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Interlibrary Loan between the United States and Latin America: The Current Landscape

Megan Gaffney

University of Delaware Library, Newark, Delaware USA

E-mail address: gaffneym@udel.edu



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Abstract:

Resource sharing between libraries in the United States and Latin America has typically not been robust, despite the two areas' geographic proximity. Librarians in the United States have suggested potential reasons for this perceived absence of cross-border cooperation, ranging from a lack of participation in WorldCat to turbulent political climates in some areas of the region, but there are few formal studies investigating the current state of resource sharing between Latin American territories and institutions outside that geographic classification. This paper will summarize the results of a survey distributed to librarians and library staff in university libraries in Latin American countries and territories to gather information about the current landscape of resource sharing activities both within and outside of the region. The survey asks about local policies and practices in an attempt to foster greater understanding of how resource sharing looks in a Latin American context and to broaden international understanding of potential collaborations between libraries inside and outside Latin America.

Keywords: interlibrary loan, resource sharing, Latin America, préstamo interbibliotecario

Introduction

This study attempts to build upon previous inquiries into international interlibrary loan (ILL) with a specific focus on Latin America and the United States (U.S.). It does not intend to be comprehensive or to capture a complete picture of resource sharing in Latin America but rather seeks to enhance practitioners' understanding of challenges and opportunities for relationships between libraries in the two regions. It attempts a more qualitative perspective on participants' practices related to interlibrary loan, going beyond the capture of statistics and requesting more free-text responses to questions. This study also uses data from the recent RUSA STARS International Interlibrary Loan survey as a point of departure: while that study has produced a high rate of return from libraries around the world, it lacks participation from Latin American libraries. Only thirteen libraries responded to that survey and indicated a location of "Central or South America," while only one library from Mexico is represented (H. Nance, personal communication, April 1, 2016).

Definitions

For purposes of this study, Latin America is defined as any country or territory south of the U.S. in which a romance language is primarily spoken. Puerto Rico is included. Interlibrary loan (or “préstamo interbibliotecario”) was intentionally not defined for survey participants: the goal was to capture policies and procedures related to sharing between libraries. Although this open term could skew results depending upon respondents’ interpretation of the term, it was more important to ensure that a United States-centric concept of interlibrary loan did not create the framework for responses: the goal was to gain insight into lending practices within, among, and with libraries outside of Latin American countries and territories.

Literature Review

Several core papers have provided insight into resource sharing in Latin America. Elda Monica Guerrero (1995) studied Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico, and Venezuela nearly twenty years ago; at that time, only 14% of the 39 libraries she studied offered international interlibrary lending services (p. 13). She noted the obstacles to interlibrary loan in the institutions she interviewed, including copyright legislation, insufficient time and/or personnel, inefficient postal services, and a lack of national interlending codes (p. 13-14). Graham P. Cornish (2001) provides an excellent overview of interlibrary loan activities in Latin American countries based upon the reports presented at a September 1999 Universal Availability of Publications (UAP) program hosted by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) and based on the conference proceedings of the 60th IFLA General Conference. He observed three categories of interlibrary loan activity within Latin America: first, “those [countries] with systems, demand and collections,” such as Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Mexico; second, “those with systems but very limited collections and therefore limited demand,” such as Cuba; and finally, “those with none of these elements in place,” such as Honduras, Paraguay, and Peru (Cornish, 2001, p. 126).

Maurice B. Line, et al. (2002) speculated on the impact and future of interlibrary loan and included comments on the “developing world.” Henri Sène notes that such a service may help libraries in the South with “a great opportunity to limit the paucity of their documentary heritage, by offering possibilities for access to resources available in other countries,” though he acknowledges that an interlibrary loan/document supply program presupposes that an institution has the appropriate level of human and technical resources (Line et al, 2002, p. 63). In the same article, Elda Monica Guerrero observes that interlibrary loan in an age of growing dependence on licensed electronic resources may be difficult: librarians in developing countries may find themselves operating under restrictive license terms because they do not have “the resources, time or expertise necessary to present a better contract deal” (Line et al, 2002, p. 60).

