



Mn/DOT Library - Local Service, Global Reach

By Jerry Baldwin, Mn/DOT Library Director, 1972-2007

In Mn/DOT (Minnesota Department of Transportation) Library, Olive Nerem, our interlibrary loan technician, has posted a placard outside her workspace. It depicts all the continents on the globe. On it, she has placed markers for each of the various countries she has dealt with in meeting our customers' needs. At least one country is indicated for each continent, except Antarctica. In addition, several island nations are marked, including Iceland and New Zealand. It's a graphic display that the words on our library's logo, "Your local connection to global information" are more than a motto. And, even though Antarctica isn't marked, I know of at least one satisfied customer stationed at McMurdo Bay.

Although some may consider Minnesota rather remote and isolated, our library's reach is indeed global. We claim, regardless of the source of the needed information, ninety-five percent of the time we will get it. The other five percent of the time we'll tell the customer why we can't. In fact, we believe there are only two acceptable answers to any transportation-related question from our primary customers: "Here is the information you requested," or, "We aren't able to get the information you requested, but we estimate this is what it will take to get (or create) it."

This may be somewhat of an oversimplification, but it emphasizes our commitment to customer service. That commitment provides our customers with the information they need far more often than the claimed ninety-five percent of the time. We can do so only by participating in an array of local, regional, national and international networks, consortia and partnerships. These range from a partnership with the University of Minnesota's Center for Transportation Studies to OCLC's WorldCat, involving 36,000 libraries around the world. Mn/DOT management's strong commitment to information as a product ensures that we have the time, and the communications and computer support needed to be an active participant in each of them.

It has not always been so. Just twenty five years ago, the library didn't even have its own phone line. Then operated by a library technician and a half-time clerical assistant, the library shared one phone line with two adjoining training rooms. On busy training days, it was virtually impossible for customers to call the library with a question or request. If a customer succeeded in getting through and needed something the library didn't own, unless the customer was willing to do it on their own, they would have to wait until the technician could get the item from the University of Minnesota on one of his weekly, cross-town trips.

Things began to change in the mid-seventies when the library was invited to participate in something called the "Minnesota Union List of Serials" (MULS). The union list was a pioneering effort by an organization dubbed "MINITEX," an experimental program aimed at demonstrating the use of the latest technologies to improve interlibrary information exchange in the state. As an inducement to participate, MINITEX offered daily courier service to the university libraries. At the time, our management worried about committing staff time to making sure our information in the union list was kept current, but library staff prevailed in convincing them it was a good idea. Our serials holdings were added to the union list and our customers soon learned the value of quick turn-around times on information requests. Both our library and MINITEX have subsequently flourished.

A quick look at our library's web site (www.dot.state.mn.us/library/libnetworks.html) shows we're still a part of MULS as well as a number of other networks, consortia and partnerships. This doesn't mean, however, that once we got past that first one, the rest were easy. Management and, on occasion, other partners have had to be sold on the value of participating in virtually every one of them. A little background on some of the more important efforts, arranged by geographic reach, follows.

University of Minnesota-Mn/DOT Partnership

A little over a decade ago, the Center for Transportation Studies (CTS) was founded at the University of Minnesota. Early in its development, a partnership agreement was established between the Center and Mn/DOT. The primary goal of the partnership was to coordinate the development of research projects and the use of research funds administered by the two organizations. CTS staff and management understood that development and support of a strong transportation research program at the university required library resources and services.

In addition, shortly after it was created, CTS was named as the Minnesota affiliate in the U. S. Federal Highway Administration's (FHWA) Local Transportation Assistance Program (LTAP). Each LTAP affiliate is required to provide information clearinghouse services to municipal and county officials. Again, CTS staff and management understood that library services were needed to meet this mandate, but they did not want to compete with, or replicate, resources and services already available from Mn/DOT Library. Participants in the university-Mn/DOT partnership suggested adding the coordination of the two agencies' library services to the partnership agreement.

At first, Mn/DOT management was reluctant to officially commit resources to serving the information needs of transportation officials in local government and other transportation organizations. The department's chief executive, at a meeting of Mn/DOT's top management team, even suggested that Mn/DOT donate its library resources to CTS and get out of the library business altogether. In response, the deputy commissioner and chief engineer, a frequent user of the library, commented on its role in his decision-making efforts and the benefits the library had provided, especially early in his career. A number of other managers then chimed in with similar comments, including one notoriously tight-fisted fiscal manager. An infrequent library user, she referred to a decision to close the library in another state agency, earlier in her career, as one of the bigger mistakes she had made.

