A library is no longer a collection bound by physical walls with books counted volume by volume to reach an acceptable quantity. Resource sharing has breached the walls and opened the way for users in one location to obtain almost any piece of information that is formally published. In a word—unlimited!

Sharing books and other materials is not a modern practice. As early as the seventeenth century, Nicolas Claude Fabri de Pierres initiated an international system of lending by arranging loan transactions between the Royal Library in Paris and the Vatican and Barberini libraries in Rome. As libraries for all people developed in the next two centuries, a demand for items not found in a local collection also emerged. In 1876, Samuel Swett Green, director of the Worcester [Massachusetts] Free Public Library, wrote, in the first issue of Library Journal, that lending books “would add greatly to the uniqueness of our reference librarian. ...” Swett’s idea became widely accepted, and, by 1915, between-library loans of books and other materials had increased to such a degree that the American Library Association published a code of regulations governing the interchange of materials between libraries.

Although a public librarian first described the loaning system, college and university libraries also saw the advantages of such loans. Academic libraries can never meet, through “inhouse” collections, the demands of the students and faculty whose individual study and research goals call for an almost infinite number of published sources. If chronological and international coverage is not required, as in history, English, philosophy, etc., then highly specialized, current, and, as a result, uniquely expensive, materials are essential, as in the sciences. No matter how generous the fiscal response to the demands, no institutional budget can provide for the purchase of, or subscription to, all the sources that users identify and wish to examine. As a result, resource sharing operations have shown massive global growth.

Western Michigan University is among the forefront of institutions that depend heavily on access to books, periodicals, and other publications found in libraries around the world. With the advent of university status in the late 1950s, and of a strong research advocacy in the mid-1980s, an ever-increasing need to read and review materials not owned by the University Libraries has created an entire unit, the Resource Sharing Center (RSC), to administer the interlibrary loan system. Located in Waldo Library, the Center provides service to all faculty, staff, and currently enrolled students. The Center’s purpose is “to obtain materials to meet the informational needs of users when local resources do not meet those needs” (“National Interlibrary Loan Code for the United States, 1993,” RQ 33[4] Summer 1994, p. 477).

The activity of the Center illustrates the world-wide trend in sharing resources. In the last ten years, the number of requests for loans at WMU increased 177 per cent. During 1994-95, 34,892 items were processed—some 2,200 more than the previous year. The service is extremely labor intensive and expensive. Currently, a coordinator, three full-time assistants, one part-time library assistant, and ten to

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twelve students keep the Resource Sharing Center operating in accord with the national guidelines. Each request averages about 30 minutes of time to process. According to a 1992 study by the Association of Research Libraries (The Association, 1993), the average cost of a "filled" request is $30.00. The expenses, however, are still not equivalent to the cost of attempting to purchase the actual materials and process them solely for use in Kalamazoo.

Interlibrary loan services must begin with a precise citation to a specific piece of data found in a particular source. Each request must be verified and a lending collection(s) identified. Users regularly misinterpret or leave the form incomplete, or have information that is either incorrect or incomplete. Staff members in the Center consider themselves to be the "detectives" of the elusive citation. In addition, WMU's Libraries must acquire, keep, and/or have access to many unusual bibliographies, indices, abstracts, and databases in order to certify the requisite information.

After verifying the request, the loan process requires additional complexities including adherence to copyright law; the actual document delivery (e.g., format, packaging, transmission) from the lending library to the individual who requested it; turnaround times; regulations imposed by the lending library; and varying costs of different types of materials "borrowed." If not available in one location, the staff in the Center selects up to four alternative lenders and will, if necessary, search even farther afield. Moreover, every library has an equal responsibility to provide materials as well as borrow them. Requests for materials owned by the University Libraries come from all over the world. Among the countries to which we have loaned our resources are Tasmania (Australia), Tanzania (once known as Zanzibar), Italy, Japan, New Zealand, Poland, Singapore and Saudi Arabia.

The Resource Sharing Center is essential to the existence of the University and its constituencies. The challenge to respond to faculty, staff, and students is an exciting and rewarding one. The credo of the contemporary user is often "the more you see, the more you want," and the University Libraries offers multiple opportunities to find worldwide resources. As a result, service in the interlibrary loan Center is interpersonal, interdepartmental, interlibrary, international, and never ending: "resources unlimited; a library without walls."