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Increasing Document Delivery to Off-Campus Students Through an Interdepartmental Partnership

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Abstract

At Central Michigan University, two separate departments in the Libraries have historically handled library services to distance learning and on-campus students. In 1999, Off-Campus Library Services and Interlibrary Loan (ILL) partnered to provide additional services to off-campus students through the on-campus ILL department. In this paper, the authors discuss the procedures, budget, successes and challenges of this interdepartmental cooperation.

Central Michigan University (CMU) has been providing courses and degree programs to off-campus students throughout North America for over 30 years. Early on, a separate library department was formed to deliver library services to off-campus students and faculty. This resulted in the CMU Libraries having two distinct and exclusive public service areas. Over the years, these areas worked independently and were funded out of different budgets. Unlike many academic libraries that provide services to distance learners and local learners out of the same public services departments, there was little or no service cooperation between the on and off-campus departments at CMU, although the staffs of both services have always cooperated in collection development. Students in the off-campus programs have been viewed as a separate constituency at CMU and have been served by a library program that evolved to fit their unique needs.

Off-Campus Library Services (OCLS) was formed in 1976 to serve the library needs of students and faculty in courses taught off-campus through CMU's College of Extended Learning (CEL). Since 1971, CEL has been delivering degree programs, certificate programs and professional development courses to approximately 12,000 students in over 60 locations throughout the U.S., Canada, and Mexico. Outside Michigan the two major degrees are a Master of Science in Administration (MSA) and a Master of Arts in Education (MAE). Within the state, in addition to those degrees, over 50% of the students are enrolled in undergraduate programs. Through the Distance and Distributed Learning (DDL) department, web-based courses are offered to students worldwide and include a Doctor of Audiology degree and a Doctor of Health Services Administration degree (scheduled to begin in 2002) in addition to the other degree programs mentioned. Courses taught through CEL are primarily offered in a concentrated format. Most classes meet on alternate weekends for six weeks or on weeknights for six, eight or nine weeks.

CEL offers degree programs at centers in metropolitan areas, most notably, Detroit, Washington, D.C., Atlanta and Kansas City. Students in cities have the option of using local academic and public libraries that are open to local users. However, many of the CEL programs are offered in remote areas and on military bases where the students might have to travel for more than an hour to a library with collections sufficient enough to support the needs of the programs. Because of the variety and number of locations where CEL delivers programs, it would be difficult for CMU to contract with local libraries to provide services for the off-campus students as many other academic institutions have done for their distance learners. OCLS was designed to provide all library services to CMU off-campus learners.

OCLS is made up of three separate departments, reference & instruction, document delivery, and copyright services. All services are accessed through a toll-free phone number, a toll-free fax number, email, or forms on the OCLS Web site.

Six reference librarians travel to the required research classes of all of the MSA and MAE students and to classes in the other degree programs, which require research, to conduct library instruction classes. These classes include instruction on all OCLS services. For online classes, instruction is done by chat. The librarians also provide reference assistance 52 hours a week by telephone, email, and chat.

The copyright office works with faculty members to obtain copyright permission on all print materials that are required for classes. The required items are reproduced in coursepacks that are sold to students through the bookstore used by CEL.

The Document Delivery Office (DDO) is responsible for taking requests for library materials from off-campus students and faculty and shipping them out within 24-48 hours of the request. The DDO staff loan books from the CMU Libraries to students for 30 or 42 days depending on their location within or outside the continental U.S. They also retrieve articles from the Libraries' collections and send them by mail, fax or electronically to students. Telephones are open 71 hours a week and students can also make requests through fax, email and forms on the OCLS web site.

The Interlibrary Loan Office (ILL) is a part of the Libraries' Collection Development department. ILL has two service sections. One part is responsible for filling borrowing requests for on-campus students, faculty and staff as well as for off-campus students. The other part responds to lending requests from other libraries in Michigan, the United States, and worldwide. CMU Libraries' material has been lent to libraries as far away as Australia and Indonesia. The office uses the latest electronic advances in ILL service—ARIEL and Prospero software—to send and receive digitized images via the Internet and to make these images accessible for each user at a World Wide Web address. Using these transmission methods in conjunction with a sophisticated ILL management system called CLIO has reduced ILL turn-around time.

