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## Unaffiliated Users' Access to Academic Libraries: A Survey

by Nancy Courtney

Most of 814 academic libraries surveyed allow onsite access to unaffiliated users, and many give borrowing privileges to certain categories of users. Use of library computers to access library resources and other computer applications is commonly allowed although authentication on library computers is increasing.

Unaffiliated users are possibly the least regarded user population of any academic library. Contributing no tuition and few, if any, tax dollars to the institution, their needs come after those of the enrolled students, faculty, and staff, if indeed their needs are considered at all. Yet, many academic libraries serve unaffiliated users, at least through onsite use of materials, as a by-product of service to their own populations, recognizing that the library possesses resources unobtainable at the local public library. Librarians from public institutions often perceive that private institutions, freed from the obligations imposed by receiving tax dollars, restrict or prohibit use of their libraries by outsiders. Librarians at private institutions, however, often see service to unaffiliated users not as a requirement but as a means to maintain good public relations in their communities. An investigation into the literature on academic library policies toward unaffiliated users revealed a number of articles on the pros and cons of allowing the public to use the library but only a few provide numerical data on the extent of public access.<sup>1</sup> The largest of these was a national survey of 1100 academic libraries done in 1965 by an ad hoc committee of the Association of College and Research Libraries' College Library Section.<sup>2</sup> Subsequent, more limited surveys were done of academic libraries in Virginia,<sup>3</sup> Georgia,<sup>4</sup> New York state,<sup>5</sup> and North Carolina.<sup>6</sup> In each case, the majority of libraries surveyed allowed in-house use to the public and varying degrees of additional privileges.

Many things have changed in academic libraries since the 1965 ACRL survey, notably the advent and growth of electronic resources and the increase in consortial arrangements. Has the public's access to academic library resources also changed? To answer this question, a national survey of 814 academic libraries was conducted in Winter 2001 regarding their policies toward unaffiliated users.<sup>7</sup> Onsite access (as opposed to remote access) to library resources was of primary interest, as well as the extent to which libraries allow free and open access and borrowing privileges or limit access to particular categories of users. Related questions were concerned with whether or not unaffiliated users were permitted to use library computers to access library materials or for other computer applications, or if the library used authentication to restrict access to their computers. In addition, libraries were asked about the extent to which they

**Table 1**  
**Libraries that allow unaffiliated users building access and borrowing privileges**

|   | Building Access |      | Borrowing Privileges |      |
|---|-----------------|------|----------------------|------|
|   | No.             | %    | No.                  | %    |
| Yes, unrestricted access to any unaffiliated user | 469             | 88.9 | 97                   | 18.4 |
| Yes, certain unaffiliated users may have access   | 58              | 11.0 | 407                  | 77.2 |
| Alumni  | 53              | 10.0 | 277                  | 52.5 |
| Consortia faculty                                 | 41              | 7.7  | 266                  | 50.4 |
| Consortia students                                | 39              | 7.4  | 251                  | 47.6 |
| "Friends" members                                 | 30              | 5.6  | 171                  | 32.4 |
| Other college or university faculty               | 35              | 6.6  | 144                  | 27.3 |
| Other college or university students              | 31              | 5.8  | 121                  | 22.9 |
| High school students                              | 22              | 4.1  | 69                   | 13.0 |
| Other   | 35              | 6.6  | 248                  | 47.0 |
| No access to any unaffiliated user                | 0               | 0.0  | 22                   | 4.1  |

have cancelled print resources in favor of electronic versions to determine if the trend toward electronic resources combined with restrictions on the use of library computers might limit the onsite availability of library materials to unaffiliated users.

## PROCEDURES

A survey of 13 questions was developed and mailed in February 2001 to the heads of public services or directors of 814 academic libraries chosen from higher education institutions listed in the 1994 Carnegie classification.<sup>8</sup> A random sample of 50% of the institutions listed was taken for each of the categories of "Baccalaureate Colleges" and "Master's Colleges and Universities," but all "Doctorate-Granting Institutions" were surveyed because of the small size of the population. Two-year colleges and specialized institutions were not surveyed. Responses were received from 527 libraries for an overall return rate of 64.7%. Baccalaureate institutions returned 199 surveys (a return rate of 63.1%), master's institutions 177 (67.3%), and doctoral institutions 151 (63.9%).

