



Library late fees

NOT JUST INEFFECTIVE, BUT HARMFUL

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About the author

Lori Bowen Ayre is a nationally recognized expert in library technology. Since forming The Galecia Group in 2000, she has worked with city and county libraries and consortia throughout North America especially in the areas of material handling, RFID, and technology planning and assessment. She also guides the work of The Galecia Group in a variety of activities including offering software development, open data, and civic technology services. The Galecia Group also developed and supports two software-as-a-service offerings: Bookpoints and LibraryCall.

Broad experience with libraries, a deep understanding of technology and commitment to the mission of public libraries informs all of Lori's work. She believes in the transformational power of libraries and works to help libraries leverage technology to streamline back office functions, reduce operating costs, and improve and expand customer services.

Lori and her team believe that libraries are critical institutions for our democratic society and that these institutions must change as society changes. Recognizing that technology is a catalyst of change, they work to help libraries harness the power of technology as libraries navigate the changing needs of their communities.

CONTENTS

Abstract	3
Justifications for charging late fees	4
Fines cause harm	7
Eliminating fines offers benefits	10
Suggestions for more effective approaches	12
Conclusion	13
References	15

Increasing numbers of libraries have ELIMINATED LATE FEES

because they are **ineffective at promoting the timely return of materials,** and argue that they undermine the mission of the library to provide **equitable access** to library services and resources.

In eliminating late fees, many libraries have discovered that the **use of the library increases** without the rate of overdue returns rising, and in some cases even **reducing the number of late returns**. These libraries also report improved **relationships** between their library staff and the community.

JUSTIFICATIONS FOR CHARGING LATE FEES

There are four commonly cited justifications for charging late fees, but in each case, the desired outcome is often not the result.

1

Charging late fees for material teaches children responsibility

This is one of the oldest cited reasons that libraries charge late fees.

The problem with this explanation for charging late fees is that most would argue that the library's primary job is to provide access to information, support literacy, and promote reading and it is the parent's job to teach responsibility.

About teaching responsibility, one librarian says, "I don't think it's our task, or that it's mission-centric, any more than teaching people manners is. Our role is to provide access to information" (Poon, 2019).

Another problem with the responsibility argument is that kids have virtually no control over when their library materials get returned. Late material has more to do with the working schedules of the parents than any sense of responsibility a child might feel about returning their books on time.

2

Late fees incentivize people to return material on time

Another reason for charging late fees is to ensure material comes back on time to prevent longer wait times for people with holds on the material. However, "libraries who have implemented fine-free programs have proven that these fears are unfounded" (Kohn, 2015).

Studies show that late fees do not increase the rate of on-time returns unless the fines are very high (Burgin and Hansel, 1984), but most libraries don't charge high fees because it would reduce library use (which we explore later).

Many studies have documented the fallacy that late fees increase the rates of on-time returns (Burgin and Hansel, 1984; Kohn, 2015). In most cases, the imposition of late fees has no effect (Hixon, 2019). In at least one case, the return rate has improved after late fees were dropped (Carter, 2019).

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3

Late fees ensure people return material rather than just keep it

Similar to the idea that late fees incentivize people to return material on time, the idea is that people would just keep library material if there were no consequences. The fact is that most libraries do have consequences for not returning items and it is a more effective approach than using late fees. A replacement fee is charged to patrons who fail to return an item. The replacement cost is limited to the actual cost of replacing an item, unlike late fees that can just keep adding up indefinitely.

The truth is that most libraries have a cap on late fees or convert a long overdue item to a lost item so it no longer accrues a late fee but the mythology is firmly attached to libraries nonetheless (Ailworth and Kesling, 2019). How many “funny” stories have we heard about the person who found the library book under the bed and was supposedly facing hundreds of dollars in late fees (Sifton, 2009; Vitra, 2018; Mancini, 2019).

Ironically, late fees have been shown to increase the number of items that don't come back to the library. A person faced with excessive late fees may choose to stay away from the library rather than facing the shame of trying to arrange payment (EBSCO, 2010). “It became clear to us that there were families that couldn't afford to pay the fines and therefore couldn't return the materials, so then we just lost them as patrons altogether...we wanted our materials back, and more importantly, we wanted our patrons back.” (Bowman, 2019).

4

Late fees provide an important revenue stream for the library

The amount of fine money “on-the-books” can look like a large number but in most cases, the amount collected represents less than 1% of the total library budget (Graham, 2017; Fallon, 2015; Kohn, 2015; Pyatetsky, 2015; Wenger, 2018; Bowman, 2019, Morehart, 2018) and it costs a lot to recover it. Some libraries have reported that it costs more to collect the fees than the amount of fees collected (Poon, 2019).

Handling the money, updating the patron account, and providing a receipt can take up a “nice chunk of staff time” (Burgess, 2017). One library estimated they spent \$1.2 million (including staff time) to collect \$600,000 in library fees (Hoffman, 2019).

