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The Public Library as an Academic Resource

With online technologies making distance learning at the post-secondary level not only possible but common, and the economy turning many otherwise traditional students into commuters, public libraries need to be aware of and prepared for college students seeking help. Although these students have access to the online collection of their "home library," or library of the post-secondary institution in which a student is enrolled, there are still many reasons for them to use their public libraries. Students may seek out journals that are not yet (or will never be) digitized at a large urban public research library, they may need to pick up a novel that they would rather not purchase for an English literature class at a smaller public library, or they may simply want to study away from the distractions of their homes. Whatever the case, public librarians should be prepared to handle academic-level questions from patrons and be well-versed in the scholarly resources available through the public library.

A study conducted in 2004 sought to enumerate the reasons for college-student use of public libraries. Seventeen students were interviewed and their answers classified into five broad categories: personal convenience, ease of use and familiarity, materials, staff, and subjective appeal (Antell 2004, p. 230). Of these students, few were traditional students, with most indicating that responsibilities like full-time jobs, spouses, and children were factors in their choice of library (233). Examples of common reasons for choosing the public library included the ability to bring their children, helpfulness of the public library staff members, ease of use of resources, and an appreciation of the public library atmosphere. This community of non-traditional students is a growing one, at all levels of post-secondary study from Associate's to

Master's degrees, and students who have responsibilities keeping them in one location are often commuters, or, as is becoming more common, online and distance learners. Because of this move away from attending nearby colleges or moving closer to school, proximity is another common factor in selecting a library, especially in urban areas where public libraries are plentiful and in rural areas where academic libraries are not (Freeman 2008, p. 34).

Many of these reasons – helpfulness, atmosphere, easy-to-use resources, proximity – mimic those of most public library patrons for choosing their main library, but the resources perceived to be needed by the college students are not those that most public libraries are used to providing access to. The majority of public libraries function as popular book lending libraries, while college students are expected to need access to scholarly journals, literary criticism, and other publications that are most often found in research libraries. However, students who do not need such advanced sources for a particular assignment may find that the public library can fulfill their basic needs. In fact, the convenience of the public library may outweigh the benefits of the academic library in some cases. Hastings (2008) likens the public library to a discount department store; she wrote that "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." In contrast, the academic library is the mall, with more specialized and in-depth information. Antell's (2004) interviews indicate that students treat the libraries this way, with responses like, "If I need a journal, I go to campus," or "If it's a technical subject, I go to campus" (234). Students seem to know what materials they can get where, and spend their time accordingly.

Of course, the public library's holdings extend beyond the print and in-person collection, with many libraries purchasing or sharing the purchase of online databases, encyclopedias, and

the like that can be accessed remotely. Public librarians should be well informed about the extent of these resources and their limitations, and be able to advise college students on the usefulness of a general database, like Academic Search Complete, versus the more specialized databases they could use through their academic library's online holdings. If many students are coming from programs at the same college, public librarians can and should work with academic librarians at that school to put together a list of resources available only through the college library, and those available through public libraries. Knowing what independent and complementary services public libraries can offer will help librarians tailor their assistance to students, and learning to use all of the services available in both libraries will help students become more successful in their academics (Freeman 2008, p. 34).

Even if the public library databases aren't the most appropriate for the students' needs, librarians can take the opportunity to show them how to use the basic database and how the instructions will translate to the other databases the students should use. The less-specialized articles found on these databases may be useful to the students as jumping-off points for future research or as indicators of the research done on a particular topic. Public librarians might also be better prepared than academic librarians to find specific and simple information for college students; Freeman (2008) wrote that while academic libraries have the advantage in depth and breadth of materials, public libraries and librarians are used to finding answers quickly in limited resources (36). These basic answers may fulfill the students' needs, or they may provide a basis for further research in the academic resources. Higher use of reference services by college students will also help librarians prepare for the more difficult questions asked by non-student patrons; as Freeman (2008) wrote, most patrons are turning to the Web and Google for the answers to their easiest questions, and coming into the library only to ask for help with their most

difficult searches (36). Getting practice in handling these types of searches will benefit all users as librarians become better at addressing hard questions and at teaching patrons how to use appropriate resources to answer them.

Distance learners tend to have the hardest time using academic library services; they are often completely out of range of their physical home library building, may not have had an orientation to the library's online resources, or may even be unable to access the online resources due to technological limitations. They have also had problems using public libraries. These students have been in the past regularly sent away from public libraries, with the admonition that "public libraries were not created to support a university or even college-level curriculum" (Culpepper qtd. in Barsun 2002a, p. 12). Marvin Scilken, a librarian, wrote against college students in public libraries; he indicated that high per-user funding in academic libraries is a good reason for college students to use their academic libraries, that college students with access to academic libraries are not legitimate users of public libraries, and that scarce resources at the public level should lead public librarians to serve only those who have no other library to serve them (qtd. in Antell 2004). This opinion disregards the much lower population of an academic library than a public one, and makes it seem that some librarians have forgotten the open-access tenet of their profession. Barsun (2002a) wrote that of a set of 54 library mission statements collected by a now-defunct Web site, most included a mandate to support education, ten specifically mentioned "lifelong learning," and one sought to assist students of all ages in their educational needs (12). It can be seen in these mission statements that regardless of the scope of a public library's collection or the expertise of its librarians, anyone who enters a public library should be able to get assistance in fulfilling their information needs.