In recent years with the advent of electronic full-text, all academic libraries have wrestled with the issue of "access versus ownership." The Dean of the CMU Libraries responded to this issue by actively promoting ILL service. ILL's move into electronic transmission was enthusiastically supported. In 1994, the Dean mandated that a portion of the acquisitions budget underwrite the cost of purchasing documents from commercial vendors who provide fast turn-around. As a result of this, ILL has a document-purchasing budget of about \$100,000 each year.

Off-campus students make requests for library materials by toll-free phone, toll-free fax, email or request forms on the OCLS Web site. As they are received, the requests are entered into a database under the student's name and coded for the date and hour in which they are entered. Students are allowed to request up to 50 items per week. Each request is printed onto a form as soon as it is entered into the database. Each request is checked by a DDO student assistant or staff member to see if the item is in the CMU Libraries' print collections. Student assistants gather those that appear in CENTRA, the Libraries' online catalog. Book requests, which generally average approximately 15% of the overall requests, are routed to one DDO staff member who checks out the books to the students and processes them for shipping. Articles are photocopied by student assistants and processed for mailing or electronic sending by a staff member.

Up until 1999, the process ended at this point. Students were informed of requests that were not filled and were advised by OCLS librarians that they had the option of requesting items not owned by CMU through ILL. However, this was generally not a viable alternative for students whose classes were held in a compressed format and who required materials in two to three weeks. Traditional ILL processes through the U.S. Mail or UPS could take sometimes up to six weeks to be filled. Most students chose not to try ILL. The best solutions for them were to look for other sources or try to locate the materials they needed at local libraries in their own communities. The exceptions to this were the off-campus students enrolled in MSA 685, the research and analysis course, in which students have up to one year to complete a final integrative project. They generally did not have the time constraints of the compressed courses and could take advantage of ILL service for their research.

Document delivery has been an important and busy OCLS service since the beginning. Off-campus students often take courses in remote locations with little access to other library services. CMU

serves these students with library resources from the campus library collections and ships the items directly to any address the students provide. The first six months that OCLS was in existence, the DDO processed 545 requests for library materials. The number of requests from students grew yearly until they peaked in the 1993-94 fiscal year, when the department processed 110,046 requests. The number of requests began to fall off steadily as the CMU Libraries made full text articles available to students through the Internet. As more online journals were made available, the number of requests continued to decline yearly. In FY 2000-2001, the number of DDO requests was 46,274.

Along with the decreasing requests, OCLS began to see an increase in the number of requests that were unfilled. In FY1993-94, the fill rate was 75%. (The fill rate is the percentage of requests that are sent to the student or faculty member within the stipulated timeframe.) By FY 1998-99, it had decreased to 60.44%. Most of this increase in unfilled requests has been attributed to the fact that many of the periodicals that were in the CMU Libraries' print collections were now accessible in electronic format through the OCLS Web site. Students were able to retrieve many of the articles they needed from the OCLS Web site and turned to OCLS only for the articles that were not readily available.

Throughout its history, one of the largest challenges that the DDO faced in filling requests was a gap in the Libraries' collections corresponding to courses taught off-campus. The degree programs that are taken off-campus by CEL normally are also taught on campus. The CMU Libraries' bibliographers ensure that the collections in the Libraries support the courses being taught on campus. In addition, OCLS has historically had an acquisitions budget with which they have maintained subscriptions to a variety of periodicals most requested by off-campus students and have added to the monograph collections whenever possible.

However, there are areas in which students off-campus have a need for specific publications that would not be collected by the Libraries because they do not support the on-campus curricula. In particular, health care and nursing journals especially are in high demand by off-campus students who are pursuing the MSA degree with a concentration in health services administration. Over the years, there arose significant subject areas, which the CMU Libraries did not ever anticipate growing, but which received substantial numbers of requests from students. In addition, the OCLS acquisitions budget was never large enough to maintain periodical subscriptions in all of these areas. For requests that OCLS could not fill, students were referred to local libraries in their areas or to Interlibrary Loan (ILL) if they had six weeks or more to wait for the articles. (Until 1998, OCLS librarians compiled lists of local libraries open to the public near most of the program centers so students would be aware of libraries they could use if OCLS could not supply the materials.)