Linda Frederiksen, Margaret Bean, and Heidi Nance (2011) provide a brief overview, including a list of active consortia, of practices in Latin America and the Caribbean in their book *Global Resource Sharing*. They present a case study of Argentina, observing that “no centralized interlibrary loan system exists in Argentina and international requests are dealt with on a library-to-library basis” (Frederiksen et al., 2011, p. 102). This arrangement echoes much of what Elda Monica Guerrero has observed about the need for more centralized oversight of interlibrary loan in many countries in the region.

A recent study that includes an excellent review of the literature on interlibrary loan in Latin America and the Caribbean was published by LeEtta M. Schmidt in 2014. Schmidt conducted a survey and reported on statistics such as collection size, circulation trends, interlibrary loan

activity, and systems used. She found that 61% of the libraries in her study charge library patrons for ILL services and that 60% of them do not lend internationally. These numbers provide some insight into interlibrary loan activity: the majority of respondents do not lend internationally as a rule, and the majority also will charge their own users for a practice that is well-documented as very expensive. She also found that respondents rank copyright law, postal difficulties, and electronic books as the issues that most affect interlibrary loan; in terms of international interlibrary loan specifically, respondents to Schmidt's survey selected costs, time, and danger of loss as the greatest obstacles. She notes, building upon an earlier study by Robert Seal, that "the drive to develop and improve international interlibrary loan services locally and nationally seems to be primarily based on demand over any other force or obstacle" (Schmidt, 2014, p. 130).

Another recent publication by Stephen G. Marvin (2015) provides a comprehensive overview of resource sharing (using a broader definition than traditional 'interlibrary loan' that includes consortial sharing, open access, and digitization efforts) and current issues ranging from copyright and literacy. Marvin and Karla Rodríguez Salas (2011) wrote on the challenges related to consortium development in Latin America; these also provide insight into barriers to interlibrary loan. One fascinating observation by Marvin and Rodríguez Salas is that "*la tradición cultural histórica de la familia explica las dificultades para superar con el desarrollo de la colección de consorcio*" (the cultural tradition of the family explains the difficulties in achieving consortial collections). Institutional pride may prevent the sharing of specialized resources and/or developing shared collections.

Many more studies describing libraries and/or resource sharing activity in specific countries in Latin America exist, but are not being reviewed here because of the more generalized approach of this survey. There are additional papers, presentations, and other resources which analyze successes in and barriers to international interlibrary loan on an even larger scale.

Methodology

The survey was designed to ask about interlibrary loan policies and practices to answer colloquial questions about why Latin American and U.S. libraries do not appear to have stronger resource sharing relationships. A survey invitation in both Spanish and English, with links to the survey in both languages, was emailed to Latin American and Caribbean libraries. Only one library in an English-speaking country in the Caribbean responded; therefore, results only from Latin American libraries were analyzed. In distributing the survey, where it was possible to identify a person or department responsible for lending collections, the survey invitation was sent to that address; otherwise, the invitation was sent to a general email address for the library. OCLC Mexico staff sent the survey invitation to member institutions on the researcher's behalf. 147 direct email invitations to unique institutions were sent with a focus on reaching numerous libraries in each country/territory. The exact number of potential respondents reached is unknown: several respondents generously shared it with colleagues. A link to the survey was also posted to the Seminar for the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials (SALAM) Facebook group.

The survey consisted of twelve questions, some of which were displayed depending upon respondents' answers to previous questions. All survey respondents were asked which barriers they saw between their country/territory and other countries, where they loaned physical materials and sent journal articles, and from which countries/territories returnables and journal articles were requested on behalf of users. In keeping with the focus of the study, if participants did not indicate that they loaned to or borrowed from the U.S., an additional question was

displayed to ask why. The survey also provided a final, free-text, optional question asking for any comments related to interlibrary loan. At the end of the survey, respondents were asked to select their library type and their country/territory. All survey responses were anonymous.

