

Upper Hudson Library System

The Fine-Free Experience

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- RESPONSES PROVIDED BY PANELISTS –

1. Where did the motivation to go fine-free come from? Why did this conversation come up within your library?

Albany:

We launched our Mycard program four years earlier, and that was a toe in the water. Trustees were happy with the work that went into the process. After our February 2020 board meeting, when we will be reporting to the board on what the impact was, I can better answer that question.

Brunswick:

We first went fine-free for kids because we noticed that parents were maxing out their kids cards and then children couldn't get books out of the library. Our first year being fine-free for kids went so well, we decided to go fine-free for everyone.

Castleton:

We were motivated to go fine-free primarily because of instances where fines presented a barrier to serving people in our community. We wanted to bring back people that had stopped using the library because they had overdue fines or billed items, and to bring in people who had avoided getting library cards due to fear of owing money. We also saw going fine-free as a way to foster a more welcoming, positive customer experience in the library.

2. What were the biggest concerns about going fine-free?

Albany:

There was a significant debate about how fine free would work. Trustees were split about making fine free for everyone or just for Albany residents. Not sure if your board should ever be "delighted," I think they should be confident the right decision was made and be prepared to roll any initiative back if it is not successful,

Staff, it varied by service area and position. We saw significant support from librarians, especially those in areas of the city that are resource insecure. Some of

our librarians were concerned about the integrity of the collection but understood the decision.

Brunswick:

There were concerns that books wouldn't be returned and that people would take advantage of the process. We have not had this experience, however. If people have late books, they simply aren't allowed to check out new items until the late items come back.

Castleton:

Some concerns included: how to eliminate overdue fines while also making sure that new and in-demand items are available for checkout; concerns that eliminating overdue fines might discourage municipalities from increasing our funding; potential loss of revenue; potential item loss.

3. What resources did the board use to make the decision to go fine free, and what were the strongest motivating factors?

Brunswick:

We looked at examples of other libraries nation-wide where fine-free has worked well. The more we looked at the concept of fines, the more it seemed like an economic barrier. There are so many obstacles to literacy, we don't want the library to be a source of another obstacle.

Castleton:

I was deeply inspired by the 2017 NYLA Conference presentation "Breaking Down Barriers by Rethinking Fines," presented by the Onondaga County Public Libraries and the Rochester Public Library. I also serve on a UHLS committee (Automation Advisory Committee – AAC) that did quite a bit of research about a variety of efforts to eliminate barriers to youth access in libraries, including eliminating overdue fines. This research and the experiences of other libraries convinced me that eliminating overdue fines was a positive change that our library could easily implement. Participating in the AAC's research was very helpful in preparing me to present information to the board and to anticipate questions and concerns. The document "Removing Barriers to Access: Eliminating Library Fines and Fees on Children's Materials" created by the Colorado State Library was especially helpful; I shared this document with my board as part of our discussion regarding fines. I also shared anecdotal information with the board about occasions at our library when fines have constituted a barrier to service or contributed to a negative customer service experience. I also provided a history of the revenue we received from overdue fines, which had been falling every year since 2015, and what percentage of our revenue it had constituted each year. The board reviewed all of these resources and perspectives in reaching consensus on this issue.

4. What were your first steps?

Brunswick:

Our first year, we were fine-free for children under 12. This was our trial year and gave us time to see if there would be any issues.

Castleton:

Before we explored eliminating overdue fines, we had reduced fine barriers by reducing fines (i.e. changing overdue fines for DVDs from \$1.00/day to \$.10/day) and by raising the threshold at which fines block patrons from checking out items (from \$3.00 to \$10.00). We had also offered “Food for Fines” programs during the month of February (2016-2018) for patrons to eliminate their overdue fines by donating nonperishable food items to a local food pantry. From June-August 2018, we offered “Fine Free Fridays,” which allowed patrons to return overdue items fine-free on Fridays during our Summer Reading Program. We also waived existing overdue fines for all CPL youth patrons at the beginning of our 2018 Summer Reading Program.