Of the 527 total returned surveys, 37.7% were baccalaureate institutions, 33.5% master's, and 28.6% doctoral. Public institutions represented 42.1% and 57.8% were private. There were 320 libraries (60.7%) having collections of fewer than 500,000 volumes, 86 (16.3%) between 500,000 and one million, and 121 (22.9%) more than one million. Institutions with student populations of less than 5,000 accounted for 59.2% of the returns, 10.6% had more than 20,000 students, and 30.1% were in between. There were 165 institutions (31.3%) located in urban areas, 85 (16.1%) in suburbs, and 277 (52.5%) in small town or city or rural areas. Two hundred sixty-one (49.5%) were Federal depository libraries.

## FINDINGS

### Onsite Access and Borrowing Privileges

Allowing unaffiliated users entrance to the library building to use library materials is the most common form of access. Libraries were asked to differentiate between unrestricted access

for any user and access to certain populations of unaffiliated users. To the question, "Do unaffiliated users have physical access to your library building during regular open hours?," 469 libraries (88.9%) indicated that they permitted unrestricted access to any user. These represented 83.6% of the private and 96.3% of the public institutions. Fifty-eight libraries (11.0%) permitted access only to certain categories of users, including alumni, consortia faculty and students, other college or university faculty and students, library "friends" members, high school students, or "other." Fifty of these libraries were private. High school students were the least likely category to have access. No library answered that it did not permit access to unaffiliated users. Reasons given for restricting access were security (32), impact on staff (26), impact on library materials (26), seating space (19), impact on facilities (15), or "other" (9). Of the responses, 98.1% indicated that unaffiliated users have access to reference assistance onsite.

Borrowing privileges are considerably more restricted than building access (Table 1). There were 18.4% of the libraries giving borrowing privileges to any unaffiliated user, 77.2% to certain categories of users, and 4.1 % did not grant borrowing privileges to unaffiliated users. Of the special categories of users, alumni (277) were the largest group to be granted access, followed closely by consortia faculty (266), consortia students (251), and "other (248)." The "other" category is of special interest since more than half of the libraries in this category granted what amounts to unrestricted access. Of the libraries that specified a certain user group in the "other" category, 35 granted borrowing privileges to anyone in the state (these were nearly all doctorate-granting institutions.) Eighty-five libraries (mostly private baccalaureate schools) reported granting privileges to anyone in a lesser geographic area (local community, county, or multi-county). The remaining 44 libraries granted privileges to anyone by issuing a courtesy card, most of which carried a fee and were granted to adults only. Public institutions (23.4%) versus private institutions (14.7%) allowed unrestricted borrowing privileges while 74.7% of the public versus 79.0% of the private institutions granted borrowing privileges to certain categories of users (Table 2).

**Table 2**  
**Public and private institutions that allow building access and borrowing privileges**

|  | Public (n = 222) |      | Private (n = 305) |      |
|--|------------------|------|-------------------|------|
|  | No.              | %    | No.               | %    |
| Building access to any unaffiliated user           | 214              | 96.3 | 255               | 83.6 |
| Building access to certain unaffiliated users      | 8                | 3.6  | 50                | 16.3 |
| No building access to any unaffiliated user        | 0                | 0.0  | 0                 | 0.0  |
| Borrowing privileges to any unaffiliated user      | 52               | 23.4 | 45                | 14.7 |
| Borrowing privileges to certain unaffiliated users | 166              | 74.7 | 241               | 79.0 |
| No borrowing privileges to any unaffiliated user   | 4                | 1.8  | 18                | 5.9  |