Results

There were 71 surveys started in Spanish, and 43 were completed. The response to the English-language version was much smaller: 13 surveys were started and 7 were completed. Again, one response was not included in this analysis because it falls outside of the “Latin America” geographic classification. Eleven countries and Puerto Rico were represented (Figure 1). The majority of responses came from university libraries (84%), with responses from five special libraries, two public libraries, and one national library. Three additional libraries replied (two university, one national library) to say they would not be taking the survey because they offered no interlibrary loan services of any kind.

Barriers to International Interlibrary Loan

By far, the largest perceived barriers to sharing were shipping/transportation of materials ($n=40$) and cost ($n=35$). Intellectual property/copyright laws, technology, and language were also selected by respondents (Figure 2). When respondents were asked to provide examples of shipping and transportation problems, cost was mentioned more frequently than concrete problems with transporting materials: it is expensive to ship materials between countries or sometimes, within them. If the institution cannot pay the high cost of shipping, users might be charged fees that they are unwilling or unable to pay. Lost items were another concern for respondents, some of whom indicated that it would be difficult to initiate the process of replacement. An inability to pay shipping fees was mentioned by one library. One respondent indicated a lack of confidence in the country’s postal service and its ability to transport materials securely. Some libraries found that between the cost of international interlibrary loan, speed of delivery, and risk of loss, it was easier instead to purchase materials needed by users whenever possible. These concerns about shipping and cost echo discussions about international interlibrary loan regardless of the country of the institution: it can be costly, take many weeks, and there is a significant fear of material loss.

Respondents also indicated that fees charged by other libraries, bank transfer fees, and currency conversion constituted barriers to interlibrary loan. Two libraries mentioned that they do not have IFLA vouchers. One of these respondents therefore could not request from other countries and the other indicated that international transactions were possible but difficult. These replies did not explain why these institutions did not have access to IFLA vouchers.

When asked about intellectual property laws in the context of interlibrary loan, several Brazilian respondents pointed to the *Lei de Direito Autoral (Ley N° 9.610, de 19 de febrero, 1998)*, or Authors’ Rights Law; in fact, 36% ($n=5$) of the 14 libraries that identified copyright laws as a barrier were from Brazil. This law was described as both prohibiting any transactions outside of Brazil and restricting the number of pages that might be copied for another library. Differing interpretations of this law indicate a problem that seems prevalent in many countries with resource sharing programs: practitioners may be operating under varying interpretations of the law. One troubling response from a Puerto Rican library indicated that U.S. libraries often approach lending to them as they would approach lending to a foreign country: as a U.S. territory, this library follows U.S. copyright law but has seen resistance to sharing from U.S. libraries. A Bolivian library indicated that there is no real culture of interlibrary loan in that country, nor does their authors’ rights law have a section addressing what might be permitted for interlibrary lending.

Interlibrary Loan Practices in Latin America

Participants were asked to which locations their libraries would lend returnable materials. 84% ($n=41$) reported that they lend within their country or territory. Only 18% ($n=9$) reported that they lend to the U.S., while 10% ($n=5$) lend to any country. Results were similar for providing book chapters and journal articles: 67% ($n=33$) reported a willingness to lend within their country. 16% ($n=8$) send articles to the U.S. and 37% ($n=18$) send to any country. These results reflect the comments made by reporting institutions regarding the barriers to interlibrary loan: many libraries are unwilling or unable to lend across borders because of high costs, security/transportation concerns, or legal restrictions. Those libraries may, however, send non-returnable items because of the lower risk and lower cost involved with those transactions, though not every library is legally allowed (or contractually allowed, in the case of licensed electronic resources) to share reproductions of articles.

