



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

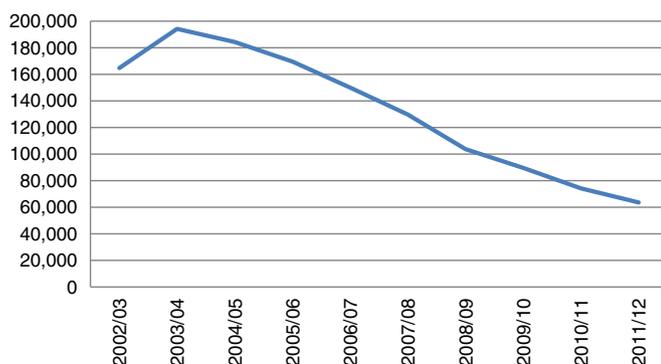


Fig. 1. Physical circulation, 2002/03 to 2011/12.

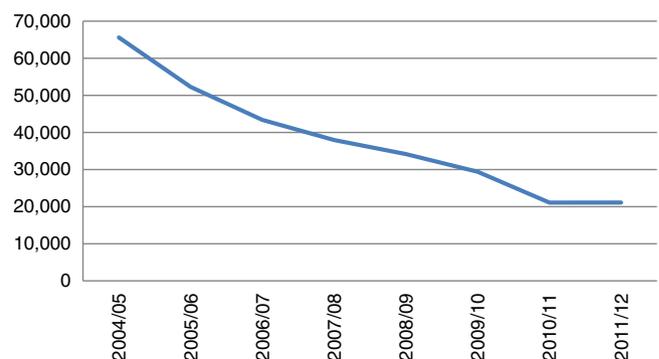


Fig. 2. Fine revenue, 2004/05 to 2011/12.

principles to guide a thorough review of the library's fines and loans policies and practices. These principles were:

- Circulation management is a diminishing problem.
- A better return on investment for our physical materials should be strived for.
- Barriers to access should be reduced to the greatest extent possible.
- Policies and practices with a punitive tone or approach should be reduced to the greatest extent possible.
- More equitable access should be achieved for different user groups, where possible and reasonable.
- Loan policies for different collections & formats should be harmonized, where appropriate.
- Loan policies and practices should reflect the most efficient possible transaction costs and workflows.

A task group was formed to conduct the review, consisting of two long-serving library technicians with responsibilities for circulation management and interlibrary loans, and two professional librarians with coordinating responsibilities in the areas of user experience, library collections and library systems. The task group met several times in June 2012 to review all loan and fine practices in place at VIU Library, and develop recommendations for changes. The group's recommendations were all endorsed unanimously by the Librarian's Committee, and with a few minor exceptions, all were implemented in July–August 2012.

The decision to remove overdue fines occurred within the context of a proactive effort to reduce spending on overlapping subscriptions, underutilized maintenance contracts, and wasteful use of supplies. By reigning in unnecessary spending, Library staff sought to be in a position to take advantage of strategic opportunities in collections and services.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overdue fines have been the subject of little scrutiny, yet they are a widespread practice in library systems around the world. Three major reasons for imposing fines were identified by [McMenmy \(2010\)](#): the efficient circulation of materials, to encourage users to be community minded, and to generate income. The argument that fines encourage people to return material has held significant traction in library communities for decades, yet there is little evidence that fines are effective for improving return rates versus any other mechanism that libraries put in place to encourage users to bring back materials. There is, however, evidence that fines drive people away. A 2005 study of the public library system in Victoria, Australia found library users frequently mentioned fines as a disincentive to library use. Additionally, the report found that culturally and linguistically diverse community leaders identified fines as a significant disincentive to ethnic community library use ([State Library of Victoria, 2005](#)).

While there is little peer-reviewed literature on the topic, there are several opinion and editorial articles related to library fines in the public system context. Canadian (and VIU librarian) Daniel Sifton questioned whether or not public libraries really needed overdue fines, coming to the conclusion that they did not ([2009](#)). In Australia, Alan Bundy wrote a series of editorials condemning fines ([2012, 2005](#)). The United Kingdom has seen debate as well, with [McMenmy \(2010\)](#), [Clayton and Chapman \(2009\)](#), and [Breslin and McMenemy \(2006\)](#) interrogating fines and reaching opposing conclusions.

Meanwhile, academic libraries are largely sitting on the sidelines of the fine debates. Aside from a handful of colleges and universities, few post-secondary institutions have yet to completely remove fines. New York University's Bobst Library ceased collecting overdue fines on some items, but still charges for materials that have been recalled and are overdue ([Rupp, Sweetman, & Perry, 2010](#)). McGill University Libraries recently established a similar policy. Texas A&M University maintains some fines in combination with "inconvenience" motivators ([Mosley, 2004](#)).

