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Circulation Policies in Major Academic Libraries

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ABSTRACT

As part of an assessment of its patron circulation policies, Brigham Young University's Harold B. Lee Library Circulation Committee studied the circulation policies of ARL members and like-sized academic institution's libraries. Access Services Department Heads or their equivalent at 165 academic libraries were surveyed. This paper reports on policies relating to circulation, renewals, fines, and recalls for these libraries. The majority of circulation policies are traditional (typical circulation periods, low numbers of renewals and traditional fines), though non-traditional policies (longer circulation periods, more renewals, and elimination of fines) provide better service and satisfaction for patrons. Libraries should examine their policies to determine if non-traditional policies would work at their institution.

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INTRODUCTION

Despite its continuous decline over many years, circulation is still a major function of almost all libraries. There continue to be many important issues to be resolved regarding circulation periods, fines, and recalls, especially given the decrease in circulation. In spite of these issues and the importance of circulation, little study has been done to examine circulation policies at major academic libraries. As a result of this assessment gap, the Circulation Committee at Brigham Young University set out to discover what policies were typical at other major academic libraries in order to inform its own circulation policies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Though there are no articles providing data about circulation periods in major libraries, there have been several articles discussing the policies for loan periods, renewals, fines, and recalls. These are discussed below.

LOAN PERIODS

Brophy and Moorhouse (1984) reported that variable loan circulation periods, determined by heavy or light demand for certain books, were implemented by Teesside Polytechnic Library. Hartse and Lee (1992) discussed how data from peer ALA institutions encouraged

changes to Arizona State University Library's circulation policy including loan periods for graduates, fines, and unseen renewals. Changes in loan periods and fines, implemented at Babst Library at NYU, were evaluated and reported in an article by Rupp, Sweetman, and Perry (2010). They lengthened loan periods and eliminated fines for the general collection, causing fewer billed books and increased patron satisfaction. Wilson (2014) described the process of assessing circulation policies, which indicated the need to increase undergraduate loan periods at the Brigham Young University Harold B. Lee Library.

RENEWALS

Sifton (2009), reported that various libraries have abolished overdue fines in favor of renewals. When renewals run out and the item is not returned, the person with the item is blocked from checking out additional library materials. Returning the book removes the block and restores patron privilege. Zweibel and Lane (2012) described the quantitative results of policy changes made in circulation practices at Columbia University libraries in 2003–4 and 2009–10. They reported an increase in undergraduate circulation periods and subsequent decrease of renewals in that group.

FINES

Discussions of how to improve fine policy or even eliminate fines have been regularly mentioned in library literature. An evaluation of circulation policy at the University of Cincinnati Medical Center Libraries was made to decrease staff processing time for overdue materials as well as better meet user need. For them, instituting a first overdue notice containing replacement costs of the item and then a final notice

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Table 1
Number of days different groups can checkout materials in academic libraries.

	Minimum	Maximum	Average	Median	Mode	Standard deviation	Number of libraries
Undergraduate	14	142	35	28	28	25	74
Graduate	14	365	117	120	120	90	71
Staff	14	365	118	120	120	90	71
Faculty	14	None	186	126	120	108	71
Community	0	180	27	28	28	20	68

greatly increased timely returns of library materials (Fried & Hurlebaus, 1981).

Burgin and Hansel (1984) discussed solutions to improve patron relations with the library through fine policy changes. They reported that libraries with no fines had more items circulated, more items returned, and increased patron satisfaction with the library generally. Shontz (1999) questioned the effectiveness of trying to modify user behavior with fines. He reported that one of the main points determining when patrons return library items is ‘when the user is finished with the item’ and that if a user still needed an item they would keep it whether there was a fine levied or not. Mosley (2004) discussed the problems involved and costs incurred by staff in processing and collecting fines compared to the income fines generated. Their decision was to eliminate overdue fines for general stacks books at Texas A&M libraries. She also notes that billing patrons for long overdue or ‘LOST’ books in many cases encouraged their return. Sung and Tolppanen (2013) found that fines make a difference in whether books are returned on time, but stressed that assessing fines harms the library image and impedes patron access. A year-long study about circulation issues reported by Reed, Blackburn, and Sifton (2014) resulted in their recommendation that libraries carefully examine long-held library practices of fines and loan periods and make changes that encourage good will and library use.

