

# *Closed-Access Policy as a Solution to Library Crime: Perception and View of Students*

N. A. AJAYI

Hezekiah Oluwasanmi Library, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Osun State, Nigeria

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Library crime in academic libraries is a global problem. Security of library books has been the subject of much investigation. However, the situation is not getting better. This study examines whether there are significant differences in the utilization of library books after the introduction of a closed-access policy in Hezekiah Oluwasanmi Library and whether the users are satisfied or not with the policy. Questionnaires

were administered to a random sample of 1100 students. Results show that maximum use was made of the library. Students were satisfied with the implementation of the closed-stack policy. There is no significant difference between the science and non-science students in preferring closed-access. Recommendations pertinent to a smooth implementation are suggested.

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## *Introduction*

It may seem that by advocating security, security checks and restricted access, the nature of library service is being altered. Fortunately, such is not the case. Access to some materials is as free as it has ever been; and if the egalitarian ideal that all should have access to any and all materials must be limited in some respects by practical consideration, there is nothing new in this.

Most of the research on the reduction of theft and mutilation has focused on attempts to improve the physical security of the library. Generally this is seen to be more effective than attempting to change the behaviour of library users. Academic library managers must therefore consider whether the proud tradition of open access is any longer the best way of operating, and thought must be given to methods of effective control on access to their collection.

Regulating people does not necessarily have to cause offence, and it is obviously desirable that such a consequence does not result from the implementation of security strategies (Houlgate

1992). It is true that librarians have developed welcoming and informal places where the emphasis is on the open-access collection, the encouragement of use, customer care and meeting the needs of users with the minimum number of rules and regulations.

However Quinsee (1991) observed that the popular policy of open access to a wide range of readers from different cultures and social background makes libraries vulnerable in the face of increasing anti-social behaviours. Resolving the inherent dilemma between the needs of security and conservation and making material readily available to readers is one of the greatest challenges now facing librarians (British Library 1991). Regrettably it must be recognized that higher degrees of security may diminish, to a greater or lesser extent, the freedom to enjoy the library (Thompson 1989), and in some cases may even add to the recurrent costs of providing the service. Providing an environment in which the genuine reader feels comfortable but the criminal is deterred by effective security measures may prove a formidable challenge for many libraries.

In the recent past research findings have shown that library crimes (stealing, mutilation, mis-shelving, impersonation etc) are on the increase in academic libraries (Obikoya 1995, Bello 2000, Ajayi & Omotayo 2002). Adeyemi (1995) and Hogan-Basse (2000) concluded in their studies that stealing and mutilation constitute the largest crimes in the library. Mis-shelving constitutes a special crime, carried out by students who deliberately hide books in places you would not expect to find particular books (Ajayi & Omotayo 2002).

In the past nobody contemplated refusing readers free access to most of a university library's collections because the principle of open access was completely accepted. But recently, the debate has been reopened with some harkening back to the points made by Woledge and Page (1982) in their article on problems of open access in large academic libraries. They pointed out that unrestricted access does create serious problems of efficient control and correct replacement of books etc. They believed that closed-access permits a much more economical shelving of books, reducing the risk of theft, mutilation and disarrangement which open access creates. Closed-access collections made librarian/reader confrontation unavoidable. Bibliographic skills are not encouraged by open access; use of the catalogues, for example, in an open access system makes it very difficult to obtain proper statistics of library use. The picture we paint is one of students wandering, lost and confused, and researchers trying to rely on browsing.

Now, however, the existence of library crime is generally acknowledged and steps must be instituted to combat it.

### *Justification for the study*

The issue of security of library materials has been a concern of academic librarians. They have been desperately seeking a solution to the problems of mutilation, hiding of books, mis-shelving, stealing, etc. of library materials. This problem prompted the Hezekiah Oluwasanmi Library management to introduce the stringent measure of a closed-access system to reduce, if not to remove, these anti-social behaviours. Hezekiah Oluwasanmi Library recorded cases of book loss before the introduction of the close-access collection in 1998.

In 1996, 24 volumes of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* were carted away; in October 1997, more than 20 titles of previously stolen medical books were dropped at the main entrance of the library. In September 1997, another set was also found in the same place. In 1998, more than 200 back and front covers of books from which the contents had already been removed were found in the various reading rooms and inside the shelves. The Circulation Librarian's monthly reports for April, May and September 1998 were full of cases of mutilation and stealing, and proposed as a solution instituting a closed-access system (Circulation Librarian, 1998). Possible implementation of this recommendation provided the impetus for conducting this study.

