

Lose money, win friends: a review of fines and loans at VIU Library

By Alexandria Everitt.

In 2012 Vancouver Island University (VIU) Library decided to review and revamp its fines and loans policy. Before the review, patrons could receive a maximum fine of \$25 per item, and were accruing fines of 50 cents per day. The library was then blocking users from services such as graduation completion and registration.

"It gave patrons a negative feeling about the library," Jean Blackburn, VIU Library's Collections Coordinator and User Experience Coordinator, told the audience at the 2013 BC Library Conference session "Lose money, win friends: a review of fines & loans at the VIU Library". It was the block on patrons' accounts that motivated users to return their books and pay their fines, not overdue fines.

There were definitely the financial concerns of losing fine revenue, but Blackburn stated that "the purpose of fines was to get the materials back and not to gain revenue." Also, from a practical perspective, since fine revenues were steadily declining along with circulation, there was a narrowing window of opportunity to get some good will from the users by doing away with fines. Blackburn reviewed the literature and specifically looked at VIU Librarian Dan Sifton's 2009 article "The last taboo: abolishing library fines." (Partnership: the Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research, vol. 4, no. 1). While written from a public library perspective, the article is applicable to academic libraries, Blackburn said. She stated: "it's not our role to teach lessons through policies." VIU librarians then established some guiding principles:

- Circulation management is a diminishing problem
- Aim for better ROI for physical materials
- Reduce barriers to access
- Reduce punitive tone/approach
- Aim for more equitable access for different user groups
- Harmonize loan policies for different collections & formats

- Aim for the most efficient transaction costs & workflows

A task group was formed consisting of four members; two long-time staff members, and two librarians. This task group met three separate times to develop recommendations for the Librarian's Committee to approve. Once the review was completed, recommendations emerged under three main themes:

- Increase and harmonize loan periods for different collections and formats
- Reduce barriers to accessing library materials
- Reduce financially punitive loan policies while providing strong incentives for the return of materials

Then, a 'made-at-VIU' solution was implemented. The Library forgave all fines and loans but still blocks accounts if an item is 25 days overdue. If the patron returns the item, the slate is wiped clean. If the item is missing, the patron is responsible for paying the replacement fine.

Blackburn noted that there are still exceptions to the no-fine environment: there are still (reduced) fines for reserve items and for community borrowers. At the time of implementation VIU library did not aggressively promote the changes: an email was sent to faculty and staff and information was posted to the VIU Library twitter and Facebook pages. VIU students did not receive an email notification. Recommendations were made in June, they were implemented in July, and everything was ready and changed for the September semester.

Blackburn closed by noting that feedback from users and circulation staff has been positive and has included comments such as: "It's really positive for the library."

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