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Interlibrary Loan in Mexico: two solutions to an age-old problem

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Abstract:

In spite of the great strides that have been made in recent years in improving Mexico's transportation and communication systems, obtaining material through interlibrary loan is still often difficult. This problem is exacerbated if the libraries involved are in different parts of the country or, even worse, if one of the libraries is located in another country. This paper focuses on two relatively small but successful programs that have been organized by the Grupo Amigos and the Transborder Library Forum (Foro). Both programs are important due to their international focus, but the latter program is particularly interesting due to changes that are being made at the Mexican coordinating library to allow end users to prepare their own ILL requests via the library's Web page, thus potentially speeding up the ILL process and giving the end users a more dynamic role in creating modern and efficient library services. The two programs will be compared and the authors will speculate on the future of interlibrary loan in Mexico.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper we will examine two interlibrary loan programs that operate between U.S. and Mexican libraries. The first is run by the Grupo Amigos and the second is a program established by the Transborder Library Forum or Foro.

2. THE GRUPO AMIGOS

The Grupo Amigos is a group of 13 Mexican libraries, principally located in the Mexico City metropolitan area, and 28 U.S. libraries. The group was formed in 1989 under the auspices of the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) and the Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México or ITAM to provide interlibrary loans. Robert A. Seal, who was then the University Librarian at UTEP, played a key role in establishing the group. Member libraries include those of some of Mexico's most prestigious universities and research centers as well as the libraries of major private and public universities in the U.S. Southwest. Since its inception, Grupo Amigos has received ample support from the Benjamin Franklin Library, which is the U.S. Embassy library in Mexico. The Franklin Library has played a critical role in sending books back and forth between the U.S. and Mexico, thus avoiding the need to rely on Mexico's often slow and unreliable postal service. This interlibrary loan program has also supported a document delivery service via the Franklin Library's mail service, fax and Ariel software.

Grupo Amigo activities have been coordinated on the Mexican side on a rotating basis, with different member libraries coordinating the program for two-year periods. It was first coordinated by the ITAM, then by the Colegio de México, the Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas or CIDE, and later by the University of the Americas. The program is currently coordinated by the campus located in the State of Mexico of the Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey, commonly known as the Monterrey Tec. On the U.S. side, the library at UTEP has played a permanent role as coordinator.

During the program's first five years, Mexican libraries borrowed heavily from their U.S. counterparts. This high demand later declined as Mexican libraries began to have OPACs and were able to provide more efficient resource sharing on a local level.

Recently, the Mexican members of Grupo Amigos have begun to focus their attention on other activities, such as providing continuing education courses and the organization of a major congress at the University of the Americas in Puebla in February, 2000. A second congress is being organized for 2002. You can find more information about the Congreso Amigos 2002 at <http://www.udlap.mx/fido/amigos/>

Some of this group's other achievements include the following: (1) purchase of the Ariel software as a consortium; (2) establishment of a procedure to request interlibrary loans first by fax and later by e-mail and (3) recognition by library administrators of the need to provide staff training on copyright legislation on a national and international level.

3. THE TRANSBORDER LIBRARY FORUM

The Transborder Library Forum, has also established a program to promote interlibrary loan between U.S. and Mexican libraries. It has used somewhat different strategies and has up to now focused exclusively on providing journal articles and book chapters.

In 1990, the Transborder Library Forum or Foro held its first meeting in Rio Rico, U.S.A. to promote the exchange of ideas and establish cooperative projects between libraries in the United States, Mexico and Canada. The Foro's annual meetings are alternatively held in the United States and Mexico. It has no headquarters and no officers. Each meeting is organized by a dedicated group of volunteers. The XI

Transborder Library Forum was held in March in Hermosillo, Mexico. Next year's conference will be held in Laredo, U.S.A.

4. THE TRANSNATIONAL INTERLIBRARY LOAN PROGRAM

The Foro's Interlibrary Loan Program is officially denominated as the "Transnational Interlibrary Loan Program". The program was originally designed to support the needs of smaller libraries, including academic, medical and special libraries. It was designed both to promote interlibrary loan between U.S. and Mexican libraries, as well as to stimulate ILL activity between libraries located in different parts of Mexico.

Interlibrary loan in Mexico functions almost exclusively at a local level. As early as 1995, a number of librarians began to express an interest in creating a project that would help them obtain journal articles not readily available in local libraries. Many hoped that U. S. academic libraries would be willing and able to help their Mexican colleagues by providing copies of articles available only in U. S. collections.

As a result of this interest, Robert A. Seal and Daniel Mattes later created a "Proposal for the Creation of a U. S. – Mexican Interlibrary Loan Working Group". In the proposal, it was expressly stated that among the goals of the program was the desire to strengthen interlibrary loan within Mexico as well as between the U. S. and Mexico. It was also agreed that articles would be sent between libraries via the Ariel software or by fax where Ariel was not available.

These same two librarians later prepared a new document entitled "Suggested Guidelines for Transnational Interlibrary Loans" and were encharged to organize and coordinate a pilot project which included 22 Mexican library participants and 11 U. S. library participants. All of the U.S. participants were academic libraries; Mexican participants included academic, medical and special libraries.

An evaluation was presented in 1998 on the basis of the short trial period mentioned previously. The group decided that the pilot project had been successful and recommended that it become a permanent program. 49 libraries are currently registered as participants in the Foro ILL Program, including 39 Mexican libraries and 10 U. S. libraries. 31 other Mexican libraries have participated in the program in an unofficial and sporadic manner.

5. NEW STRATEGIES

In response to basic needs expressed by program participants, since March, 2001 the library of the Universidad Anahuac has dedicated part of its Web page to the Transnational Interlibrary Loan Program. At this site one can find the guidelines under which the program operates and a directory of participating libraries. There is also a form which allows the end user to formulate his or her own interlibrary loan request.

The URL for the University Anahuac Library's main Web page is

<http://www.anahuac.mx/biblioteca/>. Information specific to the program can be found under "Services".

We plan to hold workshops to show users how the program works and thus empower them so that they can use the form to directly request materials from appropriate lending libraries. This means bringing about a major change of library user culture, since most of our users are accustomed to receiving personalized service by the librarians. It's also important to mention that at this point our users typically still do not provide complete bibliographic information in their requests for new acquisitions. It goes without saying that they have very little experience in locating material in other libraries via Internet and deciding which library can best help them. All of these abilities will have to be taught in the workshops or the program will become unworkable. If this process works at the Universidad Anahuac library, we will propose that other program participants attempt to implement similar strategies.

The library at the Universidad Anahuac is currently working with the university's Department of Academic Services to establish an Internet discussion list to improve communication between program participants.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The Grupo Amigos and the Transborder Library Forum have established different but complementary programs to meet the need of sharing information resources between libraries in Mexico and the United States. The Grupo Amigos program provides both books and documents; the Foro's ILL program deals almost exclusively with documents. The Grupo Amigo's program continues to work more or less as it has since its inception, with the end user playing a relatively passive role. The Foro's program is looking for ways to empower end users to make their own requests directly to lending libraries, thus giving the end user the chance to take a more dynamic role in the library and thus enjoy speedier and more efficient services. It is our hope that human creativity and technological innovative will provide the elements needed to improve these and other forms of resource sharing between libraries in the United States and Mexico. We do not foresee a library without walls or without librarians, but we do believe users are willing and able to play a more active role in creating the libraries they expect and deserve.

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