Libraries that did not indicate a practice of lending to the U.S. received an additional question asking why. Nearly all responses to this question reflected the same concerns expressed about general barriers to interlibrary loan: it is expensive, currency conversion is difficult, and it takes a long time. Several responses were interesting in light of typical practices in U.S. interlibrary loan. Three respondents indicated that there was no existing agreement or policy that allowed for resource sharing between their library and those in the U.S. This response highlights an important detail for requesting libraries outside Latin America: in some operations, including many in the U.S., practitioners are accustomed to searching for potential lending libraries and sending an inquiry or request form to those institutions. Response rates to these efforts may be low because many institutions in Latin America do not frequently receive requests from external organizations without an existing agreement or relationship. In contrast, 31% ($n=15$) of respondents indicated that they would lend materials to the U.S. but never receive requests. In 1995, Elda Monica Guerrero observed that only 20% of the libraries she studied based interlibrary lending on national or IFLA codes; “in all other cases, practices were based on interinstitutional agreements” (p. 13). It seems that tendency has not changed drastically since that study.

The next set of questions in the survey asked participants from which locations their libraries would borrow returnable loans. 84% ($n=41$) reported that they request materials within their country or territory. 20% ($n=10$) request from the U.S. and 16% ($n=8$) request from any country. The same question was asked about journal articles or book chapters: 80% ($n=39$) requested non-returnables from within their country or territory. The number of respondents that were willing to request from the U.S. or any country were higher than they were for returnable items. 35% ($n=17$) request from the U.S., and 31% ($n=15$) request from any foreign country.

Again, libraries that did not indicate a practice of requesting from the U.S. were asked if there were reasons. The majority of respondents indicated that shipping/transportation and cost were the primary barriers. 29% ($n=14$) would request returnable materials from the U.S., but their researchers did not request materials that would require borrowing from a U.S. library, and 33% ($n=16$) selected this reason with regard to non-returnable items. One response indicated that the British Library fulfilled all its English-language needs. Two respondents indicated that they did not request returnable items because their libraries did not have an agreement with foreign libraries. Another participant wrote that they did not request “*por desconocimiento de PIB en bibliotecas extranjeras*” (lack of familiarity with ILL in foreign libraries). Several respondents indicated that they did not need to request journal articles from other libraries

because they relied on the internet, or on specific databases (such as EBSCO, ebrary, and Dialnet), to retrieve needed information.

Discussion

The data collected through this survey and previous studies show that interlibrary loan in Latin America will not routinely fit the model of resource sharing that U.S. practitioners might expect, and that it is not possible to capture the nuances of interlibrary loan in each country/territory of Latin America in one study. A respondent to this survey indicated that “*no hay una cultura de préstamo interbibliotecario*” (there isn’t a culture of interlibrary loan) in Bolivia; a Colombian respondent said that “*no hay modelo*” (there is no model) and “*no veo la practicalidad*” (I don’t see the practicality) of an international interlibrary loan program. Responses like these highlight the importance of approaching interlibrary loan and resource sharing in Latin America, or any area of the world, with an understanding that preconceived models of one practitioner may differ from the experience of a practitioner elsewhere. Interlibrary loan has become a common, well-regarded service for library users in the U.S., but it does not necessarily enjoy that same status in all libraries of the world.

Though many respondents to the survey indicated that there was no practice or culture of interlibrary loan in their institutions, others expressed willingness to share resources between countries or continents. Some libraries in Latin America subscribe to OCLC’s WorldShare ILL platform. Unfortunately, even among subscribers, lending through WorldShare ILL is not robust. In 2015, a library in Mexico was very active, fulfilling 31% of the requests their institution received. The next highest lender through WorldShare ILL in Latin America, however, fulfilled only twenty requests (a 6% fill rate), and many libraries never fulfilled any request that was received. Very few requests were fulfilled by libraries in Brazil via WorldShare ILL, though over 2,000 requests to borrow from other institutions were initiated in 2015; the next most active borrower, in Chile, initiated over 1,000 requests of other libraries (T. Melvyn, personal communication, April 11, 2016). These data suggest that in some institutions, there is a demand from users for materials not locally available, and libraries have developed a program for fulfilling those requests. Lending materials may not be as easy, or as much of a priority under constrained financial and human resources, as borrowing them. The drastic difference between borrowing and lending in Brazil also could be partially explained with Brazilian libraries’ response to this survey indicating that lending many materials is difficult or impossible due to national laws. A Brazilian respondent stated that “books are considered equity in Brazilian public university libraries. We cannot ship books out of the country.” These statistics also confirm Cornish’s observations about which are the best-equipped libraries in Latin America to offer interlibrary loan services.