RECALLS

Recall policy has rarely been discussed in the literature. Goehlert (1979) reported that the Indiana University Library began fining faculty for recalled items when a study of their patrons showed that this group was far less responsive to recall notices than other borrowers. Dethloff (2012) explained how the University of Houston replaced recalls with interlibrary loan and how this ‘Quick Loan’ process has done away with ‘recall wars’ and has increased customer satisfaction.

After examining the literature, the circulation committee found that there was a lack of comparative information about circulation policies in academic libraries. Though the various articles were helpful, they were primarily reports on localized studies and policies. Seeking to address

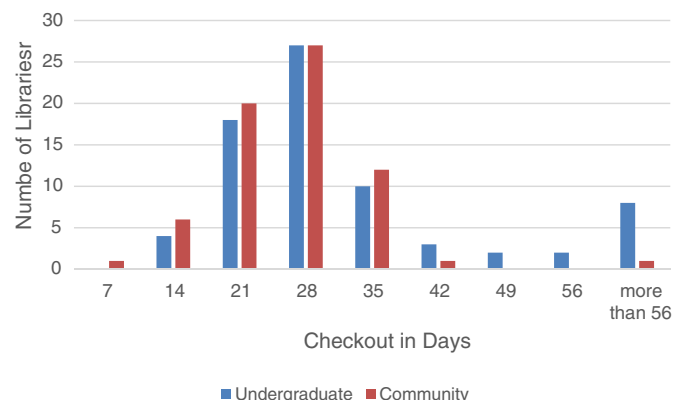


Fig. 1. Undergraduate and community checkout periods in academic libraries.

this gap, the circulation committee pursued a study on circulation policies at major academic libraries in the United States.

METHODS

To determine circulation policies in major academic libraries, the Harold B. Lee Library Circulation Committee chose to survey libraries from academic institutions with enrollment similar to BYU. BYU is a member of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), which creates a natural peer group for comparison. Because BYU is an academic library in the United States, the committee eliminated the 16 Canadian and 9 non-university libraries from the list of 125 ARL libraries, selecting the 100 academic libraries in the United States. The committee also used the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) ‘Compare Academic Libraries’ tool to find other academic institutions with large enrollments. Using the tool, the committee selected libraries that offer at least a bachelor’s degree with enrollments of 16,809–57,271. These numbers were chosen because of the technical limitations in selecting enrollment numbers with the compare libraries tool. The intent was to find large institutions with student populations that were within about 15,000 students of BYU’s enrollment. This method provided 65 additional institutions that were not on the ARL list, for a total of 165 unique institutions. The committee created a survey with questions that asked about specific circulation policies at the libraries surveyed. The full text of this survey can be found in Wilson, 2014. This survey was emailed to identifiable heads of circulation or access services in the libraries of selected institutions. Seventy-six institutions completed the survey for a response rate of 46%. No demographic data was collected as part of this survey.

RESULTS

CIRCULATION

Respondents were first asked what the standard circulation period was for a variety of patron types. In order to include all of the different ways that libraries measured circulation periods (day, week, month, term, semester, etc.) respondents were presented with the patron types of undergraduate, graduate, staff, faculty, and community and were given a blank box to record the circulation period for each patron type. Interestingly, the different terms that librarians used to describe

Table 2
Most common checkout periods at responding libraries.

# of Days	Number of libraries				
	Undergraduate	Graduate	Staff	Faculty	Community
14	4	1	2	1	6
21	27	3	11	1	27
28	19	3	4	1	21
30	10	2	1	1	12
120	4	21	20	21	0
180	0	9	7	10	1
240	0	4	3	5	0
365	0	2	5	16	0
Total	64	45	53	56	67
% of overall total	86%	63%	75%	79%	99%

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