Public Libraries for College Students!

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Recommended Citation
Freeman, Gretchen L. (2008) "Public Libraries for College Students!," Against the Grain: Vol. 20: Iss. 1, Article 8.
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.2690

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I’ve lived in Centre County in Pennsylvania for twenty-six months and one of the first things I noticed was the collaborative relationship between the Penn State University Libraries and Schlow Centre Region Library. I’ve worked at libraries in two other states and have never seen any collaborative effort quite like this between the public and the university research library.

**Fostered by Library Leadership**

This collaboration is fostered by the leadership of both libraries and permeates both organizations. The two Associate Deans at Penn State University Libraries, both long-time residents of State College, have been champions of Schlow in roles of board member and fundraiser. The Administration and other librarians at the Schlow Library are very active, as are many Penn State Librarians, in the Pennsylvania Library Association. It was the collaboration and enthusiasm of these leaders that served as the catalyst for an academic/public library partnership to assume the leadership of both libraries and permeates both organizations. The two Associate Deans at Penn State Librarians were the academic/public library leadership to assume the responsibility for facilitating the 2007 Pennsylvania Library Association Conference to be held in State College.

The planning for this conference began back in 2004/2005. The timing was perfect for a suggestion to hold the conference in State College to move forward. The President of the Pennsylvania Library Association was the parent of two Penn State students — and so followed events at Penn State more closely than might be expected. Librarians from both Schlow and Penn State University Libraries were on the Pennsylvania Library Association Board. Agreeing to work together, they jointly made the motion for the 2007 conference to be held in State College. The motion was passed by the Board.

**Electing a Conference Chair**

In 2006, a librarian from Schlow and a librarian from Penn State were the two candidates for 2nd Vice President Conference Chair of the Pennsylvania Library Association. They agreed to work together on the conference, regardless of the election outcome.

Betsy Allen, the Director Schlow Centre Region Library, was elected. She and Jack Sulzer, one of the Associate Deans at Penn State and her opponent, became the leadership for planning the conference. The planning committee was composed of a good mix of public and academic librarians in the region and began meeting in the winter of 2006/2007 to plan and organize the conference. It was an extremely collegial working group, with enthusiastic people who were excited about hosting the conference. Fundraising, program planning, local events, publicity and other committee began working in earnest to plan the conference. Each subcommittee worked on its tasks through the spring and summer of 2007. The subcommittee chairs met with the conference chairs each month to make sure the planning was moving forward. The conference was held on October 14-17, 2007 at the Penn State Conference Center Hotel.

Why did this collaboration between the public and the university research library surprise me? Because, I have not seen it elsewhere, though I’ve worked in libraries in two other states.

Why did this work so well? I believe it worked well for several reasons. First, there was tremendous administrative support from both the Dean of University Libraries and Scholarly Communication, Nancy Eaton, and from Betsy Allen, the Director at Schlow. Second, the librarians at both libraries assumed leadership roles on committees and wherever else they were needed. The commitment to host a successful conference was shared by employees of both libraries. Many other librarians both from the region and outside the area were integral partners in areas such as fundraising and program planning. And finally there was a great deal of support by the Association headquarters staff.

Preliminary reports indicate that the conference was a success and that people would like to add State College to the regular rotation of conference sites. Though it took 106 years for the Pennsylvania Library Association to be held in State College, it will not take another 106 years before it returns to what is known as “Happy Valley.” State College residents are very fortunate to have two such marvelous libraries in their town.

**Public Libraries for College Students!**

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**Dual Citizenship**

In the larger community beyond ivy-covered campus walls, college students are identified both as students and residents. This unique dual citizenship means they have access not only to the college library, but also to a public library serving the community where the student lives. While the public library does not serve specific curriculum or research needs, it offers a number of resources for college students. With a mission to serve community information and recreation needs, public libraries offer college students collections, facilities and services that complement those available to students on campus.

For academic and public libraries to form an effective partnership, each should understand the resources and strengths of the other. And librarians need to be aware of the resources their customers are able to access both inside and outside libraries on campus or in the community. Furthermore, students who are public and school library users during their school years are more likely to be successful in their academic endeavors. Librarians of all stripes continued on page 36
have a common goal of creating lifelong library users who feel comfortable moving between libraries in various settings.