Another theme that emerged throughout this survey is the importance of consortia in Latin America to share resources unavailable from a user’s home library. Along with sponsors such as IFLA and the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publication (INASP), and the International Coalition of Library Consortia (ICOLC), Stephen G. Marvin has worked extensively at consortium-building in Latin America but also notes that “to guarantee the success [of the consortia and other resource sharing activities], further senior management buy-in and other research agency involvement is needed” (Marvin, 2015, p. 143). Participants in this survey specifically mentioned the politics and the lack of policies surrounding resource sharing or the potential to carry out such a program. There are also mixed responses on whether enhancement to resource sharing capabilities was desirable: many libraries responded that they would lend to or borrow from the U.S., but never received requests. Others did not see the need for such a program, which may in some cases be explained by lack of demand from local

users. It is notable that in carrying out this study, numerous institutions were not contacted to participate in the survey because it was impossible to locate an email address for the library. Some libraries might be willing to provide resources to colleagues outside the region, but it is not easy for practitioners to start the correspondence that would result in a formal request.

Conclusion

In keeping with previous studies both on international ILL and Latin America, cost and transportation emerged as major concerns for Latin American libraries who may wish to lend to or borrow from libraries outside of their own country or territory. This information is worthy of further, more country-specific exploration, but it is also imperative for practitioners to understand the significance of their perceptions of interlibrary loan in Latin American libraries. One survey participant noted a “*falta de confiabilidad de las Bibliotecas de USA en las Bibliotecas Latinoamericanas*” (U.S. libraries do not trust Latin American libraries). This response is troubling, though may not be surprising: if U.S. libraries colloquially express a lack of understanding about working with libraries or with postal services in Latin America, then a lack of familiarity might breed mistrust or the appearance of it.

Some contemporary Latin American scholars encourage an examination of that region and other developing areas not through typical Eurocentric points of reference, but rather through a “decolonial” perspective. Walter Mignolo observes that “the Third World was not invented by the people who inhabit the Third World, but by men and institutions, and languages and categories of thought in the First World” (2011). This is a very simplistic attempt at summarizing contemporary decolonial thought, but it is an important frame of reference for considering interlibrary loan in Latin America on an international scale. Some libraries in this survey expressed an interest in developing partnerships with libraries in the U.S., and those partnerships would be beneficial both for exchange of materials and for learning opportunities. It is imperative to remember, however, that laws, cost, and time are not the only barriers to seamless interlibrary loan between two areas of the world: a requesting or lending library cannot assume that resource sharing generally works or should be approached the same way in another library’s country. Even studying Latin America as a whole does a disservice to the rich diversity within that geographic classification, though observing trends in interlibrary loan activities can provide a beginning framework for considering possible collaborative opportunities between libraries in the two regions.

It is also important for practitioners to recognize that the ability to place or fulfill a request under U.S. copyright law does not translate to an institution in another country being able to place or fulfill the same request: a library in the U.S. may be able to legally request a copy of an item from a colleague in Mexico, and it may not be legal for the Mexican library to fulfill that request. At least one survey respondent mentioned that interlibrary loan is difficult or impossible because of the bureaucracy in his or her institution and country. Practitioners of interlibrary loan looking to work with Latin American libraries should know that what is routinely possible in some operations may be difficult or impossible to carry out in an environment that is not equipped to regularly promote or provide interlibrary loan services. There is great potential for libraries in these two areas of the world to collaborate and transform resource sharing initiatives, and practitioners will benefit from approaching these relationships with the understanding that staffing, cost, transportation concerns, bureaucratic or political limitations, and differing practices will all play a role in interactions.

