

Oregon Library Association Intellectual Freedom Committee Tuesday Topic, April 2019

Welcome to Tuesday Topics, a monthly series covering topics with intellectual freedom implications for libraries of all types. Each message is prepared by a member of OLA's Intellectual Freedom Committee or a guest writer. Questions can be directed to the author of the topic or to the [IFC committee](#).



Intellectual Freedom Committee

Oregon Library Association

Eliminating Library Fines to Provide Better Access to Information and Services

In January 2019, the American Library Association released a [Resolution on Monetary Library Fines as a Form of Social Inequity](#). It lays out specific ways fines are a barrier to accessing information and using libraries, both public and academic. The resolution ultimately urges libraries to eliminate monetary fines and strengthen funding so that they are not dependent on fines for their budgets.

Oregon Libraries and Fines

Several libraries in Oregon have already taken steps to eliminate fines in some form. Beaverton City Library, Corvallis-Benton County and Multnomah County Library are among those that have eliminated fines for children's materials. Deschutes Public Library, Jackson County Library Services and Newport Public Library are a few that have gone fine free for all materials. To learn more about the various fee systems of libraries in Oregon, the [State Library provides library statistics](#) including fines and fees. [This map](#) has information about libraries worldwide but may be lacking in complete accuracy.

Concerns

Motivation to return, budget, and teaching civic responsibility come up over and over again in articles and conversations on this topic. However, [this report from the Colorado State Library](#) cites several studies that indicate fines do not seem to be a motivating factor for returning or not returning items. In terms of budget issues, many libraries are already seeing decreases in their fine generated income due to the increasing use of e-materials.* Additionally, some libraries may find that the cost of processing fine payments might outweigh the fine income.** To the topic of teaching responsibility, libraries will need to find ways to adequately communicate to their constituents the importance of access over these perceived lessons.

Access, Not Barriers

As the ALA resolution suggests, fines impact people who are less likely to be able to pay them, thereby creating barriers for those most in need of library services. The [Salt Lake City Library](#) and [San Francisco Public Library](#) have both done studies that indicate that "an outside portion of library cards blocked for financial reasons...came at the low end of the socioeconomic scale" and that fines "disproportionately affect low-income communities, African American communities, and communities without college degrees."

It seems clear that it is time for libraries to think about why they charge fines, how communities are affected, and how fines impact access to information. Even with small steps like eliminating fines for children, libraries can begin steps to limit barriers and provide better access to information for all. Certainly, there are budgetary, political and public opinion hurdles to navigate and overcome, but in the long run, eliminating barriers means better access to information and better libraries for our communities.

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*"Doing Fine(S)?" *Library Journal*, vol. 142, no. 6, Apr. 2017, pp. 40-44

**"The End of Fines." *Library Journal*, vol. 143, no. 15, Sept. 2018, pp. 21-23