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Putting a Sacred Cow Out to Pasture: Assessing the Removal of Fines and Reduction of Barriers at a Small Academic Library

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ABSTRACT

At the beginning of the 2012/13 academic year, Vancouver Island University library removed most fines and made other loans changes to improve access to physical collections. One year later, the changes were assessed using circulation data and staff interviews. The removal of fines had no significant effect on borrower return rates and circulation numbers, but did win significant goodwill among users. Library staff believe the changes to be positive.

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INTRODUCTION

Fines are a contentious topic among librarians, with many strongly held beliefs about their effectiveness backed by little evidence. At the beginning of the 2012/13 academic year, Vancouver Island University (VIU) library joined a handful of university libraries in North America that have removed most fines and changed other loan policies to improve access to physical collections. The following policy changes were made:

- Ceased charging fines on most materials, with the exception of interlibrary loans and reserve materials.
- Fines for hourly reserves decreased from \$1 to \$0.25/h, and from \$7 to \$2 per day for daily reserve loans.
- In the place of fines, three friendly overdue notices are emailed on overdue days 5, 15, and 25. At the 25 day mark, the replacement cost of the item is charged to the user and the account is blocked, preventing the user from further borrowing, remote access to e-resources, and VIU registration services. When the user returns the item, all charges are cleared from the account. If the item is lost, the user must pay the replacement cost plus a processing fee to clear the account.

- Should users want a title that is checked out, they can request it on interlibrary loan. VIU library does not have a recall system.
- All past fines were forgiven, amounting to \$126,987.80.
- CD borrowing limits were removed.
- The regular physical material loan period for students was increased from 2 to 4 weeks, and from 1 day to 2 weeks for videos.

The main drivers of these policy changes were a desire to reduce barriers to accessing library materials and remove most financially punitive loan policies, coupled with a continued downward trend in the circulation of our physical collection. This study explores the perceived and actual effects of reducing barriers at VIU Library.

BACKGROUND TO CHANGES

There were several factors influencing the decision to remove most fines at VIU:

- Philosophical position.
- Barrier reduction.
- Circulation trends.
- Revenue trends.

PHILOSOPHICAL POSITION

At the very core, the fines vs. no fines debate is about what role libraries choose to play among their users. Fines are inherently punitive and negative, and libraries that choose to collect them are put in an

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enforcer or tax collector role. Does holding a threat above the heads of borrowers really cast libraries in the best light, at a time when libraries need all the support they can get? At VIU, librarians felt that a new chapter in our relationship with users should begin, one not backed by threats or based on a position we found ethically distasteful.

VIU librarians also wanted to opt out of a common library practice of using fine money to support library operations. We agree with David McMenemy, who finds this a particularly repugnant practice: “It is utterly perverse to me that a punitive action that is designed to prevent inefficient use of the service is actually so vital that it is essential to the functioning of the library. In such a context, system dysfunction is necessary for the service to be seen as successful” (2010, 81). In having any reliance on fine revenue to cover operating costs, VIU library would be tacitly supporting student failure.

BARRIER REDUCTION

Concern for the accessibility of library collections compelled librarians to implement policy changes. VIU is classified by the provincial government as a “special purpose teaching university” that serves coastal British Columbians by providing adult basic education, transfer programs, and trades education alongside bachelor’s and master’s degrees. Compared to large research-intensive universities with admission standards that serve to restrict access, VIU functions as an access institution with a regional mandate. Approximately 18,000 full and part-time students (6000 FTE) learn at campuses in Nanaimo, Duncan, and Powell River, BC. The student population has a high proportion of non-traditional learners, including adult students, first generation university students, students who return to their studies after years away, and those who are trying out post-secondary courses. While students everywhere often juggle families and employment with studies, non-traditional students need special support to succeed and instruction in learning how to be a student (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Harvey, 2011). The library aims to be as accommodating and flexible as possible to meet the needs of these learners. With fines and loans policy changes, we wanted to reset our relationship with our users: to be seen as friendly, trusted learning partners rather than book cops or tax collectors.

