3-2018

Canary in the Coal Mine: Utilizing Interlibrary Loan Requests to Monitor eResource Access

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Discovering Access Issues
When Interlibrary Loan staff receive requests for material they check against the catalog to make sure the items are not already owned before sending a borrowing request to another institution. Sometimes staff discover that the material is owned by patrons are unable to access it due to technical issues.

Why Interlibrary Loan?
The avenues for reporting access issues are not bountiful based on where one is during their search. While on the library website, there are links to “Ask Us” or “Contact Us” but when patrons go to a vendor’s site, the help links often address individual subscribers or authors and editors. Banner information showing the hosting institution does not always link back to the institution’s website.

Interlibrary Loan Borrowing:
Requests received from patrons at the home institution for materials not owned by the home institution

Food for Thought
Out of 4,644 of articles requests received from local patrons in 2017, only 10 had a note indicating that they were unable to access content held locally.

How is this affecting libraries and patrons?
Interlibrary loan staff act as help ticket liaisons when patrons don’t know who to ask, where to ask, or how to ask. Acting as a “canary in the coalmine” benefits both students and technical services librarians but does create extra work. Patrons will receive material after a longer wait time; how many patrons are not even making it to the ILL request stage once they come upon an obstacle?

Discovering Holdings Issues
Data that populates Interlibrary Loan lending requests is generated by OCLC holdings records. Often staff discover upon checking our own holdings that OCLC records have not been updated and convey inaccurate data to Interlibrary Loan staff at other institutions who are searching for material.

Why is this happening?
With the advent of “The Big Deal,” the task of updating holdings in OCLC has gone to vendors who load titles without holdings or do not update holdings when they add or take away volumes while local institutions’ staff primarily update a knowledge base.

Interlibrary Loan Lending:
Requests received from other institutions to borrow materials owned by home institution

Food for Thought
In 2017 25% (2,309) of Clemson’s Interlibrary Loan Lending requests were cancelled because of inaccurate holdings information.

How is this affecting libraries and patrons?
Interlibrary loan staff are wasting time placing borrowing requests for material that is not held; Interlibrary loan staff are wasting time processing lending requests for material that is not held. Patrons’ time is wasted while ILL staff unknowingly place bad requests and have them bounced from one library to another.