To that effect, Barsun (2002a) wrote that there are many ways, even outside of a library's material resources, for public libraries to aid distance learners. In general, public libraries can offer proctoring of exams, coaching in research and writing skills, information on financial aid and online learning, information on evaluating online learning programs, and a central spot where "local online learners can meet one another to share 'war stories'" (Barsun 2002a, p. 13). Some of these services, like coaching in research skills, are already offered to the public library community as a whole; the more online-learning oriented ones like financial aid information can be easily offered with a little research and pamphlet design by a librarian. This latter information will also be useful for the general library public, some of whom may find themselves interested in online learning in the future and can use these pamphlets before starting a program. Other services already offered by the library that are useful for distance learners include free Wi-Fi, interlibrary loan, computer classes (which can include classes similar to a library orientation session), and group meeting spaces (Fields 2009, p. 7). As Holba-Puacz and Bradfield (2006) wrote, "Let's not worry about the specialized academic sources we can't give them; let's focus on all the help, instruction, and sources that we can give" (48).

The ability for distance learning students to meet up with each other and with librarians is a great asset of public libraries. Barsun (2002b) wrote that "face-to-face consultation with a reference librarian, even if the librarian is not familiar with the student's program of study, has advantages over remote communication" (69). Even with today's chat reference and videoconferencing services, many students, especially non-traditional students, may prefer to talk to a librarian in person. Students from the same community taking online classes together may find it advantageous to meet and discuss lectures and homework assignments in person rather than via a discussion board or chat, and the library makes a perfect meeting place where

students can both work on their assignments and have access to public library resources that might be useful in completing them.

Some libraries have even gone the extra mile and specially incorporated distance learning into their everyday services. The Wilkinson Public Library in Colorado provides reference and research assistance, extended computer time, and more interlibrary loan service to distance learners; another library in Washington state made sure that all services were fully offered to distance learners and soon found a branch campus of the students' university opening in their town (Barsun 2002a, p. 13). These libraries are not only helping distance learners by providing these services, but are helping themselves by increasing the use of library resources and lowering the cost per person. Students who come in to the library only to study and use resources may start taking advantage of other programs offered by the library and keep coming back even after their studies have ended.

Another set of learners for whom the public library is important are those who have recently graduated or have otherwise lost access to the wide array of resources provided by academic libraries. While these former students may still have access to the physical library building of their alma mater, they do not have the remote database access that their matriculating counterparts do, and even physical access may be limited or cost money to maintain (Barsun 2002b)[1]. These users may come to rely on the database access offered by public libraries or by larger consortia; in Ohio, the Ohio Web Library allows all state residents and library card holders access to several specialized resources for genealogy, business and history, as well as more

[1] A personal example: my husband, when he worked as a legal assistant, often needed to use the local medical libraries at Case Western Reserve University and within the Cleveland Clinic to do research. His access to these collections was limited by the hours of each library, so on one day when he couldn't get to either I offered to look up some articles on the databases offered to me by Kent State. He was amazed by the amount of information I could get just by being affiliated with a university! After that, he rarely went to the physical libraries again, using my databases as a starting point and going to the libraries only when I had found a perfect reference only available in print.

generalized resources. Libraries within a system with a large public research library should promote their connection and ability to obtain research materials via a hold or, if the libraries are not networked, an interlibrary loan. Non-university-affiliated information seekers should not be turned away from public libraries, their only option, because their questions are too specialized, instead, public libraries should look for ways to expand their resources or to work with academic libraries to at least know where to point patrons when their questions cannot be answered at the public library level.

One way that public libraries are becoming able to offer more specialized sources is by teaming up with local universities or community colleges, with some even sharing facilities. In these joint-use facilities and in partnerships, patrons are able to access and check out items from the collections of both the college and public libraries, and the two library systems may be able to share access to some electronic resources. In the case of the partnership in Keene, NH, the city and college communities benefited as well by members of the communities into contact with each other (Halverson and Plotas 2006). The animosity between communities which is often found in college towns could easily be lessened by members of the town community meeting and hanging out in the same place as members of the college community, whether in a partnership or simply with programming at a public library geared toward the college students. University students who become users of the public library may also take more of an interest in the town community, which can help the town's economy. In the combined-library situations, librarians benefit as well, as they may be able to work on both the academic and public circulation desks. Fontenot (2007) wrote that the public librarians in this situation may learn to integrate teaching into reference transactions, while academic librarians can learn to work efficiently in the face of large numbers of patrons (48).

Even though public libraries are commonly seen as repositories of popular books and places where children can go to storytime, it is obvious that these libraries have the ability and the need to serve students with more technical or scholarly questions. Especially with the continuing increase of commuter, distance learning, and online learning students, the public library can use its meeting spaces and resources as an excellent marketing tool to attract students who already use the library for its popular materials and those students who have never set foot in their local library. Public libraries may not be able to offer the specialized information resources that academic libraries can, but they can provide the more basic resources necessary for learning and can teach students how best to use the resources that the library does have access to. And they need not do this alone; public and academic libraries can work together in varying levels of commitment, from public libraries simply offering a pathfinder to academic resources for their distance learners, to reciprocal circulation agreements between the libraries, to having the libraries share a physical space. With the cooperation possible via online technologies, anyone with a burning question, simple or difficult, should be able to find the answer somewhere; public libraries, as the most open-access libraries, should be able to help locate it.

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