

Grassroots Report

A Fine Madness

by Jennifer Burek Pierce

I've long depended on the kindness of circulation clerks. Audiobooks are a staple of my commutes, and "reading" titles such as *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (18 hours of listening time), Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy (nearly 36 hours altogether), and even *Pirates!* (a mere 9.5 hours) sometimes takes longer than it ought to. Library staff who have reminded me about soon-to-be-overdue materials when I check out yet another book, or who have generously interpreted the library's grace period policy, have kept the overdue fines I pay to a minimum—at least until recently.

Higher fines and reduced grace periods have resulted in considerably more cash in library coffers, a phenomenon some have referred to as Libraryland's version of the speed trap. Soft evidence abounds of a trend toward higher overdue fines. Such periodicals as the *Christian Science Monitor* have featured the topic, and *Consumer Reports* recently published an article on how libraries' practices of sending unpaid-overdue notices to collection agencies can affect users' credit ratings.

An online discussion list I scan recently considered the matter, and one library announced a new policy as a result: Patrons at that institution will be cut off once they accrue \$2 in overdue charges. This policy reflects a traditional take on fines as a measure designed to encourage prompt returns and prevent loss of materials, but not every library shares this goal.

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"It's clear anecdotally and it's clear based on the amount of money people are losing that this is a substantial revenue stream. The trend has been,

as far as I can see, to increase fines," Herbert Snyder, associate professor of accounting at North Dakota State University, said. Author of *Small Change, Big Problems: Detecting and Preventing Financial Misconduct in Your Library* (ALA Editions, 2006), Snyder commented, "The biggest library fraud I've ever seen involved overdue fines. Many libraries don't realize precisely how much money comes in this way."

Better late than never

At the same time, some libraries are quite conscious of how much money is at stake.

A few years ago, Seattle Public Library raised its fines with a clearly identified revenue target of \$50,000 in an effort to make up for funding cuts. The revised policy included fines for materials such as large-print titles that previously did not accrue overdue charges, and increased daily overdue fines from 10¢ to 15¢, while decreasing the amount at which accounts are blocked from \$20 to \$15. Caroline Ullman of SPL's communications office revealed that as a result, combined revenues from fines and fees went from \$515,000 in 2003 to \$846,000 in 2005. Communications Director Andra Addison indicated that the public has not raised objections to the new fines and fees policy.

Denton (Tex.) Public Library also increased its fines in 2004, moving from 15¢ to 25¢ a day. "This was the first increase in 14 years," librarian Sian Brannon noted, adding that the library had recognized the substantial balance of fees owed but not

collected. Director Eva Poole said that because DPL had been "lenient" in applying its policy of allowing patrons to continue borrowing until

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they'd accrued \$10 in fines, patrons have been nonplussed by the change. However, she added, it has also meant that DPL is

owed nearly \$80,000 in uncollected fines, leaving the library short of unreturned materials and assets that would fund replacement volumes.

Poole acknowledged that the increase in fines was intended, according to long-standing library policy, as a "cost-recovery resource." She also indicated that the library did its homework, showing its board and the public that DPL's fees were modest in comparison with other area libraries' charges.

Nonetheless, not all libraries depend on overdues to create a revenue stream. The Vigo County (Ind.) Public Library declines to charge overdue fees unless a patron allows an item to become 60 days overdue, at which point the case is referred to a collection agency, explained Jeffrey Trinkle, head of lending services. Patrons whose overdues exceed this period are assessed a \$10 fee, but nothing more if they return the items. As a result, VCPL sees an 85% rate of items returned or fees paid.

"We find it more user-friendly and more staff-friendly not to charge fines," Trinkle said. "There's nothing worse than working in the circulation department and having to deal with fines on a daily basis. We're not about generating revenue; we're about getting people through the door and using the library." He said the library has not depended on fines as a revenue source, so their absence isn't missed. □

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