While [Rupp et al. \(2010\)](#) and [Mosley \(2004\)](#) dedicate small sections of their articles to discussing the success of fine removals, only recently was the first peer-reviewed study focusing solely on the effectiveness of fines published. [Sung and Tolppanen \(2014\)](#) compared patron return behavior at two mid-sized academic libraries with different fine policies in the United States. Although four of five hypotheses regarding the effectiveness of fines were disproven, the authors placed great importance on their fifth hypothesis: professors who are subject to fines return their books at a higher rate than those who are not subjected to fines. Their data supported this hypothesis, which they used to conclude that fines do influence patron book return behavior, although they are careful to mention that this conclusion "in no way takes away from the contention that fines are harmful to the image of the library, a barrier to access, and that other approaches can be equally effective" (6).

The current study was carried out to bring additional evidence to the fines debate. It seeks to understand the effects of removing most fines at Vancouver Island University Library.

METHODS

The changes made were assessed in the summer of 2013, almost one full year after VIU library's new policies went into effect. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used to explore the effect of policy changes. Circulation and overdue numbers were collected via the integrated library system (SirsiDynix Symphony®). These efforts were hampered by patchy ILS data; whole datasets were lost in the technical transition to a reduced barrier environment. For example, we could no longer run new reports detailing past overdue fines, as the system deleted all past fines. Luckily reports about fines and overdues that individuals ran in previous years were still in the system and accessible.

Using past reports was an inelegant solution to retrieving data for assessment, but it did allow the authors to proceed in this analysis. We note, though, for those institutions contemplating removing fines, it is critical that assessment staff work with technical services to establish what data is needed to assess the changes and to ensure this data is archived.

Qualitative feedback was collected via emails sent in reaction to a campus-wide policy change e-mail update, and via LibQUAL+® 2012 comments. Ten semi-structured interviews with service desk staff proved to be the richest source of data illuminating the effect of policy changes. These interviews explored how staff relationships with users changed as a result of the new policies, as well as staff thoughts on the new environment. Qualitative data was coded and analyzed in NVivo®, a qualitative analysis tool.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

REMOVING FINES DOES NOT RESUSCITATE PHYSICAL CIRCULATION

While some staff hoped that the policy changes might boost circulation, there was no discernible effect on physical circulation trends. The decade-long decline in physical circulation continued. [Fig. 3](#) adds the 2012/13 post fine period onto the numbers presented in [Fig. 1](#), illustrating that the removal of fines did not change the downward physical circulation trend.

THE PHYSICAL COLLECTION WAS NOT PILLAGED

While it was established that removing fines and the other policy changes implemented did not improve circulation, one of the major questions library staff had about the changes was whether or not there would be an increase in overdue materials among the small numbers of users who are checking physical materials out. Did library users check out material without intending to bring it back, now that

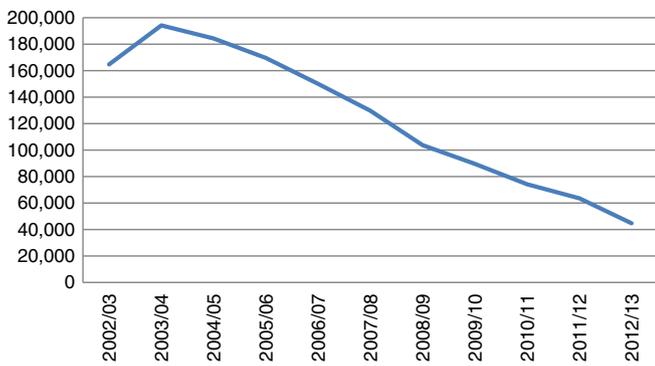


Fig. 3. Physical circulation, 2002/03 to 2012/13.

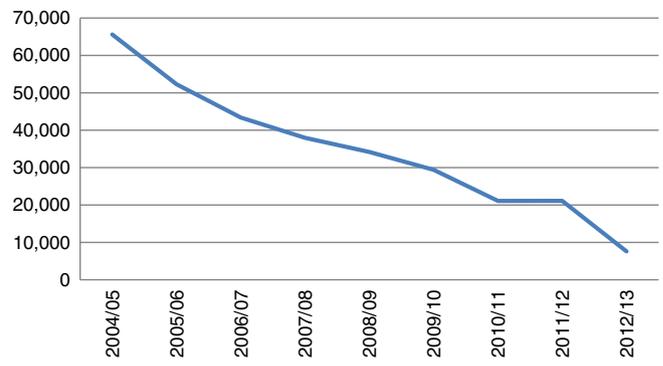


Fig. 5. Fine revenue, 2004/05 to 2012/13.

the long-believed most effective impetus for returning materials was removed?

As Fig. 4 shows, VIU library did not experience an increase in overdue items. Rather, the library saw a small decrease in the percentage of overdue circulating items. This decrease can be attributed to an extension of loan times from 2 to 4 weeks. These findings cast doubt on long-held beliefs that fines are the only policy holding back the hordes of irresponsible users waiting to pillage our sacred stacks.