One library eliminated overdue fines and found the move to be cost neutral because they were “able to eliminate costly credit card technology on their self-check machines and save a great deal of staff time” (Hixon, 2019; Graham, 2017).

(Bowman, 2019)

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**but the shushing librarian stereotype
and the fear of incurring late fees**
are probably the two most damaging.

FINES CAUSE HARM

Fines go beyond being ineffective, they are harmful. They disproportionately hurt low-income patrons and prevent people from being able to use the library. Late fees create a stressful work environment for staff. Library fees also hurt the library brand.

LATE FEES DISPROPORTIONATELY HURT LOW-INCOME PATRONS

As more and more libraries have explored the idea of eliminating late fees, they have looked at the underlying patron data. What they have found is that people in well-to-do communities are not negatively affected by fines, but for low-income patrons, fees are more than just a nuisance.

“Library fines in most places remain quaintly low, sometimes just 10 cents per day. But one user’s nominal is another’s exorbitant. If a child checks out 10 picture books, the kind of haul librarians love to encourage, and then his mother’s work schedule prevents her from returning them for a week past the due date, that’s \$7. For middle-class patrons, that may feel like a slap on the wrist, or even a feel-good donation. For low-income users, however, it can be a prohibitively expensive penalty.” (Graham, 2017).

Libraries have consistently found that the number of people with library fines that have blocked a patron’s ability to use the library tend to be in poor neighborhoods (Wenger, 2018). One city found that 40% of the patrons in the city’s poorest neighborhoods had fines they couldn’t pay (Bowman, 2019).

Two large, urban cities discovered that people living in poverty and communities of color had higher rates of “blocked patrons” due to library fines. “Overdue fines are not distinguishing between people who are responsible and who are not. They’re distinguishing between people who can and cannot use money to overcome a common oversight” (Poon, 2019).

LATE FEES PREVENT PEOPLE FROM BEING ABLE TO USE THE LIBRARY

When a person has unpaid late fees, they often feel ashamed – feeling that they are perceived as irresponsible. They are also often blocked from checking out additional material. The result can be that libraries not only lose valuable library materials, but they lose their valued patrons.

“For many, it is more palatable to discontinue using the library than to pay up or to face the shame of being “irresponsible” (Sawyer, 2017).

“Library users with limited income tend to stay away from libraries because they may be afraid of incurring debt,” said Ramiro Salazar, president of the association’s public library division. “It stands to reason these same users will also stay away if they have already incurred a fine simply because they don’t have the money to pay the fine.” (Bowman, 2019)

“Parents struggling to get by won’t allow their children to use the library for fear of the fines. ‘I try to explain to [my daughter], don’t take books out. It’s so expensive.’” (Graham, 2017).

“We know the heartbreaking truth: that there are families who refuse to even use the library for fear of accumulating fines.” (Marx, 2017).

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FINES CAUSE HARM

COLLECTION OF LATE FEES IS STRESSFUL FOR STAFF

As more libraries have moved to self-check machines, the ratio of uncomfortable encounters that circulation staff have to address has increased because most transactions can be done at the self-checks leaving only the awkward and stressful transactions for staff to negotiate.

“We’ve probably all experienced the feeling of dread of having to tell a patron that they owe overdue fines on their account. Especially a problem patron, who will argue that they returned the materials on time, they put them in the book drop while we were closed, how dare we charge him when he returned them on time... all while the line at the circulation desk grows longer and longer.” (Burgess, 2017).

“In the library, arguing about fines is the single most negative experience for customers and staff.” (Wenger, 2018).

THE LIBRARY BRAND IS HARMED BY ITS ASSOCIATION WITH LATE FEES

Many images associated with libraries are positive, the shushing librarian stereotype and the fear of incurring late fees are probably the two most damaging.

There’s a Seinfeld episode (Seinfeld, 2009) in which the local policeman threatens Jerry Seinfeld because he has not returned his book on time. It is a funny scene but is it good for libraries? “Some of our patrons will think exactly that: one simple transgression such as returning materials a few days late leaves you embarrassed and financially culpable. Who would want to return to such a place?” (Kohn, 2015).

The cost of undoing the harm associated with late fees and the related embarrassment and shame is the cost of a family of library users. “If the library does not charge for the damaged book, it loses about \$25.00. ... [But] it will cost the library more than \$25.00 to convince this mother to return to the library. It will cost the library more than \$25.00 to persuade this mother that the library is a welcoming community place willing to mount literacy programs aimed at her children, who will not benefit from regular library visits and programs. And when these children are adults, it will cost the library more than \$25.00 to convince them that the library is a welcoming and supportive place for their children.” (Graham, 2017).

ELIMINATING FINES OFFERS BENEFITS

The libraries that have stopped charging late fees have identified several positive outcomes including increasing the number of people using the library, increasing circulation, improving relationships between staff and patrons, freeing up staff time to engage in positive activities, and reinforcing the image of the library as an empowering and shame-free environment.

