

For this exercise I decided to find the “true” cost of binding a journal in the Barker Engineering Library. The binding of journals is a hot topic these days. With more and more of our library’s collection becoming available online – there are two arguments unfolding. One is to stop binding our print collection (some have recommended shrink-wrapping, but that is for another paper completely), and one is to cancel print altogether. If we do keep the print, it will be helpful for us to know a closer estimate to what it actually costs to bind.

Binding is not a terribly straightforward process at MIT. Therefore, there were many different “chunks of time” that had to be accounted for. I grouped several steps together for ease in timing.

Local preparation:

- Go to the shelf and pull items for binding;
- return with cart to the Processing Office;

We recorded time for two weeks. In the end we had 66 items pulled in 92 minutes - with an average time of **1.39 minutes** to pull each item. Then processing begins:

- Input information into Able (bindery program),
- Add barcode and input information into Aleph (library system),
- tie-up each bundle.

We recorded these steps on three occasions. We had a total of 91 items, which took a total of 335 minutes to input and tie -- for an average of **3.68 minutes** per item.

Preservation Services/Acme Bookbinding:

--At the completion of local processing, the cart of material is then taken to our in house bindery. This is done by hand, meaning someone physically walks with the cart through the basement tunnels. The round trip takes on average 15 minutes. When a cart is dropped off, generally a cart is picked up (with the “binding lot”). This breaks down to the addition of **.5 minutes**/per piece for an average 30 item lot.

--Once these items are in the bindery, they are then packed up, which averages 20 minutes for a 30 item lot. This comes to **.67 minutes** per piece.

--Next, they are picked up by Acme Bookbinders – transport fees are figured into the general cost of binding. It costs \$9.40 to bind the average journal, plus .35 for tattletape – for a total of **\$9.75 per volume**. This does not take into account special cases or other extras that do occur from time to time.

--Acme returns the bound volumes to our Preservation Services department after two weeks. At this time the items are then unpacked – again taking on average 20 minutes for a 30 item lot. This adds another **.67 minutes**/per piece to the equation.

--Preservation Services does some brief end processing – adding a date due slip and the MIT stamp on the inside front cover. I was only able to get them to count/time this once. But for a lot with 39 items it took 27 minutes – or **.69 minutes**/per volume.

--We then pick up the material at the time when we are dropping off another shipment. This was calculated above.

Back in Local Processing:

--We also do a small bit of end processing. This includes updating Aleph, moving the “piggyback” barcode to its final resting place, and then shelving the items. For 36 items it took 12 minutes to end process – or **.33 minutes** an item, and 15 minutes or **.42 minutes**/item to shelve. Shelving bound journals is very easy at the moment as we have plenty of room and they are shelved alphabetical. Since the journals are pulled using an alphabetical list (so generally from the same area), reshelving them goes very quickly.

The totals:

The grand total of time per journal works out to **8.35 minutes per journal**. In all honesty, this is less time than I would have predicted. But these were generally well-behaved titles, and the student doing the work has been with us for four years and she knows the system better than most librarians. There were however several new titles, which do take more time to set up.

Since our student does not always do the binding, I calculated how much (based on her times) it would cost for her to do it, as well as our staff member. Our student’s hourly rate is \$11.50/hr. (I know, shockingly high, but she is worth it and the Libraries must compete with much “sexier” science jobs on campus. Luckily our student majored in Humanities). Our staff member’s hourly salary is similar to that of the hourly salary of the Preservation Services staff members. I have average the hourly rate to be \$15/hr plus benefits. According to our Personnel officer, benefits are currently calculated at 18% of the salary – thereby adding an extra \$2.70 to the staff members wage – for a total of \$17.70/hr.

Therefore, if a student does the binding it costs on average of \$1.38 in “processing time” to bind a journal. If we add this to the Acme cost of \$9.75 we get a total of **\$11.13/per bound journal**. If a staff member does the binding that costs goes to \$2.12 per item in processing time – for a total of **\$11.87**.

Final Thoughts

There are of course issues that exist that are difficult to quantify. The general maintenance of the binding list, the questions that public service desks may answer in regards to why it isn't on the shelf, etc. Also, as stated before, these were generally well-behaved titles. The problem of missing issues, reordering to fill in gaps, etc. also comes into play, but statistics would need to be kept over a much longer time period to find valid estimates. In a perfect world you could also figure in "training costs" – because our student wasn't always this good, it took time and training. We also don't let just any student do binding – because if they mess it up, then the expenses really start to climb.

In the end though, I have to say that I'm pretty impressed with our efficiency. I was in the office during the "timing" of these steps and our student wasn't feeling pressured or working faster than normal. We had our usual pop culture conversations as we worked. She stopped and ate a brownie.

What it does really show is how important and valuable a good employee – student or otherwise – really is. It also shows (to me) that the new Able system we are using really does work better and we have been able to incorporate it into our Aleph workflows quite well. Somebody gave me a historic figure of it costing \$15 to bind a journal – and we came in well under that – so I think we are doing pretty well. I also want to use this figure when someone starts telling me just how much shrink-wrapping will cost and/or save the Libraries. But again, that is for another paper....

This was fun!