



Peer-Reviewed Article

How Libraries are Funded: Transparency Issues in Student Tuition and Fees Among ARL Libraries

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how ARL libraries affiliated with institutions of higher education receive funding, or not, through library related fees collected as part of tuition and fees payments. The authors from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) wanted to examine how their publicly available tuition-related library fee funding compared with their peers. They were motivated to research this topic due to the combined impacts of COVID-19, the serials crisis, and recent budget reductions. Data was collected from publicly available tuition and fees data on university websites. Analysis revealed that tuition-related library fees at UNL are significantly lower than similar fees supporting ARL libraries, and that there is a lack of transparency in how libraries are funded through tuition-related library fees.

KEYWORDS

tuition-related library fees, transparency, library budgets

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Introduction

Due to concerns about the effect of inflation and budget cuts due to COVID-19, the author's decided to examine publicly available library related fees in order to understand their peers' use of such fees in the Association of Research Libraries (ARL). Library fees are a traditional method of funding to help combat inflation by many institutions.

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) is a public land grant research university designated as a "Doctoral University: Very High Research Activity" by the Carnegie Classification of Institutes of Higher Education (Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, 2022). It is the flagship of the University of Nebraska state system, which includes universities at Omaha, Kearney, and the University of Nebraska Medical Center. The Libraries collaborate on purchases through the University of Nebraska Consortium of Libraries (UNCL), and budgetary considerations for all campuses must be taken into account to provide equitable affordable access to as many resources as possible.

The Rationale for Tuition-related Library Fees

Tuition-related library fees, such as library credit hour fees, are charged based on either a flat rate or a rate connected to credit hours. Credit hour fees exist to: provide a method of standardization across all levels of PK-16, mobility between institutions, increase transparency, and "public accountability" (Shedd, 2003). The rationale for tuition and fee increases is that those who benefit the most from a resource should pay a greater share of those costs, and that students will make more careful choices based on those costs, and competition will increase the quality of higher education (Callender & Dougherty, 2018).

Literature providing full transparency of tuition-related library fees are sparse. While not all libraries are supported by student fees (Jones, 2018), the authors assume some measure of student tuition or fees support their college or university library. Early literature canvassed ARL libraries about fees, but the survey focused directly on individual services, such as searching databases, copying costs, ILL borrowing, and access to technology (Association of Research Libraries, 1990). External sources of library funding beyond state allocations are frequently obfuscated by group reporting of donor gifts, capital campaigns, friend's groups, joint ventures with athletics, coffee shops, credit courses, and service fees. In many cases, libraries did not list fees related to tuition, or provide a percentage of their budget that is supported by students (Cuiller and Stoffle, 2011). The lack of transparency in student support for libraries is further hindered by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), which combines tuition and required fees into one, non-itemized category (NCES, 2021a; NCES, 2021b).

The literature also points to the difficulty of understanding tuition-related library fees when they are combined as a portion of an overarching technology fee. In these examples, a general technology fee was assessed, with committees to determine the allocation of funds

throughout the university (Cunningham, 2011). Fees distributed under this model were made through proposals developed by qualifying units (Webster and Middleton, 1999), such as the libraries, providing inadequate transparency of student support of their library, and particularly onerous, requiring annual proposals and causing unpredictability of library budgets each fiscal year (Arthur and White, 2013). These practices are highly unsustainable, and fail to provide transparent knowledge to ensure equitable funding for libraries, and that students are receiving comparable support at peer institutions.

Considering Increasing the Credit Hour Fee

UNL Libraries receive funding from library credit hour fees (used to help offset inflation related to library databases and journals) and technology fees (used for purchasing publicly available computers for students). The University of Nebraska System currently charges \$6.25 per credit hour, which was increased from the previous rate of \$4.00 per credit hour in Academic Year 2016-2017. UNL Libraries have predicted a need for an increase in student fees within the next 3 to 5 five years as many of the system campuses, due to historic levels of inflation, can no longer use credit hour fees to offset their expenses and maintain a sustainable budget. With UNCL considering requesting an increase in library credit hour fees, the authors wished to research how UNCL's library credit hour fees compared with other ARL libraries. The act of considering increasing tuition-related library fees is complicated due to the current information environment, with such pitfalls as COVID-19, budget cuts, resource inflation, vendor monopolies, rising tuition, and lack of transparency among universities for reporting tuition-related library fees.

COVID-19, The Serials Crisis, and Unsustainable Budgets

The Serials Crisis drives much of the need for increased funding, or significant cuts, to the UNL Libraries materials budget. The Serials Crisis can best be defined as the hyperinflation of resources beyond a pricing point, at which libraries can no longer afford to keep paying for current subscriptions. This has been frequently attributed to the continuous practice of corporate mergers and acquisitions of information vendors (Breeding, 2020), and reducing competition and fair pricing of resources (Veldova and Brown, 2021; Winter, 2023). While serials are the main focus of the crisis, the umbrella definition has also recently extended to the exorbitant prices charged for e-book packages, databases, and streaming media platforms.

