

Library Purpose as a Function of Audience

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There are many different kinds of libraries, including public libraries, specialized libraries and libraries that only exist in the non-physical catalogs. Each of these libraries provides a unique purpose decided by their audience.

It is a mistake to believe that public libraries are dying out. Even with the introduction of digital books, the library is still an integral part of the community. Public libraries have been forced to change dramatically, though. Public libraries have begun changing to meet the needs of their communities. For example, in recent years libraries are also being utilized as job search extensions. Accord to the American Library Association website, as of 2012, “92 percent of libraries nationwide provide access to job databases and other job resources, while 76 percent help users complete online job applications” (“Public Library Use”, 2013). Similarly, “90% of libraries offer formal or informal technology training...35% offers one-on-one technology training by appointment” (“Public Library Use, 2013). By marketing to their audience of job seekers and technologically challenged, libraries are learning to thrive in the era of digital books. Libraries are still actively lending books, but also helping meet needs within the general communities. In *The Portable MLIS: Insight from the Experts*, Laura Kane states “public libraries are known for their success in enriching communities through various programs designed to meet specific need within the local populations” (Kane, 2008). This is easily seen in the way that libraries adjust their services to fit the needs of the public audience.

In academics, both in public education and colleges, library catalogs have been designed to fit the classes taught better, so that students are more likely to use the library as a resource. Christa Collence of the Harare Polytechnic Faculty of Information Science explains it best by stating “It is noted that the basic characteristic of a good academic

library is its total identification with its institution because the measure of its excellence is determined by the extent to which its resources and services support the academic pursuits of the institution” (“The Critical Role of Libraries” 2009). The purpose of an academic library differs slightly in that they are also educators in a different way, aiding students in their own learning before they enter a professional field. Libraries at a university are designed to provide as many resources as needed for students to conduct research. Kane describes the mission of academic library as to “...support the curricula of the various educational tracks offered by the college and to meet the information and research needs of the students and faculty” (Kane, 2008). Libraries in the educational setting are more focused, but still general enough that anyone can find something useful on the shelves.

Academic libraries provide students with more than resources to complete their work. In the online periodical, D-Lib Magazine, James Marcum presents a series of changes in how the university library has changed (and will change) in his article “Visions: The Academic Library in 2012.” In one chart in the article, a chart is presented, showing the differences in how a library is organized from 1992 (yesterday) to 2002 (today). While a significant amount of time has passed since the essay was written, the observations do present some interesting changes made by libraries as they adapt to their audience. One of the observations he makes about the academic library is the use of the library as a study space for students, building on the use of group study areas in 2002 in addition to the 1992 private study areas. Other elements of the library that have changed to meet their audience are technologies such as printers, the shift in computer access and library cataloging. Most technology is dependant on some form of wireless

connection to function, so libraries have adapted to students bringing their own laptops by providing wireless internet in addition to their publicly available computers.

There are very few professions without some kind of library specific to their audience. In a special library, the field of information is very narrow, but extremely thorough as a result. The National Library and Information System Authority (NALIS) website quotes the Special Libraries Special Interest Working Group (SIWG) as stating ‘Special Libraries cater to specific professional or academic groups whose information needs are defined by a particular subject or activity’ (“Special Libraries, 2013). Every kind of special library serves a different function in direct accordance with their audience.

Medical libraries, for example, contain books about diseases and conditions that public libraries would not have to make shelf space for books not related to medicine. These libraries are primarily access by medical staff and increasingly, those who might be researching a specific disease or condition. A law library keeps track of specific case information and law practices in certain state, specifically with lawyers and law professionals in mind. Corporate libraries are based more on acquiring statistics and data about competitors. When an executive or CEO needs to know sales figures of another company’s product, it’s the job of the corporate librarian to be able to provide that information. It’s easy to understand why each of these libraries would be necessary to one professional, but not as important to another in a different field.

Specialized libraries also offer materials that other libraries might not be able to given budget or spacing issues. For example, I applied for a job at the State Education Resource Center library, which specialized in education materials. The Center provided special packages for testing (I.Q. tests, practice standardized tests and so on). These

assessments were limited and not available at most libraries, so any teacher could get the examinations they needed from the library to test their students. Specialized libraries are, more often than not, strictly for professionals, yet they are becoming increasingly available beyond the professionals they are intended for. They contain a large amount of resources on a single subject or subject area. While this is usually geared more toward members of the field, it is not unusual for visitors to examine the materials. The resources are available to anyone who finds the buildings in which the resources are held.

Libraries have many different ways of presenting information and different groups of people who are interested in accessing that information. Each kind of library offers different services based on the clientele they mean to serve.

Works Cited

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