So cautioned, Mn/DOT management agreed to enter into partnership with CTS in providing library services. Subsequent discussions led to the merger of Mn/DOT Library with the department's Office of Research Administration. It was a natural fit since the office was also responsible for Mn/DOT's technology transfer programs, also a part of the university-Mn/DOT partnership.

As a result of the partnership, Mn/DOT library staff drafted the early plans for CTS Library. The library programs of the two agencies are now so closely coordinated that, by design, they are seen as two nodes of a single service serving the state's entire transportation community. Staff of each library participates in interviewing and selection of staff for the other. The two libraries participate in the same state-wide online catalog, and the two collections can be searched either separately or jointly. Both Mn/DOT's library director and the CTS librarian are now part of the partnership's coordinating committee.

Capitol Area Library Consortium

Minnesota is somewhat unusual in that it does not have a state library. Consequently, each state agency either develops its own library services or not, as its management sees fit. The result is a patchwork of libraries scattered among the agencies - some well supported and staffed; others not. The major benefit of this system is that each agency gets the library services it deems necessary; the major drawback, that some of the smaller agencies and smaller libraries find it difficult to acquire the support and services needed to be efficient and to meet customer needs.

The consortium grew out of an ad hoc group of state agency librarians. The group had been meeting from time to time to tour each other's facilities and share tips and techniques. The need for something more became evident with the advent of online databases and catalogs in the seventies. Many of the agency librarians wanted access, but none had the clout to arrange for the needed contracts and computer support in their home agency.

The only other route was to lobby the state's Department of Administration and Legislature to encourage development of some sort of funding and contracting agreement that would cover all agencies, something that hadn't been done before. Early efforts ran into problems. Administrative officials and legislators saw only individual librarians purporting to speak for all the agencies. They weren't convinced.

Several state agency librarians, including Mn/DOT's, believed the only solution was to form a formal group. Others feared the political implications and the possible fallout from librarians rising up on their own, working together, and speaking out on issues without the approval of their own agency's management. Fortunately, the former prevailed. A dues-supported, not-for-profit organization, the [Capitol Area Library Consortium \(CALCO\)](#), was soon incorporated and registered with the Secretary of State's Office. Armed with our new status as a 501(c)3 corporation, bylaws, letterhead, logo, and checking account, eleven state agency libraries, speaking as one, could go toe-to-toe with anyone. We eventually got the Department of Administration to develop those statewide contracts for access to online databases.

CALCO has since grown to include twenty-three state agency libraries. It was, and is, a unique organization. It represents the interests of libraries in all three branches of state government; executive, judicial and legislative, as well as at least one quasi-governmental organization; the Minnesota Historical Society. The group meets regularly to work on promoting state agency library services, cooperating in developing collections, interlibrary loan and cataloging procedures, professional development and other projects and topics.

Mn/DOT's participation in CALCO provides many benefits. Close cooperation with other state agency libraries allows us to develop a more specialized transportation collection. Sixty percent of the materials listed in our online catalog are held by no other library in the state. In turn, we can rely on the specialized collections and expertise of librarians in agencies responsible for pollution control, natural resources, law, revenue, and economic development, among others. Through CALCO, we participate in grant programs aimed at reducing cataloging arrearages. CALCO has also coordinated state agency library participation in a project to provide metadata tagging of all state agency web pages relating to the environment. The project provided a great deal of visibility for state agency librarians and enhanced our image as a technologically literate and capable group.

Metronet

The Minneapolis-Saint Paul Metropolitan Area, with its array of Fortune 500 companies and public and private universities is unusually rich in libraries of all types. Metronet is a publicly funded, multi-type, multi-county library cooperative. It is charged with coordinating the activities and programs of the nearly 700 public, private, academic, school and special libraries in the twin cities. Although Metronet has few formal programs or requirements for participation, Mn/DOT library staff have been active in the program from its inception. The networking and contacts with librarians in all area libraries provides a wellspring of ideas for our own programs as well as a forum to promote our programs to other librarians who can use our services to meet their customers' needs for transportation-related information.