From October 1993 to February 1995, OCLS partnered with ILL to pilot a project that would raise the OCLS fill rate by 1.16% over the trial period. Requests for articles that could not be supplied from the CMU Libraries' collections were submitted to ILL to be obtained from the CARL UNCOVER database where a deposit account for OCLS had been set up. The project ended in 1995 when its funding allocation had been expended and could not be replenished due to budget constraints. (Grudzien and Jones, 1995) Although the positive results for students were short-lived, the trial opened the door to partnerships with other library departments that OCLS had not considered before.

In 1999, an OCLS survey of the electronic journals that the CMU Libraries subscribed to or licensed revealed that a significant number were available that were not in the print periodical collections, which OCLS had always searched exclusively to fill student requests. A new position in OCLS was proposed and approved. In March 1999 a staff member was hired for the DDO who was responsible for searching the electronic collections for article requests that were not in the print collection. This resulted in an average increase in the monthly fill rate of about 4%.

In the spring of 1999 another significant change was made in the department. The DDO had tracked requests on a proprietary database that had been developed by a former student assistant. By the end of 1998, the database was starting to fail and no one in the library was able to correct the problems and the person who had done the original programming was no longer available. In late 1998, the position of Director of OCLS became vacant and during the period of the search process for a new director, the Head

of Collection Development and one of the OCLS librarians were appointed interim co-supervisors of the department. The Head of Collection Development supervised the DDO. Rather than create a new proprietary database, which may have been the decision of the Director of OCLS, she suggested that OCLS move the request-taking database to CLIO software, which was being used by ILL. OCLS agreed to this change and began a closer working relationship with ILL during the training process for the new database. ILL staff worked with DDO staff to assist them with their new procedures both during the transition and in the first few months working with CLIO. This close contact enabled the two staffs to understand better what services the other provided.

Shortly after the new Director of OCLS began in the summer of 1999, the manager of ILL suggested a new trial partnership with OCLS to assist off-campus students to retrieve articles from periodicals not owned in any of CMU's collections. She had collected statistics that showed that over 90% of articles requested through ILL were received within a three week time period. This represented a significant change over the past when articles could take four to six weeks to come in through ILL. Most articles were now received within the tight timeframe that off-campus students needed to do research for their compressed classes.

The two departments decided to set up a trial period beginning on November 15, 1999 that would be assessed near the end of the fiscal year in May or June of 2000. OCLS would monitor the "not-needed after date" (the last date a student determined that the requested material could be mailed in time for their use) of every unfilled request. Those that had a window of three weeks or more were sent to ILL to be filled. ILL offered to pay any costs that resulted from the OCLS requests for the trial period.

A new step was added to the DDO request processing procedure. After the print and electronic collections are checked for periodical requests, all of those not filled that have a "not needed after date" of three weeks or more are photocopied and carried to ILL. The students are sent a copy of the request that has a note explaining that the DDO will attempt to retrieve the article through ILL within their specified timeframe. One DDO staff member is designated to have the responsibility of carrying the requests to ILL daily and checking for articles that have been received.

No new steps in the ILL request processing procedure were needed. Off-campus requests are handled in the same manner as all other borrowing requests. However, the number of requests the ILL office processes has increased significantly in large part due to this partnership. In 1999 the total number of borrowing requests was 19,476. In 2000, ILL borrowing requests increased to 23,846 – a 22% increase. While ILL staff has noticed the increase in demand, new ILL technologies and a highly responsive and sophisticated software system have helped them efficiently manage this increase.

Although they no longer needed to request articles be obtained through ILL if the CMU Libraries did not own them, OCLS advertised the new procedure widely to off-campus students. Students had a tendency to give small timeframes for requests to be processed because they were under the mistaken impression that the longer timeframe they gave OCLS to send out the items, the longer it would take OCLS to process them. The OCLS staff embarked on a marketing campaign to convince students that it would be in their best interest to be honest about the length of time that they had to receive materials in a timely manner. OCLS always processes requests within a 24-48 hour time period and sends all requests they find in the libraries' collections out immediately. The DDO started sending flyers out with every envelope of filled requests announcing the new partnership with ILL. Information on the new procedure was available on the OCLS Web site and sent out to the CEL program administrators who worked directly with the students. The OCLS librarians explained the new process to students in instruction classes and in the first few months of the new partnership, received a great deal of feedback from students in those classes who were very pleased with the positive changes in the number of articles they were receiving. In particular, the health services administration students spoke out in classes about the significant increases in the number of requests they were receiving. Their success helped to convince fellow students to give lengthier "not needed after dates."

