

Claims returns are an inevitable and unfavored occurrence in library institutions. These are situations where a patron believes they have returned their borrowed item back to the library, but still appears on their library account. The way this issue is addressed varies greatly as there is no formalized procedure set for all libraries to follow and the reason for these occurrences can differ depending on the dynamics of each institution. While the Access Services department at UNC-Charlotte does their best to manage the influx of these claims, the current approach for the management and execution of claims returned items is subpar at best. There is no established procedure for submitting or managing these claims, which staff members confused and unsure due to its inconsistency, and patrons are often left unacknowledged during the entire process after the initial claims submission. The Claims Returned Process is inconsistent, unorganized, and ultimately is not a patron-friendly service. It is important to have a functioning process for handling claims returns because it can ensure that submission claims are being addressed in a timely and efficient manner for patrons and staff members. Staff members need an effortless procedure to inform the designated employee of these claims and patrons need their concerns addressed in a timely, caring manner.

How Do Other Libraries Address Claims Returned Situations?

There does not appear to be significant practice or research produced on claims returned processes. The one article I was able to find discusses how the term “Claims Returned” provides a negative customer-service notion attached to it because it displays a “guilty until proven innocent” approach (Neal, 2015). After thinking about the term and reflecting on what it means, I’ve come to agree that “claiming” a patron has returned an item does seem to insinuate immediate blame on the patron. With that said, I think it is important to consider how things are

phrased during a patron interaction, to not place immediate blame.

Despite the lack of research, many libraries do have their own ways of handling claims returned situations and several utilize an online submission system. A commonality among all of the libraries I have researched is that they tend to require the patron to type in the Title of the item, the barcode of the item, or both. For Florida State University Libraries, they state under the ‘Call Number’ field that the call number is listed in the patron’s overdue notice and the original item loan notification (Florida State University Libraries). PennState University Libraries requires an item title and barcode as well — but provides only one box where the patron types in each title and call number of every item they claim to have returned (PennState).

In regards to the search process for claim returns, there are notable differences between the libraries I researched. At the Georgetown University Library, a minimum of 5 searches are conducted over a two-week period, which I find to be a fair search length and the specification regarding the *minimum* number of searches in that two-week time frame can be reassuring for the patron (Georgetown University Library). The search length for The University of California - Berkeley Library diverges slightly as they conduct 3 searches over a one-month period, which utilizes a “less searches, longer search length” approach (Jackson, 2019). Finally, we reach the Orion Township Public Library, whose claims returned process is vastly different. For one, a patron may only file for one item to be claims returned, and the patron will be charged a \$15.00 administrative fee for any other items that become a claims return issue. This could include if a patron wants to claim they have returned more than one item, which I find baffling to charge a patron a fee if the library is at fault for not checking items in properly. From there, if a second claim is made on the same patron and on an item that was once searched for, the search process

will take place for 6 months. While I do not necessarily disagree with providing an extended length of time, I believe a 6 month search is fairly inefficient and the charging of a fee is just unnecessary (Orion Township Public Library).

How Can the UNC-Charlotte Atkins Library Handle Claims Returns?

As mentioned previously, the current process for claims returns at the Atkins Library is inconsistent, poorly managed and executed, and patrons are often left in the dark throughout the process. My goal is to develop a seamless and user-friendly process for staff members and patrons to use, that accurately reflects the great customer service that our Access Services department stands for.

Currently, claims returns are submitted by phone, in person, or by sending an email to the Circulation Desk. After a patron submits a claim, the submission is placed in the “Everything Basket” that *eventually* gets sorted through and distributed to the correct people. This “distribution and sorting” process is unorganized and is not always time-efficient. Sometimes, submissions get lost in the basket and never get addressed. When a patron emails the Circulation Desk with their claim, it often gets forwarded to my work email to conduct a search. During the search process, the patrons are not updated and staff members often place blame on the patrons immediately. Since I conduct the searches, I can safely say that a vast majority of claims returns are often due to staff members not properly checking items in — not because of patron incompetence.

With the help from our software developer, I would like to create an online Claims Returned submission form that patrons can fill out on their own, or staff members can fill out on behalf of patrons. It would require a University ID number, which can be a 49er ID number or

the ID number that is given to community borrowers. The submission would also require the patron to indicate where they returned the item at (i.e. the main library, the architecture library, or a book drop) and they would indicate what date the item was returned. A feature I would love to utilize would be an API component that would pull information from the patron's library account, which would provide the patron the ease of simultaneously viewing items they currently have checked out while filling out the submission form. After the form is submitted, it would be useful to have it streamlined to a new library email delegated to the Collection Maintenance department, allowing my supervisor and myself the ease of receiving the claims in a timely manner. The search process would be established to take place over a one week period, with unlimited searches and the 'claims returned' button would be utilized in our ILS to prevent any fines from accruing on the patron's library account. I would like to ensure that each patron is included in the process from start to finish, continuously being updated of the search and ensuring they feel their concerns are acknowledged.

What is the Proposed Outcome?

As a result of this redeveloped process, I think claims returns will be addressed in a more efficient and timely-manner, patrons will feel respected and informed, and staff members will be pleased by the user-friendly submission form. By having the process streamlined directly to the unit that handles and manages claims returns, I believe there will be no more confusion among staff members regarding where submissions are supposed to go and patrons will have a direct contact regarding the status of their claim. The form would also eliminate the problem of claims returned submissions becoming lost in a stack of papers and claims would be addressed in a more reasonable amount of time. The API component that I intend to incorporate in the form

would provide patrons the convenience of not having to scramble through an ‘overdue notice’ email to find the title of their item and staff members would not have to play a guessing game with the patron to figure out which item they claimed they returned. Instead, each title checked out to the patron would appear on the screen and the item would just require a click of a button.

In future research, I would love to utilize data tracking of claims returned submissions to analyze the most common reason items are submitted through the form. By recognizing what the underlying issue is, our department can create a plan on how to address that issue to prevent, or lessen, the submission of claims returns. I would also like to consider referring to “Claims Returned” situations in a different manner, so that patrons don’t walk into the claims returned process with a “guilty” label immediately placed over their heads.



The “Everything Basket”

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