Back Talk -- There is an Old Saying that Goes...

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Recommended Citation
Ferguson, Anthony (Tony) W. (2009) "Back Talk -- There is an Old Saying that Goes...," Against the Grain: Vol. 21: Iss. 3, Article 12.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.2312

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There is an old saying that goes “no good turn goes unpunished.” That is, paradoxically, it seems that whenever you try to do something good for someone, you will somehow suffer for the effort. Recently, I had that feeling regarding the decision to open the Main Library 24 hours per day and seven days per week.

The intention, or the good turn, was to keep the library open during the reading and examination weeks so that our students could prepare themselves for their examinations. Our punishments thus far have been threefold:

- The costs associated with providing security during the post 11:00 p.m. night hours when our staff goes home to eat and sleep have been fairly significant.
- The costs for extra cleaning staff to come in early in the morning to clean up after the hundreds of students who eat and drink while they are studying have mounted up.
- The need to deal with the anger expressed by some students, toward other students who attempt to lay claim to their favorite study tables, has been frustrating.

We are not new to the business of operating a round-the-clock study facility. We have had a 24/7 Student Learning Centre in the Main Library for the past four years. It is located on the ground floor next to Starbucks. It is situated there because it is the one section of the library which has its own rear entrance as well as a lockable doorway into the library itself. This means we can lock it off from the Main Library at closing time, and then allow students to use their electronic ID cards to get into the back entrance whenever they like during the night until in the morning at 8:30 a.m. when the Main Library reopens. Since we don’t have any books stored in the Student Learning Centre, we don’t need any additional staff to operate the facility, and for human security we rely upon cameras in the facility which can be monitored by the campus security office. This system works well to provide upwards of 80 students with an overnight safe and air conditioned study area. We even have vending with hot and cold drinks as well as snacks to help those who use it to keep their energy levels up.

Opening the entire Main Library to help hundreds of students prepare for their examinations, on the other hand, poses a much larger problem. Since it is filled with valuable books, journals, and computer equipment, we knew we needed to hire guards to take over after the time when the last of our staff went home for the night. We began with the idea that we would need two guards to allow one to circulate the five floors of the building while the other one stayed at the main doorway. Most of our library materials employ an RFID security system. However, since part of our collection lacks the RFID system, we found we needed to provide another pair of guards to deal with that part of the Main Library. Four guards for three weeks of course means a fairly significant amount of expense — yet, this extra expense to help students is a good investment, right?

Opening the Main Library all night long means another nine hours of use. As any parent with teenagers and young adults in the family knows, young people can make a mess. Actually all humans make a mess. And hundreds of people means hundreds of messes. However, students do not seem to be aware that while they are taking seats, a new student would need to take another seat. Once again everyone willing to line up at 8:00 in the morning a seat was based upon the premise that the library would never close for three weeks, this year, when the Swine Flu arrived, we took advantage of the need to disinfect desks and now close it for two hours in the early morning for cleaning. This means students have to take their computers and things out at least for a couple of hours. The result has been the daily queuing up of a hundred or so students all rushing for their favorite seats — but it does give everyone willing to line up at 8:00 in the morning a fresh chance to get a coveted seat. Once again we have spent more money and effort: more electrical outlets, staff to deal with angry students, cleaners to disinfect desks — yet, this extra expense to help students is a good investment, right?

We do think these extra investments are worth it. But, since no good turn goes unpunished, what is next?

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Column Editor: Anthony (Tony) W. Ferguson (Library Director, University of Hong Kong; Phone: 852 2859 2200; Fax: 852 2858 9420; <ferguson@hkucc.hku.hk>)

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