Convenience — Just Around the Corner

In a large metropolitan area such as Salt Lake City or in rural areas, students may well live closer to a public library than they do to campus. In Salt Lake County, more than 80% of County residents live within three miles of a County library. For the student living at home for the summer or breaks, the public library can be an oasis for computer use, printing and quiet study. Virtually all public libraries now offer computers and Internet access for their customers or even guests to use. Many libraries also offer wireless Internet access for laptops — sometimes in a comfortable reading room with a cozy fireplace. For the student writing papers, the library will often have study carrels or tables in quieter areas. Public libraries are open year round and during the evenings and weekends, which is especially useful during academic breaks in the school year.

Today’s college students have the ability to connect instantly with peers via computer, cell phones and text messaging to set up group assignments. It’s not study or meeting rooms that can serve as gathering places for group assignments. It’s not uncommon to see groups working with laptops connected wirelessly to campus, to remote group members and to each other.

Collection

The SL County collection, located in 18 community libraries spread over 700 square miles, numbers more than two million items representing 428,000 unique titles. The library’s annual materials budget is over six million dollars — a size equivalent to that of a larger academic research library, but spent in a very different pattern. Like a commercial entity, highest priority is placed on purchasing multiple copies in multiple formats of current titles and topics to satisfy diverse customer demands. We typically purchase 40 copies of best sellers, but have been known to purchase as many as 800 to 1,000 copies of extremely popular titles. We also purchase the same title in the large print, CD, DVD, and downloadable eBook and e-audiobook formats enjoyed by specific audiences.

Like all community libraries with limited shelf space and healthy materials budgets, we are constantly weeding the collection. For almost every copy added to the collection, another copy is weeded — creating a relatively slow-growing total collection size. But the emphasis for us is on currency and condition of materials to stimulate circulation. When a customer views our shelves, s/he should be attracted by colorful new materials in excellent condition on uncrowded shelves. Our Library managers know that to increase their circulation, they need to weed.

We mine catalog and circulation data regularly to tell us which titles have stopped checking out and which materials are dated or superseded. Recent popular titles — many still in good condition — are weeded aggressively when circulation drops. Statistically, the average item in our collections circulates five times during the year. Even so, the bestseller titles purchased in multiple quantities circulate more in their short circulation life than the materials
we purchase in smaller quantities which may sit on our shelves for two or three years.

We spend around $250,000 a year on database subscriptions to supplement our core databases, such as EBSCOhost, supplied through a state-wide program. Thanks to the state program, our own database dollars can be directed into “niche” topics such as genealogy, reader’s advisory, test preparation, and home improvement. The per-use cost of databases for a public library is typically higher than that of an academic library, but subject databases supplement high-demand areas of the collection where we can’t begin to supply enough topical materials across the system to fill customer needs.

Academic and public libraries can readily complement each other in the area of database subscriptions since neither can afford to license everything. SL County licenses only databases that permit remote access for home use by our customers, which means convenient access for students from campus or from home. Public libraries are becoming increasingly proactive in telling students about databases available to them on campus and academic librarians are letting their students know of databases available to them online with a public library card.

### eBooks and e-audiobooks

Public libraries spend more days these days to develop virtual collections with eBooks and e-audiobooks to supplement their physical collections. These electronic formats are easier to purchase, don’t need shelving or handling, and are available for customers to download 24/7. Some of the eBooks, such as *Cliff’s Notes* and language learning, are relevant to college curriculum; others may simply offer a format more convenient for this younger generation to carry in a backpack or on a digital device.

### Circulation — More than a Million a Month

Circulation is the public libraries’ bread and butter — and they do it extremely well. Circulation for SL County in 2007 totaled 13.6 million and usually increases 4-6% every year. Audio-visual circulation (CDs, DVDs, video, books on tape and books on CD) represents 43% of that total system-wide. Circulation is evenly split between adult and juvenile materials in all formats. For SL County, circulation is at the core of our operations, receiving constant attention and technology funding to increase our efficiency. Most recently we implemented self-service checkout in all 18 libraries to improve customer service and reduce waiting at the circulation desk.

Students can easily place materials on hold through the online catalog and pick them up at the closest branch on self-service hold shelves, use self-service checkout, and renew materials online or by phone. Many public libraries notify their customers of holds or materials coming due through email, phone messaging, or even text messaging — making it easy for the savvy student to locate and borrow materials that may be in heavy demand on campus. SL County processes 150,000 such hold requests per month and moves nine tons of material throughout the library system every day. Public libraries have been transporting materials to customers at no charge since the advent of the online catalog — something the commercial world has yet to offer!