POORER IN MONEY, RICHER IN FRIENDS

Fig. 5 shows that VIU library revenue is down to \$7598 in 2012/13. The library has ceased relying on fine revenues and library staff no longer grapple with the ethical dilemma of funding library services with user fines.

What the library lost in a small amount of revenue was made up for in substantially increased goodwill. Reaction to VIU library's policy changes when announced was swift and immediate. An email was sent to all campus faculty and staff and within minutes positive feedback was filling librarian inboxes:

[In my Library Record] there is a column that says, "As of now, you owe" and then it is blank! Too cool. I have a whole bunch of overdue books, so I will bring them in tomorrow.

I am sure I am one of many who are sending you emails with a big Thank You! This is brilliant, clever, excellent—all of the above. Very good news for the start of the term.

I especially appreciate the new policies towards fines and blocking, as they relate to student borrowers. I've noticed a culture of fear around library use (in my community re: public libraries, and with students here) where users are hesitant to use library resources because of expected punitive action and disapproval if they don't "follow the rules." Now, when I encourage students to indulge in the pleasures and benefits of borrowing hard copy books, I can mention the new policies, which might relieve some of their hesitation about incurring fines or other penalties.

Good email! I rushed right over to borrow a book

A few professors were concerned with the potential for users not being able to access checked-out material, harkening back to McMenny's (2010) identified concern of community-mindedness. This concern is related to the unproven idea that as punitive motivation for returning books is reduced, individuals no longer have reason to care about others in their community having access to materials. The worried professors were reassured that 1) high-use items could be put on reserve, and 2) interlibrary loans could be procured for on-loan items. Interlibrary loan requests have continued to decline (Fig. 6), indicating that the fines and loans policy changes have not negatively affected access to needed materials.

Interlibrary loan statistics are one indicator of library users not being able to access the physical resources they need at VIU because others have them checked out, but it is only one small clue toward assessing this potential problem. When faced with a resource that is unavailable, library users might select other materials or simply give up. While

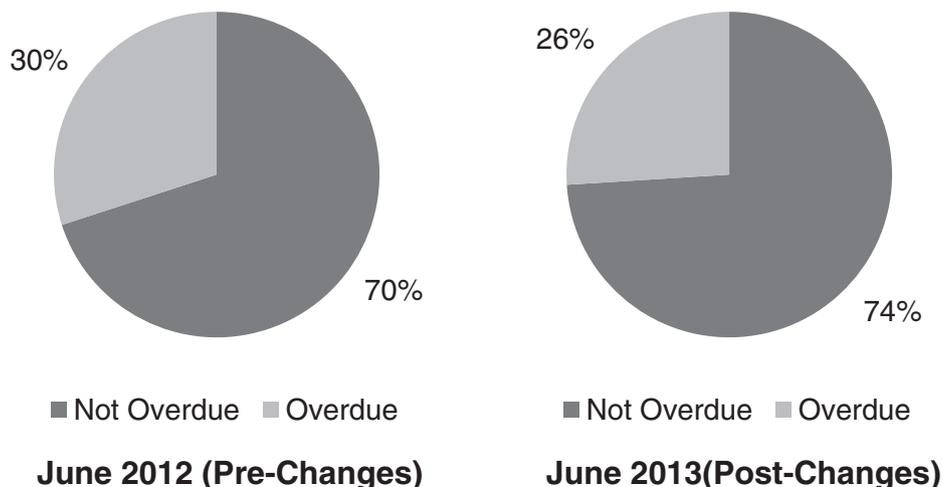


Fig. 4. Percentage of items overdue.

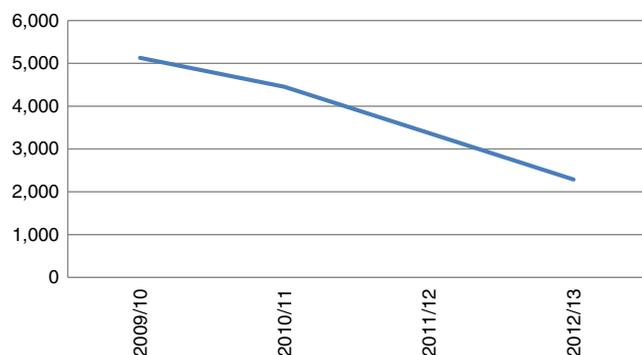


Fig. 6. Requests for interlibrary loans submitted to other institutions on behalf of VIU users, 2009/10–2012/13.

an in-depth study focusing on material demands was not undertaken, interviews with staff reveal that only a handful of students complained about desired resources being checked out during the 2012–13 academic year, and these students were immediately reassured that they could request wanted items via interlibrary loan.

