

Pat Kiernan

Ending the exam-time library paradox

Bring out the library cops. Forget about AIDS, cheating, stealing and everything like that. For me, the great moral and ethical dilemma of the 80s is right here in the University of Alberta libraries. The careful balance between securing your right to study, and depriving others of the same right. Now, you know the scenario. Exam time comes, and everybody wants a spot to study. So I stroll over to the library, books in hand, ready for many gruelling hours of academic achievement. Entering one of the seating areas, I choose to look for a spot at one of the tables. There's room for about 100 people, but I can only see about 50 around me. Still, they've managed to spread out their books and coats to monopolize every seat in sight. Not to worry...I'll sit in a carrel. I turn the corner, see an empty one, and get ready to grab it.

No. This won't work. Even though there's no one around, there are books strewn about, and on the chair is a leather football jacket that says "Biff" on the sleeve. Looks like Biff is out to lunch.

So here's the problem: half the library is empty, and all the seats are taken. There's nobody there, but I can't sit down. Major inefficiency.

It wouldn't bother me so much if the library was just plain full. I could deal with that. Instead, we have a recipe for instant frustration.

Call it Library Space Monopolization Snowball Effect (LSMSE). Because students know that others are likely to monopolize space, they take whatever steps are necessary to protect their own territory. Some people actually arrive at 8 in the morning with two jackets. One for them, one for their chair.

The two jacket system is probably the most effective. Your turf is clearly identified, yet, with your second jacket, you're free to roam. Down to trail for coffee. Over to CAB to write an exam. Home to Millwoods for supper. To Banff for 3 fabulous days of skiing. Hawaii. You get the idea.

It's a dirty trick. But given the circumstances, I really can't blame these people. I think most of them would take their stuff away with them, if there was some type of guarantee that they would have a spot when they return. But as things

go right now, the only guarantee is the one you create.

What the library needs, then, is TURNOVER. What about the 30 minute rule? Perhaps I should address this now. U of A policy states that unattended books in a library can be pushed aside if left for 30 minutes or more. Good rule. Now what do I do about it?

Here's an idea. I could choose a carrel that I really would like to sit in, and wait there with a stopwatch. After 29 minutes, there's a tap on my shoulder. Excuse me sir, that's my seat. Bad luck for me. I'll have to try another one.

Three hours later. I've been booted out of 11 different seats because my stopwatch never made

it to 30. But it's about to happen29:58....29:59....30:00. It's mine.

I've actually seen this happen once. A student much braver than me. After nearly 60 minutes, the girl who had left her books in the carrel came back, and brashly asked him to leave. He said "No. You've violated the 30 minute rule."

Both people dug in their heels, and an argument ensued. He was right technically. But she was armed with an argument about the law of the land. Something about common law and tradition overriding the petty policies of library bureaucrats. "If you wanted a seat, you should have gotten here as early as I did," she informed him.

That argument went on for about 25 minutes. Great fun for everybody in the area.

The 30 minute rule is a good idea. It just needs some impartial observer to enforce it.

This idea wouldn't need massive numbers of staff. Just one person, armed with a handful of handbills which read "This space will be available at"

The library cop walks around, and fills in a time. Perhaps 40 minutes away to allow for a grace period. The handbill is placed on the carrel for all to see.

For the person who left their books behind, the procedure is

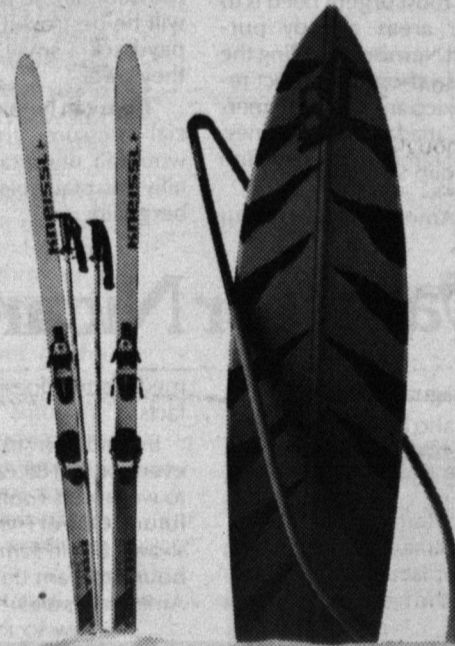
simple. When they return in time, they simply tear up the slip.

For the poor soul with nowhere to study, a quick walk will reveal an "Available" slip. He can push the offender's books aside, and take the seat as his own.

Because turnover would be high, nobody could really have a problem with this. The person who left for more than 40 minutes would be mildly upset—having been caught. Tough break...but there would be a nearby space to move to, so it wouldn't be a big deal.

I really think this idea could solve a major problem. And if it doesn't, I've got a good deal lined up on a second jacket. It's paper. Disposable. Lightweight. Perfect for the job.

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