CASE STUDY

Loans & Groans

THE GIRL LOOKED THROUGH the stacks at Tom Doniphon College’s Dutton Peabody Memorial Library. She ran her finger along the spines and, frustrated, leaned her forehead against the books. “Everything but what I’m looking for,” she said quietly. “Better ask.” The girl went to the librarian’s desk. The woman, Miss Hallie, smiled. “Can I help you?” she said.

“Yes, I’m looking for the book *Case Histories in Early Western Law* by Stoddard. I can’t seem to find it on the shelf.”

“Oh, okay,” said Hallie, turning to the keyboard, “let’s see what we can find.” She typed the title into the system. “Here it is. We have two copies of that title, but both apparently are on loan.”

“When will they be back?”

“Both seem to have been borrowed by graduate students, who get a three-month loan period. One went out six weeks ago, and the other four weeks ago. If the first student keeps it for the allotted time, the book will be back in six weeks.”

“Six weeks! I need it by tomorrow morning.”

“Sorry, but grad students get longer loan periods to complete their research. I can try getting it for you on interlibrary loan.”

“How long will that take?” asked the girl, seeing a ray of hope.

“If I can find another school that has it, it should take only a few days to get here.”

“I don’t have a few days. I have to hand this paper in by the end of the week or I’m dead.”

“I’m sorry. That’s all I can do.”

“Why do the graduate students get such long loan periods? We only get books for two weeks, and they get to take books for three months. It’s ridic-

ulous. Every junior in Mr. Pompey’s class needs that book.”

“I’m sorry, I feel for you, I really do, but that’s the way it works. We might have other books that would have the same information as Stoddard. Let me see if I can help you.” The girl told the librarian what she was looking for, and, indeed, the librarian was able to find other sources that met the student’s needs.

Later, while chatting with Nora Ericson during lunch at Peter’s Restaurant, Hallie repeated the morning’s episode. “I’ve heard similar complaints over the years,” Ericson said. “It makes you wonder whether the whole loan-period thing needs some adjusting.”

“Instead of using a blanket system for everything—undergrads getting books for this long and grads and doctoral students getting them for that long,” Hallie said, “maybe we should treat each title individually, depending on what levels are going to need it.”

“Either that or some other new model,” Ericson said. “Something to think about, anyway.”

ANALYSIS I

Let the Students Decide

By Karen Harris & Elleene Morgan, Branch Coordinators, Gwinnett County Public Library, Lawrenceville, GA

THE STUDENT BODY, comprised of graduate and undergraduate students, does not seem to have equitable access to the library resources needed for their class assignments and research projects.

Just because the graduate student loan period has traditionally been three months, does the loan period have to stay this way? No, it doesn’t. But do we change it and how?

The people directly involved in using this library and its resources should be the ones to define a solution. A team, committee, or group of interested and affected customers/staff should research the questions/issues and propose a plan for remediation. Librarians, professors, and undergraduate and graduate students should be members of a team to develop a methodology to serve all the student body equally. Parties who are directly affected by a problem will bring different experiences and perspectives to the table.

Solutions are more likely to be creative and address the real concerns.

Questions to be considered should be outlined for the team. Is there any documentation to support the librarian’s perception that she has heard this complaint for years? Is there a communication plan between the library and faculty so that curriculum requirements can be adequately planned for by library professionals? Is there room in the budget for enough copies of required titles so that students don’t wait past a defined time? Is it necessary to have the same loan periods for graduate and undergraduate students or could titles be separated into collections with different loan periods? Does ILL fit in the plan? Other issues defined by the team should also be included in the discussions.

This team will work with a senior library representative, under a defined timetable, and propose a solution to the library administration and faculty. The administration’s role is to trust the “team” process and respond in good faith to the work of the team by assessing the plan and implementing as many aspects as possible.

