govt.	Special	Public		Foreign
Not Filled	Number	306	55	2	35	19	93	510
	Row Pct.	60.0	10.8	0.4	6.9	3.7	18.2	100.0
	Col. Pct.	43.9	49.1	66.7	58.3	46.3	48.2	46.1
Filled	Number	391	57	1	25	22	100	596
	Row Pct.	65.6	9.5	0.2	4.2	3.7	16.8	100.0
	Col. Pct.	56.1	50.9	33.3	41.7	53.7	51.8	53.9
Total	Number	697	112	3	60	41	193	1106
	Row Pct.	63.0	10.1	0.3	5.4	3.7	17.5	100.0
	Col. Pct.	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Chi Square = 6.2 with 5 degrees of freedom Significance = 0.2849  
Number of missing observations = 8

TABLE 7  
CROSS-TABULATION OF SUCCESS IN FILLING REQUEST BY SUBJECT OF REQUEST

Outcome		Subject				Total
		Humanities	Social Sciences	Science	Other	
Not Filled	Number	192	111	133	72	508
	Row Pct.	37.8	21.8	26.2	14.2	100.0
	Col. Pct.	39.7	51.6	51.2	48.0	45.8
Filled	Number	292	104	127	78	601
	Row Pct.	48.6	17.3	21.1	13.0	100.0
	Col. Pct.	60.3	48.4	48.8	52.0	54.2
Total	Number	484	215	260	150	1109
	Row Pct.	43.6	19.4	23.5	13.5	100.0
	Col. Pct.	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Chi Square = 18.6 with 3 degrees of freedom Significance = 0.0036  
Number of missing observations = 5

shelf" were actually found in place when rechecked by Loan Division staff; by the end of the study (April 1976) this had declined to 18 percent. The difference between actual "not on shelf" and reported "not on shelf" could have been caused by incorrect call numbers on the initial requests or by the time lapse between initial requests and the rechecking, as well as by the simple failure to respond to the initial requests.

Although the three factors cited in Goodrum's report explain to some extent the "not-on-shelf" problem as it affects interlibrary loan, additional studies focusing on this area and on the other areas of unfilled requests could prove very useful to the library. If, for example, an analysis of materials requested but not owned showed any distinct patterns, then acquisition policies could be revised to encompass these areas.

#### *Time Involved.*

Two dates are recorded on practically every request slip: the date on which the borrowing library completed the request and the date on which the request was received by the Loan Division of the Library of Congress. If the request was filled, the request slip also contains the date on which it was completed.

The analysis of the amount of time between the completing of the request form and its receipt by the Loan Division showed that, for a library within the continental U.S., this time averaged five days. Requests from elsewhere in North America and from Hawaii took an average of six and one-half

days, those from Europe an average of eleven days, and those from Africa and Asia an average of nine and one-half days. There were no requests from South America in the sample.

(Although some European libraries sent all of their requests via air mail, others used surface mail. Because of this, the average for Europe was higher than that for Africa and Asia, where all libraries used air mail.)

These averages are broadly indicative of the transit time between the borrowing libraries and the Library of Congress. It should, however, be noted that these times may include additional nonmail time, for example, the time between the date written on the interlibrary loan form by the requesting library and the date on which the request was actually mailed.

The data permitted only one other analysis of time required in the process: the time required by the library to fill a request. The results (table 8) show great variations in the amount of time various units needed to fill requests—from almost six days to over twenty-seven.

The Loan Division reports that since this study was performed the time required to fill requests for material from the special collections has decreased substantially. The addition of staff designated to handle interlibrary loans to several of the special collection divisions has reduced the processing time to three to five days. Retrieval time for items in remote storage had also decreased by 1977—but only slightly—to about two weeks.

TABLE 8  
PROCESSING TIME AT THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

	Average Number of Days*
Request filled from general collections (i.e., by the Loan Division)	5.9
Request filled from special collections	
Music	27.4
Manuscripts	14.4
Orientalia	8.9
Serials	9.3
Law	12.1
Microforms	15.5
Request filled from remote storage locations	17.0

\*Two points about this average should be noted. First, it does not include the time required for the item to be charged out, wrapped, and mailed; all of this is done after the searcher has completed the request. Second, the average includes December cases, which are special. In December every request filed after the eleventh is held until the twenty-eighth for mailing, and only the latter date appears on the interlibrary loan form.

The study reported here has provided a basic description of the characteristics, outcome, and processing time of loan requests received by the Library of Congress. As interlibrary loan service continues to evolve

under the influence of task force and planning office recommendations, this study can serve as a base for measuring the direction and magnitude of changes that occur.

REFERENCES

1. Sarah Katharine Thomson, *Interlibrary Loan Involving Academic Libraries*, ACRL Monograph, no.32 (Chicago: American Library Assn., 1970).
2. Rolland E. Stevens, "A Study of Interlibrary Loan," *College & Research Libraries* 35:336-43 (Sept. 1974).
3. *Ibid.*, p.340. The single pass success rates that were compared were:  
 64 percent—Thomson, *Interlibrary Loan Involving Academic Libraries*, p.64-65.  
 71 percent—*A Study of the Characteristics, Costs, and Magnitude of Interlibrary Loans in Academic Libraries*, comp. by Vernon E. Palmour and others, prepared for the Association of Research Libraries by Westat Research, Inc. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Pub. Co., 1972), p.43, 46.  
 83 percent—*Interlibrary Loan in New York State* (New York: Nelson Associates, 1969), p.27.
4. Charles A. Goodrum, "Change at the Library of Congress," *Library of Congress Information Bulletin* 36:698-700, 711-12, 725-26 (1977).