### *Purpose of study*

This study is to discover:

- i. Whether closed-access can resolve the dilemma between security, conservation and accessibility of books to readers.
- ii. Whether the users are satisfied or not with the closed-access policy introduced.

### *Hypotheses*

The following questions were considered in designing the study.

- i. Are students aware of the problem of mutilation and stealing of library books?
- ii. Are they satisfied with the introduction of closed access policy?
- iii. Does closed-access inhibit the freedom to use library books?
- iv. Is there a significant difference in the preference for open or closed access between science and non-science students?

### *Methodology*

This investigation was prompted by the ongoing reports of mutilation, hiding of books, and mis-shelving and stealing of library materials. Before describing with the methods used in the study, the term 'closed-access' needs be defined. Closed-access refers to a store of library books to which only the librarians have access and users need to make requests for the materials.

The data for the study were collected through the use of questionnaires and the circulation monthly reports from 1995 to 1998. The questionnaire consisted of two parts; the first part contained the respondent's demographic data, while part two consisted of thirteen structured questions. Eleven hundred (1100) questionnaires were randomly distributed to those who came to make requests for books in the library. It took four weeks to distribute the questionnaires to the respondents.

The rate of returns was encouraging: 674 copies of the administered questionnaire were duly completed and returned. This represented 61.3% percent of the total questionnaires administered. The results are presented below.

### Results

The demographic information of the respondents showed that 423 (62.8%) were males and 251 (37.2%) were females. Their levels of studies were at the 200–600 levels and the Master's level. One hundred and forty-five (21.5%) were in their 200 level, 167 (24.8%) were in the 300 level; 145 (21.5%) were in the 400 level; 98 (14.5%) of them were in the 500 level, while 62 (9.2%) were in the 600 level and the remaining 57 (8.5%) were at the postgraduate level. Students in the 100 level were not included in the study because of their lesser exposure to the use of academic libraries. They are still undergoing the library's instructional programme course (LIB 001), which is compulsory for all freshmen. The results reveal that a majority of the respondents are regular library users except for the few who come once in a while, and that they have used the library as both an open and closed access collection. One way to assess whether library services provided are appropriate is to compare the utilization of the materials through visits to the library by the users.

Figure 1 below shows how the respondents understood the reasons for the introduction of closed-access. Three hundred and thirty (49%) indicated that the closed-access system was introduced in order to reduce mutilation and stealing of library materials. 129 (19.1%) were of the opinion that it was to encourage use of catalogue. 114 (16.9%) said it was to serve the users better. 92 (13.7%) thought that it was to save the users'

Figure 1: Users reasoning for introduction of closed-access

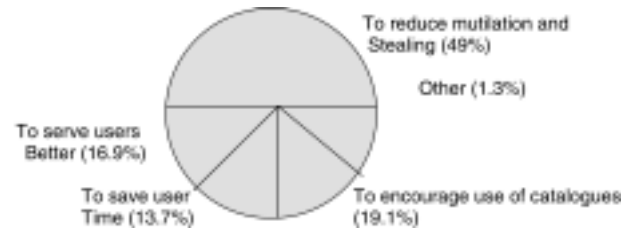
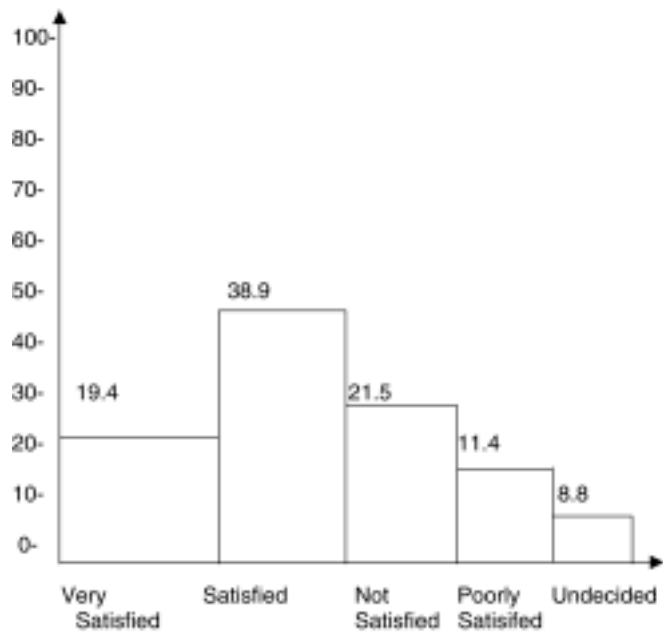


Figure 2: Degree of satisfaction/dissatisfaction of closed-access



time while the remaining 9 (1.3%) could not figure out any reason for introducing closed-access system.