The incidents described in *How Do You Manage?* are based on actual events in libraries across the United States and Canada. *LJ* welcomes reports of such incidents for possible use in this column. Send your accounts to *How Do You Manage?* Library Journal, 245 W. 17th St., New York, NY 10011 or to mrogers@lj.cahners.com
ANALYSIS II
Lack of Communication

By Dixie A. Jones,
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YES, ERICSON AND HALLIE do have some things to think about. Loan period is not the only issue here. The overarching issue is lack of communication. Maintaining effective communication is often the number one problem in any organization or institution. Why didn’t Professor Pompey communicate to the library staff that Case Histories in Early Western Law would be in demand by his entire class? Why didn’t the library staff communicate to Pompey and other faculty that placing heavily used materials on reserve is an option? Why didn’t the library catalog communicate to the student that both copies of the book were already checked out? (She was searching in the stacks as if she expected the title to be there.) If an extended loan period for graduate students has caused problems in the past, why didn’t the library staff members who were aware of it communicate these problems earlier to those responsible for circulation policy? The past aside, what do Ericson and Hallie do now?

Action is called for in three areas:

1. Loan period does indeed need to be reexamined, as does any policy periodicity. Hallie and Ericson should report this and other such incidents to library policymakers. Peabody staff need to consider shortening the loan period for graduate students so that it is uniform for all types of clients while allowing unlimited renewals for graduate students as long as no one else has requested the material. If policymakers wish to continue letting graduate students have a longer loan period, they can at least implement a policy stipulating that any materials on extended loan may be called back if requested by an affiliate.

2. Hallie mentioned treating titles individually depending on need. Most college libraries already have a means of accomplishing this by placing high-demand items on very short circulation periods in their reserve collections. If Peabody Memorial doesn’t have a reserve collection, it is time to consider one. If the library does have a reserve collection, the circulation staff must more effectively publicize this service to its faculty. Hallie and Ericson should bring the problem with this title and any other titles to the attention of the head of circulation. Prior to the beginning of each semester, all faculty should be reminded to request placement of assigned items in the reserve collection. In this case, there are two copies of the book in question, so at least one copy can be placed on reserve if truly needed, and both copies. If the class is large enough to justify it.

There is, however, some question as to whether Case Histories in Early Western Law even needs to be on reserve since the student was able to write her paper with other sources. Her initial statement that “Every junior in Mr. Pompey’s class needs that book” might have been something of an exaggeration. Maybe all students were assigned to write on the same topic but did not actually have to use that particular text as one of their sources. Having circulation staff get in touch with Pompey could clear up the question of whether or not this particular book should be on reserve.

3. The student was wasting her time looking in the stacks for a book that was checked out. Did she look up the call number for the book in the catalog? If so, did the catalog indicate that both copies were checked out? Any college library with a collection large enough to support graduate programs is likely to have an automated circulation system that indicates that materials are checked out. Maybe Peabody Memorial has such a system, but the student didn’t know how to interpret the information there—perhaps a teaching opportunity that Hallie missed? Knowing the books were checked out would not have made them available, but at least the student would have been spared the frustration of futilely searching in the stacks and could have gone directly to the desk to inquire about the status of the checked-out items. Peabody staff in both public and technical services should get together to examine the clarity of the OPAC display for an individual title and its circulation status. Public services staff should instruct students on how to interpret it.

The final element of the problem is the student’s procrastination in waiting until the week the paper is due to start gathering her source material. Hallie is to be commended for refraining from chastising the student and for looking at alternatives such as interlibrary loan, but even if the student had allowed enough time for this service, ILL would not have been the best solution for a whole class needing the book. Now that this student’s immediate problem has been solved by using other sources, the library staff can discuss optimal ways to make materials accessible in the future to its clientele and accordingly revamp its loan periods, reserve procedures, and/or OPAC displays. However, curing student procrastination is beyond the reach of Ericson and Hallie. If Tom Doniphan College finds a way to prevent students from putting off writing their papers, it will be revered in academia forevermore!