OWLS

Wise multitype libraries form regional network to share resources

by Kevin Brandon and Sandra Yee

Because cooperation and resource sharing in Michigan has been loosely organized, few formal arrangements for resource sharing among multitype organizations have emerged. The libraries are a part of the OWLS (Oakland, Wayne, Washtenaw, Livingston, St. Clair Library Network) Region of Cooperation, a loosely knit organization that has been operating within the southeastern part of Michigan since the late 1980s.

In 1998, a group of seven libraries in Southeast Michigan wrote a grant for LSTA funding for a regional catalog, which would also make use of the latest technologies, in an effort to share resources and increase the speed of document delivery.

Organizing resource sharing

Regions of Cooperation (ROC) were formed in the early 1980s by the Library of Michigan to provide an organizational structure for the disbursement of LSCA grant monies, which were sent to the state to support multitype library resource sharing. These ROCs were set up geographically within the boundaries of the existing public library cooperatives. Membership in ROC is voluntary and all types of libraries within each cooperative's boundaries are invited to participate.

Michigan public libraries are grouped into cooperatives with specific geographic boundaries determined by the Library of Michigan. Membership in these cooperatives brings state-funded library services that may include shared cataloging, interlibrary loan services, acquisitions services, training, and delivery of shared items. Academic libraries, on the other hand, are totally autonomous. There is no statewide governing board over the 15 public academic institutions, rather the public and private institutions of higher education have been left to devise their own plan for resource sharing.

Over the years ROCs have been closely aligned with cooperatives. Funding for ROC operations has been through LSCA/LSTA funds channeled through the Library of Michigan. Funding for ROC operations has been meager, and it has recently been determined that funding will be phased out over the next three years.

Many times public library cooperatives have served as fiscal agents for ROCs, and several have been successful in winning LSCA/LSTA subgrant funding for leading-edge, technology-related projects.

Currently 145 libraries of all types are members of OWLS, with membership free and open to all. OWLS Executive Board has membership from each type of library and an ex-officio member from the Library Network, this region's cooperative. OWLS Executive Board, with the assistance of Library Network personnel, has written grants which

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have been funded for such technology-related projects as the purchase and installation of Ariel software and computer hardware in selected libraries who agree to resource sharing.

Also funded were the retrospective conversion of bibliographic databases of several large libraries, including the holdings of Eastern Michigan University, Concordia College, and the union listing of the University of Michigan serials into OCLC. Such projects were undertaken to enhance resource sharing within the region.

Developing a regional catalog

In 1998, a group of OWLS members met and proposed a grant to create a leading-edge technology project using Z39.50 to build a regional catalog that would allow patron-initiated interlibrary loan. Those interested have agreed to participate in the exciting LSTA grant project, which was funded at the $150,000 level.

The libraries participating in the project include Eastern Michigan University, the University of Michigan at Dearborn, Washtenaw Community College, Schoolcraft College, Orion Township Public Library, Baldwin Public Library, Bloomfield Township Public Library, Concordia College, Livonia Public Library, the Oakland County Research Library, and the Royal Oak Public Library.

These participants agreed to focus on three basic needs to support resource sharing: access to their library catalog through a central search site; an electronic system to request the loan of materials; and a document delivery system.

The development of the regional catalog central search site uses the Z39.50 protocol. OCLC's Web Z software was purchased, since it was necessary to interface a number of different automated catalog systems. A server was purchased and housed at the Michigan Library Consortium, which was contracted to provide technical support and expertise. The interface that was developed allows a single search to be done on all participating libraries' catalogs, on a select group of libraries, or on only one library as defined by the patron.

The search results provide the status of the item found, the call number, and the full bibliographic citation. All of these are important because the system will also incorporate a patron-initiated interlibrary loan form. Items can be requested as long as the patron has a home library. The message can be sent directly to the library from which the request is being made, and if the item can be sent, it is sent to the patron's home library. That library then charges the material to the patron. Items that have been requested can be sent to the home library via the delivery van that runs throughout the area. Each of the participating libraries are visited by the van either twice or three times per week.

Providing document delivery

In addition to the delivery van, however, the third identified need is being addressed using a new and creative solution for document delivery. Building upon previous grants that had supplied Ariel workstations to libraries within ROC, the group decided to purchase several more copies of the Ariel software for smaller libraries for fast and easy transmission of journal articles over the Internet.

Beyond the need to send paper articles, however, was the need to send transmissions of articles stored on microfiche and film. Eastern Michigan University, Concordia College, University of Michigan Dearborn, and the Oakland County Research Library all had major microform collections that could be made available.

The decision to use the newest technology available to transmit this format resulted in the purchase of digital microform scanners, which, when connected to a computer, could transmit the scanned images easily over the Internet without printing them out on paper. Using the Ariel software, transmissions from library to library are easy and fast. In addition, however, several libraries are using e-mail transmission as well, sending the articles directly to the patron. This technology is adding a new dimension to resource sharing.

At this time, most of the pieces for the OWLS Regional Catalog are in place and functioning. Check out the catalog at http://owls.lib.mi.us. A good deal of interest has been generated by the Oakland, Wayne, Washtenaw, Livingston, St. Clair Library Networkproject, and the libraries are hopeful that this can be used as a model for a statewide library catalog, statewide document delivery, and enhanced resource sharing. ■

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