### Merchandising the Collection

Public libraries spend considerable effort to merchandise their collections and increase circulation by borrowing techniques employed in bookstores. All new books are on special face-out shelving and custom-built display units near the front entrance of our libraries for three to six months. We invest in thematic and seasonal displays throughout our libraries. At every opportunity, we employ face-out shelving — at the end of a shelving range, with acrylic book and AV holders, with slat wall displays, and even with “power wall” sections. A power wall groups all materials in a selected subject area, such as travel books or cookbooks, with face-out shelving, colorful graphics, and props.

SL County librarians highlight materials in a quarterly newsletter called *Shelf Life* and we review new book and media releases on our Website. Our branches provide the same look and feel as a bookstore — with the advantage of free loan and a catalog for those who are looking for specific titles. Public librarians, like independent booksellers, have to be adept at giving reading recommendations to all ages in many different genres. Customers also find booklists and featured titles to browse. College students, like the rest of the populace, are enticed to read more with attractive merchandising and knowledgeable staff.

### Reference and Reader’s Advisory

The public library reference desk is a familiar lifesaver for students of all ages. Just like their colleagues at a university, public reference librarians know their collections and how to guide research. In fact, the questions typi-
Where to Go Shopping for Information: Public Libraries or Academic Libraries?

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Why do college students frequent public libraries in the place of, or in addition to, academic libraries? For some of the same reasons shoppers choose Wal-Mart over the mall, one stop shopping, location, atmosphere and materials. Public libraries are an information seeker’s Wal-Mart.

One Stop

The “one stop” mentality is one of the main reasons patrons choose both Wal-Mart and public libraries. At a public library, patrons can borrow books for all ages fiction and non-fiction, movies, audiobooks, music to listen to, use online databases to do homework and consumer research, attend programming for themselves or with their children, they can get materials to learn foreign languages, they can surf the Internet, and more underneath the same roof. Public libraries are ideal for nontraditional college students who have families and need to multitask at their information store.

Location

The convenience of location is another reason why patrons will go to a public library. Public libraries, like Wal-Mart stores, tend to be centrally located in most cities with easy public access, whereas academic libraries tend to be located on university campuses with limited permit parking. Often nontraditional, commuting, or distance Ed students live closer to public libraries then they do to academic libraries. For those college students, the choice of library is not so much a matter of collection and programs, but of proximity.

Interlibrary Loan

When a student needs resources outside those offered by their own public library, they will likely find convenient interlibrary loan or reciprocal borrowing arrangements. A large public library typically borrows (and lends) several hundred items a month for its customers via interlibrary loan from libraries across the country. Students who live near several different public libraries may well find that a library card for any is a card for all, with the same borrowing privileges from a much larger combined collection. Often the online catalogs are set up for convenient searching across multiple individual collections.

One-stop Shopping

College students raising young children can take advantage of library programming, reading clubs and Storytimes designed to entertain and promote reading. The student as Mom or Dad already models the importance of reading in their studies — and can check out quality children’s books for their kids to read during study time. The children of students learn an important lesson that reading is an enjoyable way to learn or play together or alone. Families will also enjoy access to free DVDs and entertainment videos at the public library — an economical family activity on a student budget.

And speaking of budget, finding a job in the local off-campus community might be easier with resources available at the public library. Libraries help job seekers with ads and applications, as well as local newspapers and advertising newsheets. Computer resources for test taking and online applications may supplement what students find with on-campus employment offices. And after getting the job, income tax forms and tax help (provided by knowledgeable volunteers) are available each tax season at most public libraries.

While the public library will never replace what university libraries offer students to support research, they provide complementary collections, facilities and services. Libraries should support each other's programs and refer their mutual patrons to the library that best meets their information needs. Wise students take advantage of the strengths of public and academic libraries by virtue of their dual citizenship in both. 

References

Public Libraries ...

Non-intimidating, Friendly Atmosphere

Everyone is welcome at Wal-Mart, just as everyone is welcome at a public library. When a patron enters Wal-Mart they are greeted at the door and they can find assistance throughout the store by “roving” employees. At public libraries, the librarians at the information desk should greet or at least acknowledge every patron they make eye contact with. Librarians have assigned “roving” times to circulate through the library assisting patrons who need directions, ready reference, help with reference questions, and give reader’s advisory tips.

Focus on Current, Popular Materials

Public libraries have many of the same sections as Wal-Mart stores, such as gardening, cooking, housing, pets, crafts, self-help, consumer, health, education, and travel. Public Libraries, like Wal-Mart, often do not carry...