MINITEX

As I mentioned earlier, MINITEX began as an experimental program. It has endured and become the region's OCLC affiliate. Funded by Minnesota's Higher Education Coordinating Board and administered by the University of Minnesota, MINITEX provides a wealth of services to all types of libraries in Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota. MINITEX's daily courier service between Mn/DOT Library and the other 200 participating libraries in the region provides the backbone for our interlibrary loan services. It ensures quick turnaround on approximately 2,000 Mn/DOT ILL transactions each year.

At an earlier stage of Mn/DOT Library's development, MINITEX's formal criteria for participation helped our library staff, in discussions with our managers, promote adequate staffing, funding and other support. Today, our participation provides access to a wide range of professional development opportunities and assistance with technical processing issues. Both CTS and Mn/DOT Library contract with MINITEX to provide cataloging services to reduce arrearages.

GTRIC

A subunit of SLA's Transportation Division, the Government Transportation Research Information Committee (GTRIC) was originally formed to represent the interests of U.S. state, and Canadian provincial libraries within the division. It has since become a very active group, with its members collaborating with a number of other organizations working to improve transportation information services. Supported by Mn/DOT management, our library staff are encouraged to take an active role in GTRIC.

As a result of our involvement in GTRIC, Mn/DOT Library staff have had a voice in the development of a number of programs. One of these is project of the National Cooperative Highway Research Program, investigating means to improved access to non-English language transportation information. Jeanne Thomas, Michigan Department of Transportation Librarian, and I developed the original proposal for the project and currently serve, along with a number of other Transportation Division members, on the project's oversight committee. I am also co-chairing, along with Daniel Krummes, director of UC Berkeley's transportation library, a group collaborating with FHWA's Office of International Programs on an international gathering of transportation librarians scheduled for July, 2001 in Florida.

International Exchanges

For a number of years, Mn/DOT has participated in formal, international exchange agreements. They originally grew from an interest Mn/DOT's maintenance staff had in comparing their practices with those in the Scandinavian countries, which enjoy a climate similar to Minnesota's. As part of this program, Mn/DOT has exchanged employees with road authorities in Finland, Sweden, Estonia and Latvia, among others.

Early participants in the program established a connection between our library and the library at the Finnish National Road Administration (FinnRA). Sirpa Haapamaki, FinnRA Librarian, makes sure that our library receives copies of each of their English language reports, which we catalog and add to our collection. Their Finnish language reports, if needed, are available through the University of California, Berkeley. We, in turn, send copies of Mn/DOT's research reports for inclusion in the FinnRA library.

We have a similar document exchange understanding with Australia's ARRB Transport Research. Our librarians help each other out informally as well, providing articles, conference papers, or reference assistance, as needed. Although we don't have a document exchange program with the Swedish National Road Administration (SNRA), the libraries of SNRA and Mn/DOT are part of the formal exchange program involving the two agencies, providing a contact point for the exchange of information and reference assistance.

OCLC

Convincing an engineering-oriented organization to invest heavily in cataloging library resources has never been an easy chore. The need to continuously expend funds and staff time in describing new resources and preserving old ones doesn't fit well with the project-oriented thinking of a department of transportation. As one engineer put it to me early in my career, "Library work is never done, that's why it's women's work!"

Although Mn/DOT Library has been a member of OCLC since the mid-eighties, we have never been able to provide the quantity of cataloging we would like. Management has long understood the value of quality reference services but, until recently, even minimal support for cataloging has been hard to come by. With our new home in the Office of Research and Strategic Services (ORSS), we believe this is beginning to change. For years, we had been trying to convince management that we needed improved cataloging to keep track of our own resources. Last summer, Sheila Hatchell, our catalog librarian, discovered a better argument.

There is increasing pressure on research organizations to demonstrate that their research is not an end in itself. They need to show that research findings are eventually applied in the field. Technology transfer and research implementation efforts are becoming more important. Sheila discovered that our ORSS colleagues working in these areas see a different benefit in cataloging. They are attracted to the idea that the metadata library staff create in cataloging each research report into OCLC becomes immediately available to researchers around the world. For them, the ability of others to learn about our research is more important than our ability to identify the resources we have in our own library.

Of course, from the perspective of library staff, the real benefit of participating in OCLC and these many other programs is the global reach it provides us in identifying and acquiring resources needed by our customers. This, and our emphasis on customer service, allow us to make our motto not empty words, but reality.

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