Historically, the increasing prices of serials has been a concern for libraries, mentioned as early as 1927 by the American Library Association (Works, 1927, pp. 39). However, there have been several periods in the 20th and 21st centuries where serials crises have caused libraries to cancel subscriptions. Periods around 1980, 1990 (Roth, 1990), and from approximately 1997 to 2002 (McGuigan, 2004; Schmidle & Via, 2004) were borne out of the diminished state funding of libraries occurring since the 1970's. The recession of 2008 was particularly detrimental to library funding (Baveye, 2010), from which libraries are still recovering from budget cuts issued

during that time frame. The ongoing effects of the recession, coupled with reductions in state funding, lower student enrollment, and lost revenue from COVID-19 (Mitchell, Leachman, & Saenz, 2019) have caused another serials crisis from 2015 to the present day (McKenzie, 2019; Hoeve, 2019). Quasi-monopolization of the market through corporate mergers (Breeding, 2020), as evidenced by SPARC's Big Deal Cancellation Tracker, has documented many cancellations of major serials packages between 2015 and 2021 (SPARC, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic caused significant budgetary reductions across the University of Nebraska State System (Dunker, 2023) and state higher education budgets across the United States (Mervis 2020; TICAS, 2021). While some states generated a surplus in fiscal year 2021, there is no guarantee that funds previously cut from state schools will be returned, and those that are returned often may be designated for different priorities that are not comparable to activities dropped as part of the budget reduction process (Whitford, 2022). The UNL Libraries are set to cut expenditures by approximately 1.2 million dollars by Fiscal Year 2024, with predicted inflationary costs included. It was determined that these cuts would come from the collection's budget, so as to prevent any changes to operational costs and faculty / staff hiring plans. The Serials Crisis has added to financial difficulties caused by Covid-19, creating an unsustainable budget without alternative sources of funding, such as raising student fees. Critiques of tuition and fee increases suggest that the shifting of costs has not reduced inequalities in access to prominent institutions of higher education and sometimes increases them (Callender & Dougherty, 2018; Heffernan, 1973; Kramer, Holcomb, & Kelchen, 2018).

Methodology & Findings

The authors wanted to understand how the tuition-related library fees at UNL compared to those supporting other members of the Association of Research Libraries (Association of Research Libraries, 2023). There are 127 member libraries of ARL, 119 which are affiliated with 122 institutions of higher education. For the purposes of analysis, we only looked at tuition-related library fees at institutions of higher education and excluded other types of research libraries (8). Tuition-related library fee information was searched for on the websites of 122 institutions. US and Canadian institutions of higher education were both included in the study, but only one Canadian institution had a tuition-related library fee.

Research was initially conducted by searching Google for "tuition and fees," including the name of the ARL library related university. If this was not successful, the researchers then proceeded to visit the libraries' university homepages. Within the university's websites, we looked for the following types of pages: "cost of attendance," "student fees," and informational pages targeted at incoming undergraduate and graduate students. Sometimes this information was found on a PDF link on one of the pages described above. Information was then verified by a second researcher before analysis. ACRL and IPEDS reports were not considered in this study because they are a paid service, and do not provide transparency to institutions, students, and families. It should also be noted that UNL's libraries Director of Finance and Administration

had searched ACRL and IPEDS reports for tuition-related library fees, and determined they could not be located, indicating potential reporting gaps that could be valuable to libraries, if required to disclose in annual reports.

Library Credit Hour, Term, and Semester Fees

When examining the cost of tuition-related library fees per semester, several values were normalized. The authors decided to use twelve credit hours as the baseline for full-time undergraduate students and nine hours for full-time graduate students. If a library fee was listed as an annual fee, the total cost was divided by two to assume the traditional model of a fall and spring semester. Therefore, if a cost per credit hour was discovered (Y for undergraduate students, Z for graduate students), the total cost for an undergraduate semester would be $[Y * 12]$, and the total cost for a graduate semester would be $[Z * 9]$. For annual fees, normalized results for undergraduate students per semester are $[Z / 2]$, and $[Y / 2]$ for graduate students.

The spreadsheet generated to analyze the data, including where information was found, is included in the author's university repository, and linked as supplemental materials as the information is too large to include in the body of the article. (Naylor, Deards, and Hoeve, 2023).

We gathered information on tuition-related library fees from each of the 122 ARL Libraries affiliated with institutions of higher learning. In the process of obtaining the information, it was concluded that only fifteen universities made at least undergraduate and / or graduate tuition-related library fees known to the public, giving an identifiable reporting rate of 12.30 percent. Out of the fifteen universities with tuition-related library fees available, all fifteen provided information for undergraduates, and only twelve schools reported costs for tuition-related library fees for graduate students, giving a 9.84% reporting rate.

When examining the total cost per semester, as stated above, it was determined that twelve credit hours would be considered full-time for undergraduate students, and 9 hours would be considered full-time for graduate students. When looking at the data for undergraduate students, it was concluded that the average cost per semester for tuition-related library fees was \$129.16 undergraduates, and \$91.51 per semester for graduate students. UNL's student credit hour related fees are at \$75 undergraduates, and \$56.25 per semester for graduate students.

