Using Rewards to Minimize Overdue Book Rates

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ABSTRACT: For as long as many libraries have charged fines for books returned after their due dates, this familiar practice has excited comment and controversy. Fines are thought by many to deter patrons from keeping materials too long. However, others believe there is little persuasive evidence that fines are more effective at minimizing overdues than are reminder notices. Further, some critics contend charging fines is unethical, especially in public or school libraries, and the meager results are not worth the harmful public relations fines incur. The authors experimented with an alternative approach using positive reinforcement.

KEYWORDS: Overdue fines, library fees, patron behavior, circulation policy

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Introduction

For decades, many libraries have charged fines for books returned after their due dates, and for almost as long this familiar practice has excited comment and controversy. There is little disagreement that minimizing the number of overdue loans means library materials are more readily accessible to all patrons. Fines are thought by many to deter patrons from keeping materials too long, or at least from being repeat offenders.

Proponents often also defend fines as being just punishment for delinquent borrowing. However, others have responded that there is little persuasive evidence that fines are more effective at minimizing overdues than are reminder notices. Further, some critics
contend charging fines is unethical, especially in public or school libraries, and the meager results are not worth the harmful public relations fines incur. [For additional background, see the appended short list of relevant works.]

Among the alternatives to fines are so-called “no-fines” polices, in which no fees are assessed for overdue materials until the delinquent borrower has failed to respond to some specified number of overdue notifications. At this juncture, the next step typically is to send the patron a lost item bill, stating the replacement cost and processing fee. Some libraries may also suspend borrowing privileges at this stage, or they may wait until more time has elapsed and the patron has still failed to return the item or pay the bill. In many cases, libraries with no-fines policies assess the processing fee even when a patron responds to a lost item bill by returning the item. Rather than being a preventive or punitive fine, the processing fee is intended to recover the library’s costs for the staff time, postage, and other expenses incurred in attempting to persuade the patron to do what should have been done in the first place: return the borrowed material. The “processing fee” becomes a kind of rental fee, in such cases. Another option is a point system in which borrowers are assessed points for each overdue loan until they exceed a specified limit, after which they are subject to various sanctions, which may include loss of borrowing privileges and “processing fees.”

These various systems have at least one thing in common: they rely on some kind of punishment or sanctions to persuade patrons to return materials or pay the replacement fees. Of course, an alternative to negative reinforcement is positive reinforcement. Psychologists have found positive reinforcement can be as or more effective than negative reinforcement in influencing behavior under certain circumstances. We were
curious to know whether some kind of positive reinforcement system could be effective in minimizing the overdue rate in a library. The original positive reinforcement system was worked out by the senior author and published in the *Journal of Library Administration*, Volume 9, Number 3, 1988. Readers are referred to that article for a more detailed examination of the theory behind operant conditioning, the arguments for and against using positive reinforcement to influence library borrower behavior, and a method for implementing a positive reinforcement system when using an unsophisticated automated circulation system, or no circulation automation at all.

In conducting our experiment, we were fortunate to be able to generate the necessary reports using our Voyager integrated library system. In the next section, we will offer more background information about our overdues situation and describe the positive reinforcement system we devised in order to minimize our overdues rate.

**Georgia Southern University’s Overdues Rate and Policies**

Georgia Southern University is a publicly supported, comprehensive institution enrolling more than 15,000 undergraduate and graduate students in a small rural community. The Zach S. Henderson Library is the campus’s only library, and has had a no-fines policy for more than a decade.

The reward policy we devised was predicated on Voyager’s ability to generate a report for any specified time period that listed students who had borrowed at least one item and had never returned any loan late.\(^1\) The time period we selected was from the first day through the last day of classes. We would thus have enough time before the end

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\(^1\) It should be noted that this report, designed by our systems librarian David Lowder, was not based on retaining loan records after the materials were returned. Like most libraries, we protect our borrowers by not keeping records of the titles they borrowed once the items are checked in.
of the final exam period to contact students eligible for a reward. Some might be graduating, so we wanted to be sure they collected their reward before they left campus for good.

