

What experts say about the value of libraries to their Communities

ALA on Libraries as Community Builders

- 1. Libraries help revitalize neighborhoods and downtowns.**
 - Place-based economic development stresses the importance of offering attractive, functional, and community-based places, such as libraries, in town squares and neighborhoods. Like a major department store in a mall, libraries attract large numbers of people, creating economic opportunities for a myriad of businesses and organizations in the surrounding area. Large cities (such as Chicago), medium-sized ones (Hudson, Ohio), and even small towns (Woodstock, Vermont) have successfully transformed their libraries into the hubs of vibrant neighborhoods.
- 2. Archives preserve historic artifacts, oral histories, digital history projects, and monographs relevant to the community, including minority groups.**
 - Communities lucky enough to have archivists have a great advantage when it comes to organizing historical records and artifacts. An organized archive is a place where people can research genealogy and immigration history, do environmental research, and more. An archivist is an advocate for preservation who, among other things, coordinates the restoration of maps and paintings, the digitization of vital records, and the creation of oral history projects. Norman Williams Public Library has an extensive local history and genealogy collection that is open to the public.
- 3. Libraries are places where people come to know themselves and their communities.**
 - In the words of Robert Putnam, “People may go to the library looking mainly for information, but they find each other there.” New moms connect at baby story-times; elderly people, often facing difficult life transitions, attend events and find that they make new friends; teenagers meet up in libraries’ teen spaces after school; and readers discuss current events in the periodicals room. In libraries, community-building connections are happening all the time.

4. Libraries, which champion, promote, and reflect important democratic values, are a part of the community's political life.

- Libraries can, should, and do play an important role in the political life of a community. From Banned Books Week displays, which combat the perils of school and community censorship efforts, to programs such as the September Project, which gathers community members and encourages them to talk about issues of freedom, justice, and democracy, libraries are pivotal in encouraging informed political involvement. Libraries also help citizens learn how to become advocates for themselves and their communities.

5. Library buildings as architectural structures are culturally relevant.

- From gorgeous old Carnegie buildings to modern marvels like the Seattle Public Library, library buildings are rich in symbolism and meaning. Whether it is architecturally grand or the simplest of rooms tucked into a city government building, the physical space of the library communicates to the public our underlying values: that libraries, information, and shared community space matter, something that the American Library Association (ALA) recognizes each year with its Library Design Showcase in American Libraries. Woodstock is fortunate to be the home of a distinguished architectural treasure in NWPL.

6. Libraries provide important business resources, especially for small local businesses.

- With the recent collapse of many big corporations, it has become more widely acknowledged that small businesses provide most of the new jobs in our current economy. Libraries have a long history of serving local entrepreneurs and businesses. NWPL is a member of the Woodstock Chamber of Commerce and many of the local businesses in the Greater Woodstock area use and support our library.

Benefit: Information Services to Local Business

The public library can serve all businesses in the community, but it may be more important to self-employed individuals and small or home-based businesses. The public

library is often the only source of affordable and available information for small businesses. The information covered benefits business decisions such as: following government procedures and regulations, marketing by analyzing demographic information, new product development, the development of business plans, and improved management practices. The public library is an often overlooked contributor to the economic health of the community.

Benefit: New Business Development

The public library can support the entrepreneur with information such as regulations, business registration, training programs, or accessing business resources. The public library offers the hours, space, and resources to build upon lifelong learning, career development, and literacy skills to help individuals in their new business developments.

Benefit: Industrial/Commercial Attraction

Public libraries contribute to the quality of life factors that attract businesses to a community. Promoting the public library can target business individuals who are library users and who see the public library as a critical factor in the community economic development strategy.

Benefit: Support for the Retail Sector

Visits to the libraries may boost local retail and help the viability of some areas, such as the downtown.

Benefit: Tourism

The library may be a special destination because of a unique special collection, a local history collection, or genealogical records. The library may carry local tourism information. The library also may offer e-mail access to visitors. Any support for tourism offered by the library can be cited as a benefit.

Benefits of Libraries from the Brookings Institution

They say you can't judge a book by its cover. Increasingly in the United States, you also can't judge a library's value to its community by simply its books. Let us explain.

In a previous blog post, we've noted the importance of "third places" in strengthening communities – meaning those places that are neither one's home (first place) nor workspace (second place). A range of such third places, from churches to beauty salons,

play an important role in community building. They are the informal spaces that are often mainstays in a neighborhood, places where both random and intentional in-person relationships are made.

Libraries as Key Hubs

In health care and other areas, libraries are combining the access and trust characteristics of a third place with a hub role in the community – using partnerships with other institutions to connect people with services and help. There are plenty of challenges with this role. Community needs and the requests of visitors are increasingly straining or overwhelming library funds; and although many libraries are retraining staff, achieving the appropriate mix of skills is difficult. But as the University of Pennsylvania study found, “public libraries are dynamic, socially responsive institutions, a nexus of diversity, and a lifeline for the most vulnerable among us.” More policymakers and government officials need to recognize this, and incorporate libraries into budgets and plans to build a culture of health and upwardly mobile communities.

As the researchers conclude, “Libraries and librarians contribute two particular strengths to advance a culture of health: accessibility and trustworthiness.”

Pew Research Centers on Libraries

Libraries’ importance to the community as a whole

When asked about the importance of public libraries to their community, at least nine in ten respondents (91%) say they considered the library either “very important” (63%) or “somewhat important” (28%) to their community as a whole.

While a strong majority of all groups considered libraries important to their communities, some demographic groups stand out in their assessments. Once again, women (69%) are more likely than men (57%) to say that the library was “very important” to their community, and blacks (74%) and Hispanics (67%) are more likely than whites (60%) to say this as well. Adults ages 30 and older are also more likely to consider the library “very important” to their community than younger respondents, and those living in households in the lowest income bracket are more likely to consider

libraries “very important” to their community than those in households making at least \$75,000 per year.

Even among those who had not used the library in the past year, at least half (53%) say they consider public libraries “very important” to their community as a whole, with 85% considering libraries important to their community overall. By comparison, 70% of those who had used the library in the past year consider libraries “very important” to their community, and 94% consider them important to their community overall.

Meanwhile, about three-quarters (74%) of those who are very familiar with their library’s services consider libraries “very important” to their community, compared with 49% of those who are generally unfamiliar with their library’s services; 94% of those very familiar with their library’s services say libraries are important to their community overall, as do 84% of those who know little to nothing about their library’s offerings.