Figures

Figure 1. Respondents' Country/Territory

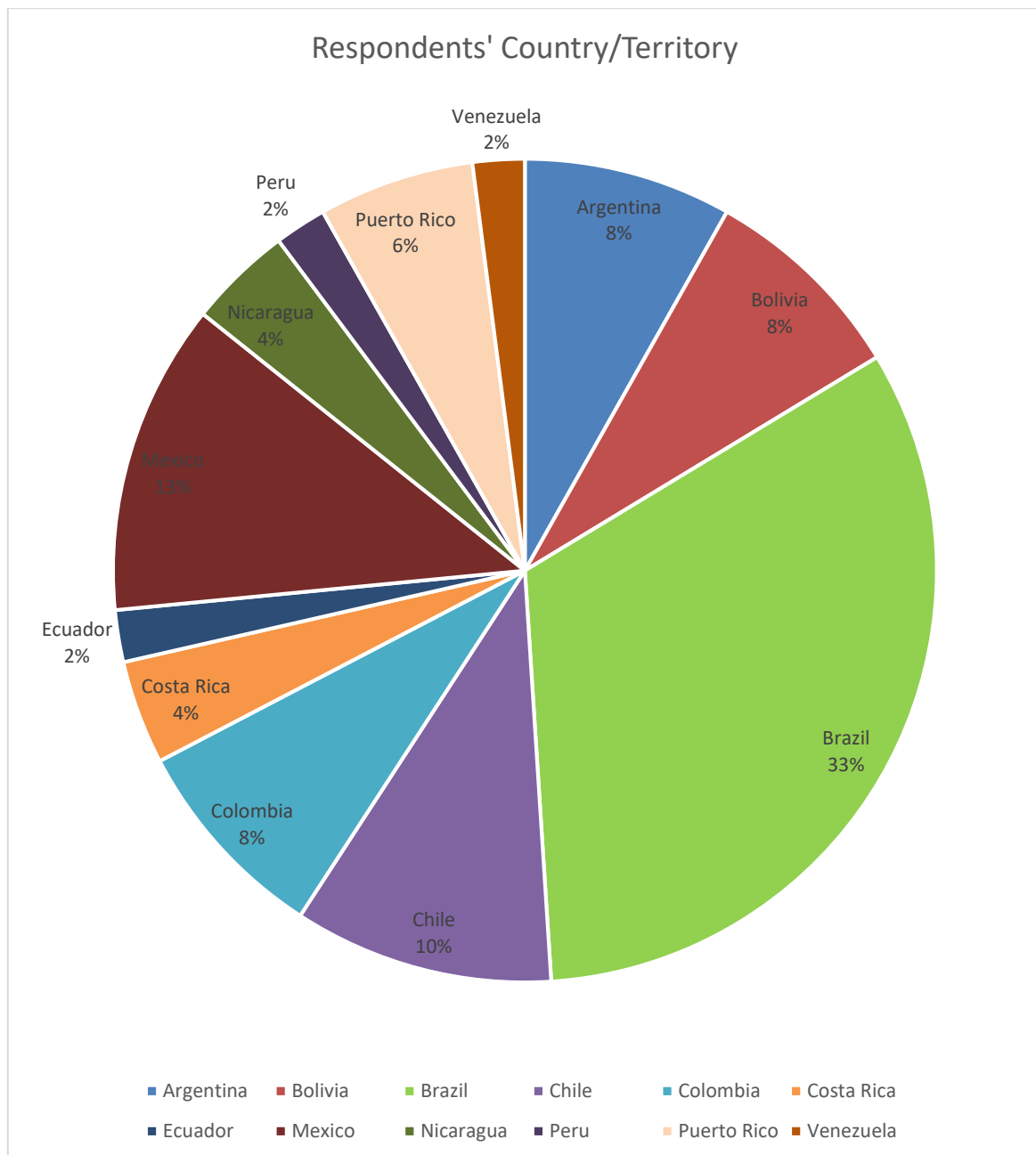
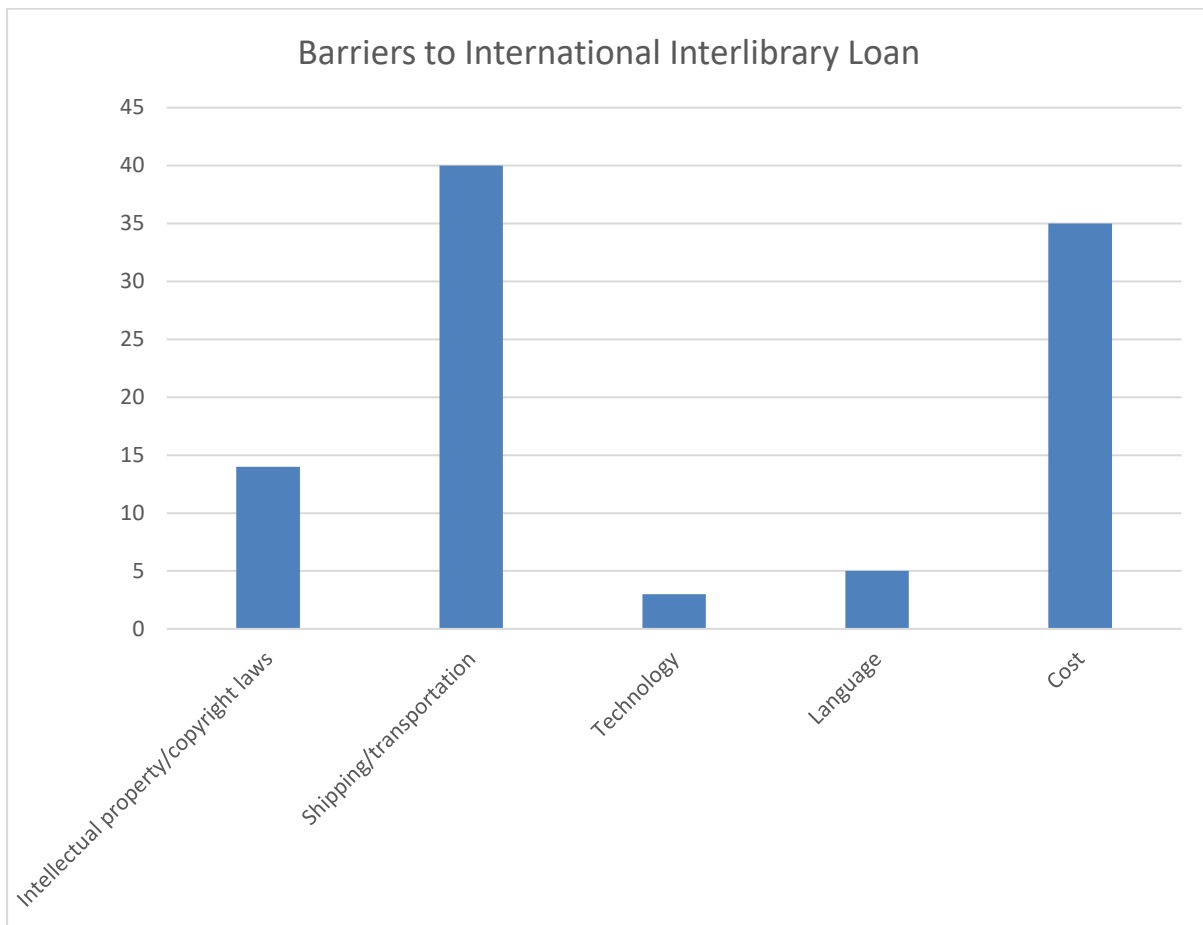


Figure 2. Barriers to International Interlibrary Loan



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