In the spring of 2000 representatives of OCLS and ILL met again to assess the program's success. From the point of view of OCLS, it was an unqualified success. The fill rate had increased by 12% in FY

1999-2000 over FY 1998-1999. The statistics showed that 63.7% of the requests were received within 7 days and 93.1% were received within 15 days by ILL. The ILL department had processed 1499 requests for OCLS in 1999 and 6334 in 2000. Students and CEL staff were so pleased with the increased fill rate that OCLS saw no way to discontinue the program. The greatest challenge that OCLS had was to find money in the budget to fund the program if ILL were not able to continue the funding. At the meeting, the Head of Collection Development agreed to commit ILL funds to the OCLS program for the next fiscal year.

In the spring of 2001, representatives of both departments met again to assess the program. The fill rate at the end of FY 2000-2001 was up an additional 2% to 74.39% from the start in November 1999. This was almost back to the fill rate of FY 1993-1994. The time that it takes to receive ILL requests had decreased significantly so the representatives of both departments decided to change the "not needed after date" window for ILL requests to two weeks from three. The Head of Collection Development agreed to fund the OCLS program for one more fiscal year.

It is a possibility that in the future, the funding of the OCLS/ILL program will no longer be able to come from the ILL budget. OCLS is unlikely to discontinue the partnership because it has added so significantly to service to CMU's off-campus students. If OCLS does take over the funding in FY 2002-2003, it is likely that some changes will take place. The most obvious may be to establish a budget for the ILL requests out of the OCLS acquisitions budget and to put a limit on the cost OCLS is willing to pay per article. These changes will limit the requests filled through ILL to a small degree while still maintaining the service for most of the requests.

There are a few challenges for this partnership in the near future. The ILL office has been moving toward paperless ILL. This will mean that requests submitted on paper forms soon will be the exception rather than the rule. DDO and ILL will be investigating ways to transmit off-campus students' requests electronically to ILL. The two services use request management software from the same company (CLIO). Although DDO uses a version that is adapted for a document fulfillment service rather than both lending and borrowing services as ILL does, it may be possible that the basic software functions existing in the two versions may be able to communicate and transmit requests between one another. A perennial challenge is budgeting. Changes in the state and national economies may cause a reordering of acquisitions budget priorities. It is unlikely that the enhanced service involving ILL will be stopped. The statistics show it is much too important and popular. It will be a challenge to determine the best ways to support equitable access for all CMU students, on and off campus.

The benefits of this partnership have been many. The most obvious is the increase in service to off-campus students. Additional advantages are the closer working relationship of the DDO and ILL and improved communication between OCLS and other departments in the Libraries. DDO and ILL staffs feel they are filling a large gap by meeting the information needs of a significant CMU student population. Historically OCLS had been isolated from other Libraries' departments. Since 1999, the DDO staff has worked with the ILL staff to learn and adapt the CLIO database to OCLS request taking and to establish electronic sending of articles to students. In December 2001, the DDO and ILL departments moved into adjoining offices in the renovated library building. This proximity should lead to future partnerships that will benefit both students and staff at CMU.

The success of this partnership has also opened the door to other partnerships between OCLS and other Libraries' departments. In the spring of 2001 a joint library committee decided to purchase chat software that would be used for reference and library instruction by librarians in OCLS, the Reference Services Department, and the Clarke Historical Library. Funds for the chat software came from the Libraries and the OCLS budgets. Later that year, OCLS and Reference Services began a discussion on services to students who took classes off-campus that were not delivered through CEL and reached some decisions on new and better ways to serve these students as a joint reference group.

As the distinctions between traditional on- and off-campus students become smaller, OCLS will most likely move closer to the other CMU Libraries' departments in its provision of services to CMU

students. The success of the partnership with ILL makes this a welcome new chapter in the history of OCLS.

Reference

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