We knew from 2002-2003 data there would be several thousand students who would borrow materials and have no overdues, and therefore it would not be possible to reward them all. In addition, we reasoned if we rewarded everyone eligible we would be in effect inviting students who might otherwise never have borrowed anything to check out an item just to claim the reward. Our concern was this simply shifted the burden of minimizing overdues from circulation personnel to shlevers, with no meaningful costs reduced or time saved. Therefore we decided borrowers who met the criteria would be eligible to win a prize in a drawing. Also to avoid increasing the shlevers’ workload substantially, we declared that it did not matter whether students borrowed one or a hundred books: if they had no overdues, they would have one chance in the drawing.

The prizes were $30 university bookstore gift certificates, and we offered five per semester. Previous experience with contests had shown book store gift certificates were fairly popular with the student body, and yet we guessed that a chance in a drawing for a $30 gift certificate would not motivate very many non-library using students to borrow just to enter the contest. Similarly, we were concerned about an imbalance between the likely effect of daily fines (be they 10 cents, 25 cents, 50 cents) and a highly desirable prize, one that most libraries might not be able to offer on an ongoing basis.

With our policy in place, we put up a sign on the circulation desk and designed bookmarks that explained the new policy and possible rewards. We tried to point the policy out and give an explanatory bookmark to every student who checked out materials,
but we did no further publicity. It seemed to us that publicizing the new policy in the student newspaper or other forum outside the library could skew the results. Anything that encouraged a substantial number of students to borrow materials they did not want just to enter the drawing would lead to an improved overdues rate, simply because of the infusion of loans kept for only a day, a few hours, or even a few minutes!

**The First Semester’s Results**

At the end of the first semester in which the policy was in place, five winning students were randomly selected from more than 5,000 who had become eligible by borrowing at least one item during the term and having no overdue loans during the same time period. The percentage of the 9,242 undergraduate loans that became overdue was 0.9% lower than the previous fall semester, while the graduate overdues declined by 4.9% (2,012 total items borrowed). The overdues rates included all items that became overdue, even if only by one day. We surveyed 91 students when they were returning books during finals week and found that more than half had not received or remembered the information about the policy that was supposed to be given at time of check-out, which might suggest that the positive reward policy did not have much effect due to students knowing little about it. Similarly, the results at the end of spring semester were mixed. There was a 3.2% decline in graduate student overdues, but undergraduate overdues actually went up 0.3%. Our end-of-term survey this time found a much higher rate, 75%, did know about the reward policy. We speculated the policy might be having more effect on graduate students since they tend to be older, more mature, more library-oriented than undergraduates, and therefore more concerned about the overdues situation.
since they would understand how it affects their access to needed library materials. It could be the declines in their overdues rates were caused as much by our raising their awareness of the issue as by any chance of winning a prize.

In the second academic year of the experiment, we decided to see if greater awareness of the policy could reduce overdues further. We therefore tried to publicize the policy more widely, despite the risk that doing so would increase circulation artificially. Although the student newspaper was not interested in carrying an article about the experiment, we put out more promotional information within the library and found at the end of both semesters of the second year the overall awareness of the policy did increase. However, since overall circulation declined, the increased publicity did not create additional work for shelvers.

The results were again mixed at the end of the second year. Undergraduate rates actually increased almost 1% between the two fall semesters, but then decreased 4.7% between the two spring semesters. Graduate student overdues rates improved much more dramatically, about 25%, but some of this was certainly attributable to our having agreed to graduate student requests for an extended loan period.

In summary, there have been some improvements in the overdues rates but given the weakness of an A-B experimental design, it is impossible to determine how much the improvement is due to the positive reinforcement policy and how much is due to other factors, such as the change in graduate student loan period. On the other hand, students have been pleased we are taking such a patron-friendly approach to the matter. We encourage other libraries to conduct similar experiments. Public and school libraries in particular might be pleased by the impact on public perceptions. What lending library
would not benefit from increasing awareness of the impact of overdue books, and from appreciation of a positive approach to combating overdues?

NOTE

It should be noted that the reports used in our study were not based on loan records retained after the materials were returned. Like most libraries, we protect our borrowers by not keeping records of the titles they borrowed once the items are checked in.

REFERENCES