CIRCULATION TRENDS

While electronic resource usage continues to increase, VIU librarians noted a steady decline in physical resource usage. Even as VIU’s student population increased, circulation plummeted from a high of 194,219 items circulated in 2003/04 to 63,626 in 2012/13, a drop of 67% (Fig. 1).

In the context of decreased physical circulation and increased electronic access, it comes as little surprise that LibQual+® comments and librarian observation demonstrate an increasing disconnect

between younger students and physical materials, with one young student referring to print as “solid books.”

VIU librarians, very conscious of the richness of the library’s print resources, were left asking ourselves how to get the material more easily into the hands of users. In previous years, the Library’s non-circulating reference and periodical collections were integrated into the main book collection and made lendable. As overall circulation continued to decrease, it became apparent that fines were no longer needed as a device to encourage equitable access to materials. We want to encourage greater use of physical materials, not punish users for keeping resources out past their due dates.

REVENUE TRENDS

As physical circulation declined, so too did VIU’s fine revenue stream. From a high of \$65,594 in the 2004/05 academic year, library fines amounted to only \$21,000 going into library general revenue in 2010/11 and 2011/12 (Fig. 2).

In the context of declining print usage fine revenue, VIU Librarians decided that the opportunity to gain the goodwill of students, faculty, and staff by removing fines was more valuable than hanging on to a disappearing revenue stream. Had we waited a few more years, fine revenue would most likely be so negligible that removing fines would have little public relations effect.

In forgiving past fines, the library closed the book on \$126,987.80 that was owed by users, most long-gone from VIU campuses. While this may seem like a significant amount, this money is not tangible. Rather, it is an idea, an abstract representation of what we feel we are owed by our users. The large dollar figure illustrates a fundamental disconnection between us and our users, who clearly do not agree that they owe us. More practically, even if students could be tracked down years after accumulating their fines, the time and resources the VIU library would have had to expend to receive payment would not be worth it.

Many librarians seem to forget that fine revenue comes at a cost in terms of staff time and effort. Library systems may reach a tipping point where the cost of collecting fines and cajoling users into returning items is more than the fine revenue being collected. VIU reached this point: it was simply no longer worth the cost in staff time and effort to process and manage fines. Without as much fine activity to manage, we could direct staff resources into other aspects of library services, such as public services and e-resource management.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES AND PROCESS

Taking into account the factors outlined above, the VIU Librarians’ Committee (VIU Library’s strategic management team) drafted a set of

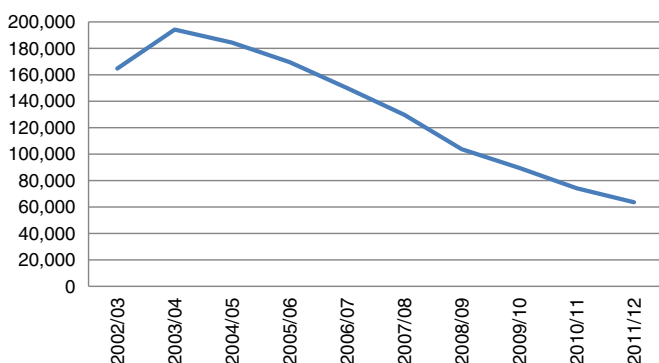


Fig. 1. Physical circulation, 2002/03 to 2011/12.

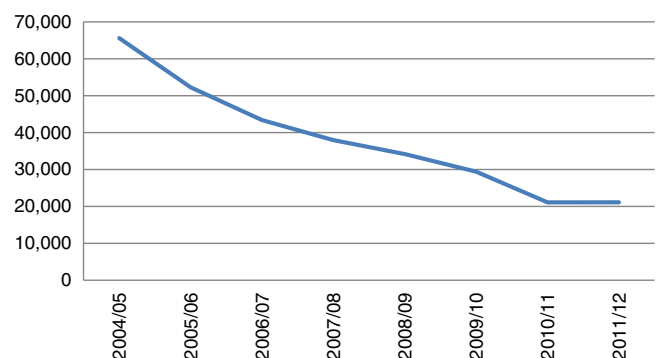


Fig. 2. Fine revenue, 2004/05 to 2011/12.

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