INCREASED NUMBER OF ACTIVE PATRONS

Once the threat of fines is lifted, the library becomes a community resource that is safe for everyone to use regardless of their financial situation. When fines are eliminated, libraries see old patrons return and lapsed patrons come in to renew their library card.

“Lifting fines has had a surprising dual effect: More patrons are returning to the library, with their late materials in hand. Chicago saw a 240% increase in return of materials within three weeks of implementing its fine-free policy last month. The library system also had 400 more card renewals compared with that time last year.” (Bowman, 2019).

People who never had a library card may sign up for the first time, allowing libraries to expand outreach to their communities.

“Without fines, more community members are stepping into the Library, and this allows us to better fulfill our mission. The number of items checked out during the 17–18 fiscal year increased 16% from the previous year. We also signed up nearly 26,000 new cardholders.” (The City Library, 2018).

INCREASED CIRCULATION

While circulation rates have levelled or gone down in recent years, eliminating fines is one of the best ways to increase circulation. Libraries have seen circulation increases of 2-16% following the elimination of late fees (Graham, 2017; City Library, 2018, Marx, 2017).

“Since St. Paul, Minnesota killed overdue fines, some branches have seen a double-digit percentage increase in circulation. Citywide, circulation is up nearly 2 percent – which may not sound like much, but it is the first increase the city has seen in 10 years.” (PYMNTS).

The reason circulation goes up is because people keep using the library even when they’ve returned material late. For some, the cost – or even the threat -- of late fees becomes a bar too high so they discontinue using the library as soon as late fees become an issue (The City Library, 2018; Marx, 2017).

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ELIMINATING FINES OFFERS BENEFITS

LONG OVERDUE MATERIAL RETURNED

Depending on how the library goes about eliminating fines, it can result in a wave of returned material that has been long gone from the library. Combining the elimination of new fines and offering to forgive all existing fines opens the door for patrons to come back to use the library and return their long overdue material.

One large, urban library system held a one month amnesty program in which \$329,797 in fines was forgiven. In exchange, they got 700,000 books back that were valued at \$236,490 and 5,067 patrons had their borrowing privileges restored (Sawyer, 2017).

IMPROVED RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN STAFF AND PATRONS

Eliminating late fees transforms the experience of staff working with customers. Rather than having 90% of one's interactions with patrons being related to fees, staff can spend more time helping patrons find answers to questions, get help using library resources and generally enjoy a positive interaction.

“Staff members are happy, because they no longer spend time locked in awkward exchanges with patrons who are angry, distraught, or indignant about their overdue fines.” (Graham, 2017).

“It's been smooth sailing since the new policy went into effect. Interactions between staff and patrons have been friendlier, and libraries in low-income neighborhoods have been busier.” (Carter, 2019).

SUGGESTIONS FOR MORE EFFECTIVE APPROACHES

CHARGE FOR LOST ITEMS BUT NOT LATE FEES

Many libraries have offered alternatives to charging late fees that have fewer of the drawbacks associated with the traditional approach.

- 1 Do not charge late fees, but if not returned after 45 days, the item is billed. If not paid by 61 days, the item goes to debt collection. (Crist et al, 2017)
- 2 Bill for replacement cost in lieu of fines once the item is two weeks overdue, plus a processing fee and blocked from further checkouts. If and when the items are eventually returned, the bill and processing fees are waived and no fines assessed. (Kohn, 2015)
- 3 Revoke patron's library privileges until they return the overdue item. After three weeks have lapsed, they'll be charged for the cost of the material. After 81 days, their account will be transferred to a collection agency, which will impose a nominal fee." (Carter, 2019).
- 4 Renew material automatically up to 15 times as long as there are no holds on it. Afterwards, the item will be marked lost, and the library will charge the borrower its market value, though charges will be cleared as long as the borrower returns it." (Poon, 2019).

USE REMINDERS TO ENCOURAGE ON-TIME RETURNS

Many libraries are finding that simply sending out more frequent reminders is the best way to get more material returned on time. Reminders are a way to help people be responsible without using the punitive approach of a fee.

With most patrons using email, it is virtually free to send out multiple, timely reminders that will increase the chance of material being returned on time (Morehart, 2018).

If the goal is to get library material back (even if it's late), then late fees can actually have the opposite effect. However, timely and persistent reminders - without the threat of punitive fees - provides positive encouragement to find and return library material.

CONCLUSION

Charging late fees for overdue library material stopped being an effective way to increase on-time returns long ago. The practice is a remnant from a more paternalistic time in public library history. It has eroded the image of the library being a welcoming place where everyone belongs by imposing a punitive and, for many, unaffordable, financial cost.

Today there are much more effective ways to encourage the timely return of library material including email reminders before the due date and after items are overdue.

Continuing to charge for damaged and lost items and eliminating late fees ensures the investment in library resources is protected without causing embarrassment to patrons who incur fees, and guards against patrons discontinuing their use of the library resulting from the real and imagined cost of borrowing material intended to be free for all.

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