One can infer from the result above that students realize that mutilation and stealing constitute the most frequent crimes in academic libraries. This corroborates Adeyemi's (1995) finding that mutilation and stealing constitute the largest crime committed in the library. It also reinforces some of the benefits of closed-access highlighted earlier in this discussion.

The respondents were asked to indicate whether they were satisfied or not with the closed-access as operated. They were also requested to freely comment on the system. Figure 2 reveals that 262 were satisfied with the system, 131 were very satisfied.

However, 145 respondents were not satisfied and 77 were poorly satisfied, while the remaining 59 were undecided. This result reveals that more than half, or 393 (58.3%) of the respondents, are

Table 1: Reasons for preferring closed-access

Reason	Responses	Percentage
Library staff attend to me punctually	270	40.1
Most of my requests were met	139	20.6
My requests not met	102	15.1
For possible contact with books staff don't attend to me punctually	94	13.9
Undecided	30	4.5
	39	5.8
	674	100

Table 2: Distribution according to course

Courses	Open access	Percentage	Closed-access	Percentage
Science	140	33.3	280	66.7
Non-science	80	31.5	174	68.5
	220		454	

satisfied with the system. This result supports the finding of Thompson (1989) that higher degrees of security measure may diminish to a lesser extent, the freedom to enjoy the library.

The study also asked the respondents to give reasons for preferring closed-access to open access. Table 1 below has the results. Forty percent (40.1%) of the respondents prefer closed-access because the library staff attends to requests punctually. Twenty-one (20.6%) percent prefer closed-access because most of their requests were met. Some 13.9% want to have physical contact with books on the shelves while 15.1% prefer open-access because their requests were not met.

The study sought to test whether there is a significant difference between science and non-science students in their preference for closed access.

Table 2 above shows that 66.7% of science students prefer closed-access while almost the same number of non-science students prefer closed-access. This implies that both science and non-science students want closed-access. Hence there is no significant difference between them. The result also shows no gender bias; a majority of both male and female students (73% and 60.0%) respectively prefers closed-access.

### Conclusions

From the analysis and findings of this study, it can be inferred that students are aware that mutilation and stealing constitute barriers to effective

use of library resources. Some of the respondents note:

“Open access allows first hand contact with the books on the shelves but encourages mutilation and stealing, disorganization of books, closed-access is the only way to preserve library heritage for future generation”

“Closed-access is the best and the safest security measure”.

The study reveals that the introduction of closed-access in an academic library is not a barrier to effective use of the library collection as some research works have suggested. Sixty percent of the respondents are satisfied with the introduction and operation of the closed-access system. One said, “with closed-access you are sure of getting what you need,” reflecting that the purpose of going to the library is to meet one’s information needs.

Students agree that security measures do not lessen the freedom to enjoy the library services if the measures are well planned and effectively managed by dedicated and committed staff, where users requests are promptly and efficiently attended to.

The respondents are not new to both closed and open access collection in their quest for information. The study showed that equal number of students in sciences and non-sciences embraced closed-access as a measure to curb library crime. It also showed that there is no difference between genders in the choice of closed-access. What is important to students is better and efficient service, meeting their needs regularly and saving them from wandering lost among the shelves.

It is a fact that in developing countries like Nigeria where there is increasing university enrolment, reduction in the library budgets, high cost of books, high demand for the few available textbooks in the library, increasing anti-social behaviours, and users from different cultures and social background, closed-access is the answer. Closed-access collections are not primitive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as many researchers have viewed it. Closed-access is the answer to the lingering problem of library crime in academic libraries. There should be no conflict between increasing security measures and maintaining the accessibility of the library’s books.

### *Recommendation*

Based on the findings of this study the following recommendations are made for effective implementation of a closed-access policy.

The problem of library and archival theft exists. It cannot be wished away. It must be met head on and dealt with in a forthright fashion. Security must become as essential a priority to the administrator as is the service ethic.

Academic libraries in developing countries must face that almost all library books are imported, and given the high cost of books and the reduction of the library budget, the library must preserve the few available copies in the library. A closed-access policy will be more successful if it takes into account the following two concerns.

- i. The successful closed-access policy must be enforced where effective control of the books can be made.
- ii. Library ethics should be incorporated into the Library Instructional Programme (LIB 001) course where the students will be taught how to use and handle library books.

Finally, prompt and effective service to the library's users, effective control and management of the resources, meeting most of their requests at all times can make users enjoy closed-access.

#### *Editorial history:*

*paper received 27 January 2003;*

*final version received 2 April 2002;*

*accepted 22 April 2003..*

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