The Library Catalog: *Or, I Know We've Got It Somewhere!*

About the Library Catalog

The library catalog is the tool used for inventorying and tracking of library materials. What started as a printed, card-based system—hence the now-obsolete term *card catalog*—has evolved over time to become the Library Management System (LMS) or Integrated Library System (ILS). The ILS software is the source of a number of library functions. Depending on the brand of ILS and the available features of that brand, this software might include:

- **Inventory**

    - **Bibliographic records**: The inventory function of the system. Each bibliographic record identifies an item available through the library. For example, the bibliographic record for a book will include the title, author, publisher, number of pages, material type (such as book, e-book, audio recording), physical size, ISBN[1], and a unique identifier for the book, such as a library barcode. The barcode for physical items helps to distinguish items that may be similar, such as two copies of the same book. The bibliographic record will also contain a call number and other location information that helps to identify the location of an item when it is at the library. Bibliographic records in the ILS are most commonly in MARC format. Learn more about MARC in the Cataloging with MARC section of this *Survival Guide*.

    - **Item records**: Sometimes referred to as holdings records, these are a next step to the bibliographic record. Where the bibliographic record describes the item, the holdings information ties into the circulation functions to let library staff and patrons know where a book is supposed to be and the item's availability. The item record is what identifies the shelf location (3rd floor? Oversized items? Branch? Reference?), defines status (Lost? Withdrawn? Checked out? Special Rules?) and identifies

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[1] There are many identifier systems in use for different types of library materials, including the International Standard Book Number (ISBN) for books, the International Standard Serial Number (ISSN) for serial titles, the Serial Item and Contribution Identifier (SICI) for serial issues and articles, the International Standard Music Number (ISMN) for musical scores, and the Digital Object Identifier (DOI) for journal articles and other digital content. Public libraries are mainly concerned with the ISBN or ISSN for each item they own.

Idaho Commission for Libraries

other important details of the particular item in question, especially when it comes grouping the item with particular circulation policies.

- **Circulation**: Because most library items are meant for use by library patrons, the ILS will also include patron records, policy settings, and tracking functions to facilitate the process of lending and returning library materials.

  - **Patron records**: An individual customer of the library (patron), or sometimes a family group, will have a patron record in the ILS. The patron record contains information about the person who will be responsible for the items they check out from the library. Generally, this means name, contact information, and a status identifier. Sometimes library policies will have different details for different users, like adults, children, staff, non-residents. By identifying the status, the system can be set up to automatically carry out different functions depending on the user (more on this in policy settings). Each patron record will also have a unique identifier, usually a patron barcode.

  - **Policy settings**: The ILS will usually have options to set different policies for different user groups or material types. A library may choose to have a four-week checkout period for most materials, but only allow two weeks for the most recently released titles. Policy settings are set to match the terms of the library's Circulation Policy. If patron status and material types are identified in the patron and item records, the ILS will be able to assign due dates automatically.

- **Acquisitions**: Sometimes the ILS has optional features that tie to library acquisitions—the process of buying materials add to the library. Some acquisitions modules tie to the systems/vendors through which library staff will purchase materials. When this happens, some bibliographic information is added to the ILS even before the item is received. The item's status will indicate it is unavailable but purchased.

- **Reports**: The ILS will have a number of options for creating reports to evaluate how well the library is doing in terms of meeting organizational goals. Reports might show the number of items checked out in a period of time, the number of library card holders who have checked out materials, the balance of inventory across different subject areas, totals of overdue fines, and a great deal more information.

Overall, the ILS is the tool that helps the library identify its inventory, track where materials are at any given time, and create efficiencies for library patrons and staff for managing the library collection.