While staff and faculty made their opinions known via emails, no effort was made in this study to collect direct, methodical student feedback on the fines and loan changes. As students are an over-surveyed population, it was felt that other studies soliciting student feedback had priority over fines and loans changes. Thus, little direct student feedback is included in this analysis. Only two formal student comments related to fines were received in LibQUAL+® 2013, one praising the library for removing fines, and the other complaining that the reserve overdue fine fee was too high. The latter was from a new first year student who was not around the previous year when significantly higher fines were charged for reserves.

While the changes were announced to faculty and staff, the policy shift continues to be soft-launched to students. Library staff interviewed all feel that most students do not know about the policy changes, but are pleased to find out when they present themselves at the service desk believing they have a fine to pay.

Happy library users and the subsequent boost in goodwill has had a direct result on front-line service desk staff, who no longer have to engage with users irate over fine amounts.

[It's been] a really positive experience...it's reduced a lot of friction between clients and staff.

It makes the library a less punitive idea, a less restrictive idea, the gate-keeper idea—all that, and that's really great to see us moving forward.

Having been little mini policemen all our lives at the circulation desk, it's really nice not to do that kind of punitive stuff.

I don't have to do the appeals I used to have to do. There's a lot less of that. There's probably slightly less cash handled, and definitely less conflict.

In addition to noting less conflict with users, one service desk employee theorized about the philosophical shift the fines changes brought. The individual recognized that the policy transitions the library from assuming delinquency on the part of users to treating students as responsible adults.

We're saying we trust the students and we're treating them like mature adults. We're giving them the benefit of the doubt.

However, not all users approach borrowing privileges responsibly. There is a small minority that continue to offend the library staff's sense of justice:

I've come away feeling a bit negative with some of my interactions with students [with reserves] because the fines are quite low, they're like 'well, I'm going to keep it anyways' since it's .25 cents an hour or \$2/day, depending on what kind of loan it is.

When asked whether or not this practice occurred before reserve fines were dropped, the staff members admitted that it had, and that it is very rare. It does not make sense to base policies on a small group of irresponsible users. Rather, borrowing policies should be created with the majority in mind, and VIU library staff choose to think of the majority as responsible people who might just need a few extra days with materials sometimes. Staff interviewed agreed with this point-of-view:

You keep finding special circumstances where we should punish people. And I don't know how else we punish them. I don't think fines are the way to go.

I think it's really good for the library, and I don't think it's resulted in students misusing it. I don't. I mean, there's going to be a certain percentage that never returns books whether there's a fine or not. But overall, I think most people return their books on time, or as close as they can under the circumstances...Sometimes you just need a couple extra days.

Coping with a handful of delinquent borrowers is made easier by the positive interactions staff have had with users.

I had a girl here today, and she was like 'oh, I've got to get my photo ID so I'll pay my library fine.' And she didn't have a fine—it had been forgiven in September, so she was really happy about that, and she left with a big stack of books. So it was really an awesome arc of the library experience, because she came in really negative and left really positive.

In the case of the above quote, it is worth noting that this interview took place in March 2013. The student had been fine-free since September, but chose not to take out books believing that she had a fine. After she was told she did not have fines, she took out a stack of books. This is a student who could have been checking out books all academic year, but did not because she believed she owed the library money. In this case, fines posed an obvious barrier to library usage.

Overall, there is overwhelming support for the fines and loans changes among staff.

I think this idea has traction. I just think circulation staff all over the country would have a collective sigh of relief. Because it was the worst part of the job, phoning overdues or telling people their privileges have been suspended and yet, back in the day that was our only weapon.

Sacrificing a small revenue stream generated waves of goodwill and an improved reputation. The jobs of front line staff are improved by a lessening of conflict and an increase in time spent on more positive interactions with users.

CONCLUSION

As mentioned above, [McMenmy \(2010\)](#) theorized efficient circulation of materials, concern for community mindedness, and income are the primary reasons librarians give for keeping fines in place. This study demonstrates that at VIU, circulation was not affected by a removal of most fines, nor was community mindedness. There was a drop in

revenue, but this was planned for and the library happily adapted to a model not reliant on student delinquency.

In an era of declining physical circulation and users that increasingly expect free information, it no longer makes sense for VIU to have restrictive physical borrowing policies in place. By removing most fines and increasing loan periods, the library sacrificed a small revenue stream for significant goodwill among our user base. However, this is a small study at a small university library with a small fine revenue stream. The little amount of fine revenue being generated in the first place made the decision to go largely fine-free quite easy. Librarians at larger institutions with a greater dependence on fine revenue face more difficult decisions in removing fines.

As the evidence-based librarianship movement turns a critical eye onto practices previously taken for granted in the library profession, library fines, held in place by traditional practices and personal beliefs, are one area that is in critical need of examination both in public and post-secondary libraries.

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