### Use of Library Computers and Authentication

Computer use in libraries has become a complicated matter, with many possible permutations ranging from catalog-only terminals to Internet- and library resource-access computers to fully equipped "lab" computers that allow additional functions such as email, word processing, and so forth. Additionally, the degree to which access is restricted to certain users through "authentication," that is, requiring users to login with a username and password to use a

computer (whether or not the user is an affiliated member of the institution), is difficult to determine. This survey attempted to distinguish between computer use for accessing library materials (the catalog, abstracts and indexes, and electronic journals) and computer use for other functions (e-mail, word processing, Web surfing, and other software applications). However, some libraries grouped things differently, for example, separating catalog use from databases and electronic journals. To the question, "Can unaffiliated users use computers in your library building to access library resources (e.g., online catalog, abstracts and indexes, electronic journals)?," 95.4% answered in the affirmative. To the question, "Can unaffiliated users use computers in your library building to do any of the following?," 79.8% checked "surf Web sites," 57.6% checked "e-mail," 31.8% checked "word processing," and 25.6% checked "other software applications (e.g., spreadsheets, scanning, and image processing)."

Authentication is a growing trend in academic libraries. Campus computing labs typically have been restricted to affiliated users while libraries have allowed open access to computers. Networking provides the means to restrict access to affiliated users by requiring an institutional login and password to use a computer or to use certain functions on the computer. Some campus computing centers strongly encourage libraries to adopt authentication on their public access computers to prohibit anonymous access to the Internet. Libraries typically are in favor of user anonymity but may bow to pressure from the computing center or from database vendors through their licensing arrangements. They may or may not provide temporary logins for unaffiliated users. The survey did not attempt to uncover the reasons for authentication but merely the extent to which it is in use or is planned. Seventy-two libraries (13.6%) answered "yes" when asked if they require that all users to authenticate to use computers within the library building to access library resources. Four hundred fifty-one (85.5%) answered "no" and 4 did not answer. Of those who responded "no" to the previous question, when asked if the library planned to require authentication within the next twelve months, 56 (12.4%) answered "yes," 324 (71.8%) answered "no," and 148 did not answer. Of the total number of libraries responding to the survey, 24.2% are currently using authentication or plan to do so. (These represent 22.0% of the public and 25.9% of the private institutions responding to the survey.) A separate question addressed the issue of authentication for computer functions other than accessing library resources. One hundred forty-four (27.3%) required authentication to use e-mail, 115 (21.8%) for word processing, 113 (21.4%) for other software applications, and 90 (17.0%) to surf Web sites (Table 3).

### **Electronic versus Printed Library Resources**

If authentication may restrict the unaffiliated user from using the library's computers, to what extent does this limit access to materials that were previously in print (and therefore available onsite) but are now available only electronically? Each library was asked to estimate the degree to which it has cancelled printed versions of indexes or abstracts and periodicals that it has available in electronic form. Regarding indexes and abstracts, 31 libraries (5.8%) indicated they had cancelled "none," 292 (55.4%) "some," 179 (33.9%) "most," 24 (4.5%) "all," and one did not answer. With respect to electronic journals, magazines, or newspapers, 100 libraries (18.9%) had cancelled "none," 371 (70.3%) "some," 46 (8.7%) "most," 4 had cancelled "all," and 6 did not answer (Table 4).

**Table 3**  
**Libraries that allow unaffiliated users access to computer functions and that require authentication for all users**

|                             | Unaffiliated users<br>may have access |      | Authentication is<br>required for all<br>users |      |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------------|------|--|------|
|                             | No.                                   | %    | No.  | %    |
| E-mail                      | 304                                   | 57.6 | 144  | 27.3 |
| Word processing             | 168                                   | 31.8 | 115  | 21.8 |
| Surf Web sites              | 421                                   | 79.8 | 90   | 17.0 |
| Other software applications | 135                                   | 25.6 | 113  | 21.4 |

**Table 4**  
**Libraries that have cancelled printed abstracts and indexes or journals that they have available electronically**

|                | Abstracts and indexes |      | Journals, magazines,<br>and newspapers |      |
|----------------|-----------------------|------|--|------|
|                | No.                   | %    | No.                                    | %    |
| Cancelled none | 31                    | 5.8  | 100                                    | 18.9 |
| Cancelled some | 292                   | 55.4 | 371                                    | 70.3 |
| Cancelled most | 179                   | 33.9 | 46                                     | 8.7  |
| Cancelled all  | 24                    | 4.5  | 4                                      | 0.7  |
| No answer      | 1                     | 0.1  | 6                                      | 1.1  |