When examining our peer institutions in the Big Ten Academic Alliance (Big Ten Academic Alliance, 2023), including the University of Chicago), the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign was the only university besides UNL that publicly displayed tuition-related library fees, demonstrating a reporting rate of 13.33 percent.

It should be noted that fifteen institutions had tuition-related library fees but did not state what amount of money went towards the libraries. These were often designated as a part of student technology fees, information technology fees, activity fees, or similarly named fees.

Table 1*Average ARL and University of Nebraska- Lincoln (UNL) Tuition-related Library Fees*

<i>Data Source</i>	<i>Undergraduate Students</i>	<i>Graduate Students</i>
<i>Average Tuition-Related ARL Library Fees from Website Data Collected June 2022</i>	<i>\$129.16 per semester (12 hr.)</i>	<i>\$91.51 (9 hr.)</i>
<i>UNL Tuition-Related Library Fees 2017 - Present</i>	<i>\$75 per semester (12 hr.)</i>	<i>\$56.25 (9 hr.)</i>

Note: Data compiled on ARL library tuition-related library fees is available as a spreadsheet under supplementary materials. Canadian dollars were not adjusted to U.S. dollars, as it was generally assumed students would be paying in their native currencies.

The 2012 Program Requirements for Associate's and Bachelor's Degrees: A National Survey indicated that as of 2011, "Most four-year public institutions now require 120 credit hours for most of their degree programs" (Johnson et al., 2012). The Average ARL Undergraduate tuition-related library fees assuming 120 credit hours would lead to an average of \$1,291.60 if figured per credit hour, and \$1,033.28 if figured per semester to complete a degree. The path to a graduate degree varies widely in the number of credit hours and years to degree attainment (Survey of Earned Doctorates, 2021). In some disciplines the authors are aware of, it is normal to pursue a master's degree and then a doctorate, whereas in others, students often start a doctoral program immediately after receiving their undergraduate degree. A master's degree typically ranges from one to three years to complete, with most students completing a degree between 18 months and two years (Coursera, 2022). The total tuition-related library fees for the Average ARL graduate student completing 30, 60, and 90 credit hours would pay an average of \$305.03, \$610.07, and \$915.10, respectively. A UNL student completing graduate degrees of 30, 60, or 90 hours would pay \$187.50, \$375.00, and \$562.50, respectively.

Limitations and Conclusions: A Call to Action

The average tuition-related library fees per semester for undergraduates were higher than those for graduate students by just over 40%. The authors speculate that although graduate

students are often heavy research users, undergraduates' use of library resources span across more disciplines, and they are more likely to study in the library. More studies are needed through reports or surveys to provide an accurate view of tuition-related library fees among ARL and non-ARL libraries.

Universities need to be more transparent in what fees cover and how libraries and library resources are funded. Some institutions did note that they have tuition-related library fees but did not provide any specific data on what portion of fees went toward the libraries. In other cases, tuition-related library fees were noted as library and technology fees or simply folded in with technology fees that include all hardware and software provided by the university. Other institutions include tuition-related library fees in blanket fees that include libraries, IT, writing center, and career centers or other campus units not directly related to library services. Conversely, many Canadian academic institutions fund the libraries based upon budgetary requests, rather than having specific fees separated out for the libraries.

The average individual would be unlikely to discover ARL and IPEDS reporting systems or documentation, when seeking transparency on tuition-related fees. ARL and IPEDS require a cost to generate reports, and do not provide complete sets of information to accurately inform investigators on this topic.

In future research it would be helpful to ascertain how tuition and tuition-related library fees correspond to library operating budgets, fees, or library credit hour fees. If there is a difference between undergraduate, graduate students or continuing education students' tuition-related library fees, it would be useful to know the rationale if the difference is not based on credit hours.

Without transparency it is difficult to determine if students are receiving equitable access to library resources and services across ARL libraries. Basing one's analysis of equitable access on tuition-related library fees alone should be used with care, as often fees are reduced to appear more financially competitive than peers (Matthews, 2011). In a study of R1 and R2 Carnegie Classification Libraries, it was found that 50% of libraries do not receive student fees (Jones, 2018). This lack of transparency contributes to increasing mystification of revenue sources for libraries, causing potential inequities of monetary support.

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries exploration into tuition-related library fees has concluded that UNL Libraries charge significantly lower fees per credit hour than other publicly reported institutions in this study. However, this statistic offers a bittersweet conclusion. While the numbers at face value suggest that tuition-related library fees could be increased, it also invokes ethical questions of whether it is right to place additional financial burdens upon students. As the student loan debt crisis continues to surge, a high degree of responsibility is placed upon libraries (and university administration) to determine fees that are fair and sustainable. By continuing to obfuscate tuition-related fee reporting, libraries and other

campus units are committing a great disservice to ourselves and users alike. Through this study, the authors hope that better reporting of tuition-related library fees will prevail, yielding more accurate and precise figures to aid libraries in requesting fees that are equitable, rational, and ethical.

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