Making The OPAC Better

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Introduction

Indiana State University Library (ISU), located in Terre Haute, has provided online catalog access to its collections since 1985. Over the course of the last decade, the library has added Wilson journal indexes and the ERIC index to its network. Within the past two years, ISU faculty, staff, and students also gained access to the OPACs of other state universities in Indiana.

All of the above capabilities were provided using software developed by NOTIS Systems, Inc. on an IBM mainframe computer. The ISU Library has also made more than 35 CD-ROM databases available through the campus network. Recently, Internet access to the library gopher, FTP (File Transfer Protocol), and telnet capabilities have been added to the library's electronic offerings.

Because ISU faculty, staff, and students are used to accessing library databases from anywhere across campus, ISU has added two new features to the mainframe environment to provide even better communication between library staff and users. These two features, an electronic suggestion box with archives and a listing of circulating items charged, are discussed below.

"Tellus"

ISU Library has had a suggestion box for more than a decade. Typically, forms were provided at service desks, and patrons used the forms or even scraps of paper to write suggestions, register complaints, and occasionally even deliver words of praise. Replies to suggestions were written by library staff and posted in the outer lobby near the front doors. The identity of the suggestion writers was not revealed. Some writers were contacted in person when a situation warranted this kind of attention.

One of the suggestions made along the way was to provide an electronic suggestion box. A library systems staff member wrote an online program to accomplish this. It began as one CICS COBOL II program and eventually expanded into 18 programs which make up the "Tellus" module.

To the user, the suggestion box appears as an option on the NOTIS navigator menu, with the label "Tellus." In effect, it is another of several databases from which the user can choose. The user is then given three options to identify her/himself:

1. Enter one's university ID number. (The program checks the patron file and places the patron name on the form if the writer has a patron record in the system.)
2. Enter information of choice (name, phone number, email address, mailing address) free style.
3. Choose to remain anonymous.

The user is then given two screens on which to enter a message. Once finished, the user is returned to the main menu to choose another database. User messages are batch printed overnight and given to the librarian responsible for coordinating responses. Initially, responses were posted on the bulletin board in the front lobby. In January 1994, an archive option was added to "Tellus." This enabled the posting of responses on the mainframe; thus they could be viewed by users while in the "Tellus" database. Users could choose to view messages and replies by the date of posting or by subject. Library staff members can assign up to two subject headings at the time of reply. The archive has a "masking" feature which eliminates the user's name in "signed" replies so that the suggestion and reply can be shared anonymously.

"Has List"

Since NOTIS circulation was introduced in October 1985, library staff provided users, upon request, a list of titles — along with due dates — checked out to the user. This list was available in staff mode but not on the OPAC. The list was called the "has list" because the command to retrieve it was "has," and both staff and experienced users called it by that name.

Early in 1994, a "Tellus" message suggested making the "has list" available without staff intervention. The writer pointed out that she/he did not want to bother busy staff. Library staff also realized that some users might be hesitant to have staff members view their list of charged materials. As a result, in August 1994 the ISU Library introduced a new module to the mainframe. "Haslist" appears on the NOTIS navigator menu screen as another database option, along with "Tellus."

"Haslist" requires the user to enter her/his university ID number plus the first nine digits of the barcode on their university ID card. The double entry of

two unique numbers was designed to prevent unauthorized viewing of lists. The two numbers are checked against the patron files so that errors are detected. The user is prompted for re-entry when one or both numbers are incorrect.

Once the user identification numbers are verified by the mainframe and the user acknowledges her/his name, the patron's name is then "masked" and a list of the patron's charged book titles with due dates appears. The masking of the patron name prevents a subsequent user from knowing whose list has been left on the screen if the first user walks away without clearing the screen.

The Future
Both the "Tellus" and "Haslist" modules have been well received by the Indiana State University community. Both are also now in use at two other libraries. One "Tellus" enhancement presently under way is the capability to reply via electronic mail if a user lists his/her e-mail address in the Tellus message. This can be done by linking the mainframe OPAC with an UNIX-based server. The linkage may also enable other enhancements.

The library systems staff is considering Microsoft Windows-based access to "Haslist" using a UNIX server for communication. One possible enhancement for "Haslist" may be the capability for the user to mark titles on her/his list for renewal. Whatever happens, the library staff will continue to make more services and communication channels available to users from wherever they access the library's electronic databases.