5. How did you implement going fine-free?

Brunswick:

We made announcements online and in person. UHLS made the necessary changes in the system and it was a pretty seamless transition. We do keep a donation jar at the circ desk – sometimes people who were late still want to give us money, but it is now an optional donation.

Castleton:

I communicated with the board on a variety of occasions about my desire to eliminate overdue fines long before we did any work to change our policy. That way the idea was not new, and everyone on the board had a chance to learn more and ask questions before we drafted changes to our policies and procedures. Once the board had buy-in, I spoke with our staff individually about what changes would be coming and got their feedback. Staff buy-in was very easy; the staff had firsthand experience of how fines could be a barrier to access, and also saw the change as an opportunity to creating a more welcoming customer service environment.

In our marketing materials and in training staff, we use language such as “our library no longer charges late fees” or “we’ve eliminated overdue fines” instead of using the term “fine-free.” We want to avoid any misunderstanding regarding charges for items that are lost or damaged. We also use the phrase “just bring it back” in our marketing materials to reinforce the message that once a patron brings back an item, they will not owe a fine.

Once we set January 1, 2019 as our official policy change date, we made sure that our circulation policies and procedures were updated and that staff were fully trained on the changes.

Along with eliminating overdue fines, I also went through some fine and collection cleanup to give current patrons a blank slate to start the year:

- We forgave all billed item charges for CPL items that had a due date of 2014 or earlier and for items that would likely be weeded if they were ever returned. These were forgiven regardless of which library's patron had borrowed the item. We did not forgive any billed items owned by other libraries.
- We sent a letter to patrons that had CPL billed items on their cards that were due from 2016 through 2018, and invited them to return those items to regain a clean slate and resume borrowing items.
- We forgave all current overdue fines owed by CPL patrons (including overdue fines charged by other libraries). We did not forgive charges for any lost or damaged items from other libraries.
- To minimize confusion for patrons following our policy change, and to handle any possible overdue fines from items checked out prior to 1/1/2019, we set our Sierra check-in screen to default to waive overdue charges on items being checked in.

6. Did you have any pushback? If so, how did you handle it?

Albany:

Clerical staff, especially those in our wealthier neighborhoods, were concerned and pushed back on the idea significantly. We experienced some push back from clerical staff at our Washington Ave. Branch as well. I believe some of that is the concern that their position in the organization is becoming marginalized as we naturally evolve away from a transactional model.

We saw similar trends when it came to patrons. Patrons in wealthier neighborhoods saw more vocal opposition to the plan; those in resource insecure neighborhoods were supportive. We also saw significant support from community partners and leaders. We received vocal support from members of the common council, including the president.

Brunswick:

Very little – the majority of our feedback was positive. We had one or two community members question why we were removing fines if the library needs money. We let them know we did not earn very much through fines to begin with and that by going fine-free, we have actually gotten back extremely late books that may not have been returned otherwise. We also explained that late fees can unfairly punish people with visual impairments, dyslexia, and learning disabilities. We don't want anyone to be punished for needing a little extra time with their books.

Castleton:

Negative reactions have been few. Usually the person reacting negatively is worried that people will be able to keep borrowing items and never return them; when I explain the logistics of how the ILS keeps that from happening, they are satisfied by that answer and regard the idea more positively. I have only encountered one person who continues to view our going fine-free negatively, despite a few conversations about it (this person is also an active member of our Friends group

and continues to help and support the library despite their objections to the policy change). I have presented about our going fine-free to the boards of the two municipalities that provide our library's funding, and have received only positive responses from people on both boards.

7. What financial impact has going fine-free had on your library?

Brunswick:

Brunswick is a small library that only charged \$0.10 a day for late items, so we were not bringing in a great deal of revenue from fines to begin with. We "lost" about \$1.5k in fines per year, but we have noticed VERY late books coming back to the library, which may not have come back before (many patrons couldn't afford their fines and stopped coming to the library altogether). In the end, I believe getting the books back saves us money.