There is probably no relationship between a library's decision to cancel printed library resources in favor of the electronic format and the decision to require authentication, but there is possibly an unintended effect of diminishing access for unaffiliated users. Of the 419 libraries that reported canceling some, most, or all of their printed abstracts and indexes, 118 or 24% also reported requiring or planning to require authentication on their library computers. Of the 421 libraries that reported canceling some, most, or all of their printed journals, magazines, or newspapers, 104 or 25% also reported requiring or planning to require authentication. (The survey did not attempt to determine whether or not these libraries provide or intend to provide guest user logins for unaffiliated patrons.)

### **A Mission to Serve Unaffiliated Users?**

The final question asked, "If it is part of your library's mission to serve unaffiliated users, please tell us why." The answers to this question ranged from a flat statement (in 27 cases) that it was *not* a mission of the library to the desire to foster good community relations and the obligation imposed by virtue of being a tax-supported, public institution. Other common reasons cited were service to local or state residents, membership in a consortium, status as the largest library in the area, presence of unique collections, recruitment of new students, and inadequacy

of the public library. Only 33 libraries mentioned being a federal depository library as a motivating factor, although 261 of the libraries answering the survey had that status. Additionally, although only 31 mentioned consortium membership as a reason for considering unaffiliated user access part of the library's mission, the answers to the question about borrowing privileges shows that 266 libraries were involved in a consortial arrangement permitting circulation to faculty from other institutions. The most frequent reason, fostering good community relations, was given by 134 libraries (42 public and 92 private institutions) (Table 5).

**Table 5**  
**Libraries providing reasons why it is part of their mission to serve unaffiliated users (may have chosen more than one)**

| Reason   | No. | %    |
|--|-----|------|
| Community relations                              | 134 | 25.4 |
| Tax-supported, public, or state institution      | 117 | 22.2 |
| Service to state or local residents              | 34  | 6.4  |
| Federal depository library                       | 33  | 6.2  |
| Largest or major library in the area             | 32  | 6.0  |
| Membership in a consortium                       | 31  | 5.8  |
| Recruitment of new students                      | 15  | 2.8  |
| Library has some unique collection(s)            | 11  | 2.0  |
| Public library inadequate                        | 8   | 1.5  |
| Some other reason                                | 72  | 13.6 |
| Stated that it is <b>not</b> part of the mission | 27  | 5.1  |

## CONCLUSION

Most academic libraries, whether public or private, allow unaffiliated users access to their buildings and reference services. Additionally, a large percentage of academic libraries also allow borrowing privileges, if not to all then to an extensive network of special categories of users, particularly alumni and consortia faculty and students. These results are similar to the 1965 ACRL survey in which 94% of academic libraries permitted in-building use to unaffiliated users and 85% offered circulation privileges to some users.<sup>9</sup> While private colleges and universities are more restrictive than public, a high percentage offered both in-building access and borrowing privileges. Private institutions more often cited good community relations as a motivating factor in offering services to unaffiliated users and favored their local communities while public institutions more often granted statewide or universal privileges and cited state tax support as a reason.

Academic libraries have also been generous in allowing computer use by unaffiliated users in their libraries. While most allow use of computers to access library resources, a significant number also allow general Internet use, e-mail, word processing, and other applications. However, the use of authentication is growing in academic libraries with 24.2% of respondents indicating they already authenticate or plan to do so. It is not clear to what extent authentication actually restricts unaffiliated users from using scholarly resources on-site. It is clear that a significant number of libraries have canceled printed resources in favor of their

electronic versions, most often indexes and abstracts but increasingly electronic journals and other periodicals. Those who work in academe are apt to take access to scholarly material for granted. Academic libraries are a significant resource for the communities beyond their institutional boundaries and offer resources that public libraries do not. It is important that academic librarians consider carefully the implications that vendor licenses and campus computing policies have for the use of materials by outside users. As greater numbers of resources shift to electronic-only formats, is it desirable that they disappear from the view of the community user or the visiting scholar?

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