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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.

“Reference is not just about resources. It is about users...”

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
older materials but focus on newer fiction and audiovisual popular items. Wal-Mart stores have many displays and signs to entice the browsing shopper to pick up and purchase items. Similarly public libraries display new titles and offer themed item displays to entice patrons to check out materials. Public libraries also provide “shopping lists” in the form of booklists or pathfinders on topics.

Academic libraries more like a mall
While public libraries are like the local Wal-Mart store, academic libraries are like the mall. Academic libraries have larger collections, more physical space, special collections, services, a variety of specialty stores, departments, desks, and offer breadth and depth to academic topics. Often as a public librarian, I have recommended that college students go to their academic libraries for more resources, primary documents, and greater selection of online databases.

Where to Go Shopping for Information: Public Libraries or Academic Libraries?
Public and academic libraries have different purposes and collections, both are needed by college students, whether they be traditional, nontraditional, commuter, and/or distance Ed students. As Sara Fine (1995) reminds, “Reference is not just about resources. It is about users…” Libraries should support each other’s services, programs, and collections by referring college students to the library that best meets the student’s information needs. This can only happen when both public and academic libraries are aware of what the other offers. College students are shopping for information, are we sending them to the right store? 🤔

Endnotes

Satisfaction Guaranteed — A System of Asynchronous Desire
by Kate Holvoet (Head, Government Documents, Marriott Library, University of Utah, 295 S 1500 East, Salt Lake City, UT 84112; Phone: 801-581-8394) <kate.holvoet@utah.edu>

I have a confession to make. Whenever I walk into a library, I can’t remember the title or author of any book I’ve been meaning to read, or CD I’ve wanted to listen to. Unless I have a written list, I end up racking my brain, vainly trying to recall the name of any author I like, and then browsing the new books section, and then leaving, possibly empty-handed. Sometimes a large space and too many choices are overwhelming, inducing a sort of decision-making exhaustion. Once I graduated from library school, I drifted into buying books rather than checking them out. I went from having more time than money to having slightly more money than time, making a several hour trip to the library too expensive.

Thanks to several popular online book seller sites, I now have an extensive “to read” list. Online bookstore catalogs often have features such as reviews, ratings, and recommendations that lead me to explore new authors, formats and subjects that I usually wouldn’t come across. What I like about the Salt Lake County Library system is that because of the way it is set up, I am 100% guaranteed to have a good experience before I even get there. I don’t have to remember that I read something about a book I wouldn’t usually be interested in — since I already added it to my “to read” list. And once a book is on my “to read” list, it makes its way to my library hold list. Sooner or later, I get an email that it’s in. Sometimes I can’t remember why I wanted it — but I know that I did — so I go and get it. This makes a sort of browsing experience which means I read books of a sort I never would have read before — because it is so easy to just put them on hold and get to them when they become available. I can browse online, put the book on hold, and be notified when it’s ready, all without ever having to leave my house.

Through this process I fell in love with audio books. I find that I listen to books that I probably wouldn’t read. There is something about the format that suits some books and makes them more compelling. I particularly tend to read non-fiction books as audio, but I do also read novels. The Salt Lake County Library system also offers eBooks for down-load, and the process works for me much the same as with printed books. I go through and find books I think sound interesting — I am reading a much wider variety than I might have in the print world.

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