Castleton:

Since fines (including payment received for billed items) constituted less than 1% of our revenue in 2018, we were concerned about how we would make up this revenue, but not unduly so. We anticipated that we would make up at least some of the revenue in the form of donations. Before we made the policy change to become fine-free, we asked our Friends group if they would be willing to give us additional funding to offset the revenue loss if it was not made up in other donations, and they agreed to do so.

To encourage donations, we put a donation box near our circulation desk with a sign that encourages patrons to make a donation in lieu of overdue fines. From January through September, donations received via the donation box alone amounted to over \$480, almost 40% of all overdue fine payments we received in 2018. When people put a donation in the box, they feel good for contributing. Our staff always says "thank you!" when we see someone making a donation.

We have not been too concerned about the impact of collection loss, as it seems that almost all items are coming back. A snapshot of billed items as of 10/31/19 is slightly higher than at the end of 2018, but it is not significantly higher, and it remains to be seen how many of these billed items will be returned or paid for before the end of the year. If anything, I believe that eliminating overdue fines encourages the return of long-overdue items, since people know they will not owe fines on them once they are returned. Collection loss is part of the cost of doing business for all libraries, regardless of their fine policy.

We do end up sending slightly more billed item notices out, which means that there is a small increase in terms of the postage cost and staff time spent to send notices.

8. What non-financial impact has it had on your library?

Brunswick:

Our first year of being completely fine-free saw an increase in our checkouts of about 2,000 items. We have had many patrons express extreme gratitude – especially those of low income, who had stopped coming to the library due to not being able to pay off their fines. Many of my storytime families are also very happy, since they take out so many children’s books at once. It is easy for a few books to get lost in the bedtime story shuffle and the fines add up fast.

Castleton:

We have always had strong customer service and a welcoming atmosphere at CPL, but it is even more positive and welcoming since we no longer have unpleasantness at the circulation desk regarding overdue fines. The tone in the library is warm and relaxed. There are more smiles. Conversations with patrons with billed items on their cards are more positive, since we are able to promise them a clean slate once the items are returned.

Putting in a donation box has been a help in offsetting the loss of fine revenue, but it has also fostered a lot of good feeling in the library. When people put a donation in the box, they feel like they are contributing to the library, as opposed to feeling punished or shamed by being asked to pay a fee for being late. Even if someone feels neutral about paying overdue fines, they don’t do it with the same level of positivity with which they make a donation. Seeing patrons make a donation also prompts a response of gratitude on the part of our staff – they give a “thank you” that is warmer than the transactional “thank you” of processing a fine payment. The donation box has meant more smiles all around.

One success story to share: A patron had several billed items on her card in 2018, and she and her child had not visited the library in several months. After being sent a letter about our new policy, she and her child visited the library and returned all of the items that had been checked out. With a clean slate, they began visiting the library more frequently to borrow materials and to participate in children’s programs. Eliminating overdue fines helped bring this family back to the library!

9. Are you aware of any impact of your going fine-free on other libraries in the system?

Brunswick:

Some of our patrons have expressed a preference for coming to BRUN and other fine-free libraries after experiencing high fines at some of the local branches.

Castleton:

Our going fine-free has had an effect on other libraries, but it is a small impact. Any items from other libraries that are checked out at CPL will not accrue overdue fines, which may result in a loss of fine revenue for the libraries that own the items. During the transition, to reduce patron confusion and ensure that 2018 overdue items came back fine-free, we set our check-in screen in Sierra to waive any overdue fines on incoming items, which may have also reduced fine revenue for other libraries. We also did a one-time “clean slate” waiver of existing overdue fines on all CPL cards,

which included overdue fines from other libraries (overdue fines only; we did not waive any other libraries' billed or damaged item charges).

10. Looking back, what if anything would you have done differently? Any regrets?

Brunswick:

I honestly think this is one of the best decisions BRUN has made. Our patrons are still expressing gratitude two years in & we have seen an increase in circulation. Very few people run late on their books and our patrons are still very concerned about renewing their items and bringing them back on time.

Castleton:

Eliminating overdue fines has been a very positive experience for our library and for our community thus far. I think that we approached the change in a way that made it fairly seamless for the staff and for patrons. I only wish that we had gone fine-free earlier!