

Beyond the Bookshelf



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History

As a child, my summers were largely spent thinking about one thing. It was large, it was magical, it was timeless and no, it was not Disney World. I lived for my public library's annual summer reading program. Nothing quite topped the thrill of getting prizes for reading 20 books over the span of eight weeks. As I grew older, I learned to use and love the library in different ways. Databases, language-learning tools and study spaces lured me back into this institution's gentle grasp during my high school years.

Even as a college student, I find myself coming back to my local library's virtual resources. The tools that I utilize at my local branch barely begin to display the full scope of assets that these spaces offer. Internet access, job search tools, genealogy trackers and so much more are readily available to any community member regardless of whether or not they have a library card. Beyond this, of course, is the promotion of literacy at all ages, which is an essential step for any of the other tools to be useful.

With such a large breadth of resources offered to any and all people in a given community, it is clear that libraries allow for equal access to quality information across the U.S. In a nation where district lines and political debate often determine the quality of an area's education, libraries fill in the gaps and create new bridges for learning. They provide the tools needed for meaningful exchanges of intellectual ideas to occur at any level in society. This allows for connections to be made that otherwise would not exist.

As a result, libraries are an essential yet often overlooked pillar of democracy in the U.S. They provide equal access to resources that benefit community members at all levels, typically for free. This can, according to the American Library Association (ALA), allow for increased interactions with literacy, job searches and research. By continuing to raise awareness for and offer patronage to these institutions, we can work to ensure that these benefits will extend into the future.

To best understand this, we must first examine what libraries are able to give to the public and how they are able to do so. Because every system of these public institutions is a bit different, we will look in-depth at the St. Louis City Public Library system and the opportunities that it offers residents. Opening the homepage of the website for this group, it is clear that there is so much information readily available to all users. Book guides, library podcasts,

craft sessions and LinkedIn tutorials rotate on the bottom portion of the page, as the top illuminates with information on COVID-19 vaccines, Women's History Month and Black-owned businesses. One click away from the main screen brings users to tabs for databases and research guides as well as automobile repair and driving resources.

Looking at the homepage and its first tabs only, it is clear that there is a nearly overwhelming number of resources available for any community member to use. For those without internet access or computers, Chromebooks and hotspots can be checked out. Additionally, monitors, keyboards and computers are obtainable within their buildings. All of these resources are provided at no charge to the community member using them. As the St. Louis Public Library website points out, this system "responds to the needs of St. Louisans by meeting people where they are. Everyone who enters...is on equal footing."

Having an institution that works to benefit the individual in this way is absolutely pivotal for the success of our community and our country. It bridges gaps in education, access and wealth to create a society where people can receive whatever help they need to succeed. It is a personalized, methodic approach to aid that factors in the well-being of the individual community member, regardless of who they are. Their widely and diversely applicable nature makes libraries unique in their ability to aid the larger community.

Yet despite this vast number of resources and personalized assistance, libraries are still struggling to stay afloat. In early 2020, the ALA released a memo about the significance of being federally funded in enabling them to help all Americans on a variety of levels. This was in reaction to growing calls to cut library funding, including former President Donald Trump's plan to eliminate the Institute of Museum and Library Services. Cuts like these harm all libraries: academic, public and school.

Although federal funding is not the only way in which these institutions are able to stay open, it is an important aspect—state and local sources can only go so far. The Library Journal reports that local funding from the 2019 to 2020 fiscal year grew an average of 1.8%, which was "a significant drop from the previous year's 5.1 percent growth." Over two-thirds of libraries surveyed were impacted significantly by these budget cuts.

St. Louis Public Libraries are certainly feeling this change. While little information has been published about the financial situation of this institution, its website points out money from taxes makes the library good, while "the support of civic-minded individuals, corporations and foundations who recognize the need for additional private funding makes our library GREAT," pointing to the need

for additional private funding makes our library GREAT,” pointing to the need for non-profit organizations and foundations to supplement local and state funding.

These financial issues do not look like they will disappear any time soon. With eyes on the future, the Library Journal notes that “sixty-one percent of libraries feel that some of the budgetary shifts they saw in 2020 will be permanent,” even after a COVID-19 vaccine is widely administered and reopenings begin to occur. These statistics help to show what is obvious for many bibliophiles—funding for valuable institutions like libraries is struggling nationally and possibly permanently.

In order to help public libraries, it is essential that we all do our part in utilizing all of the incredible resources that these institutions offer. At the most basic level, check out books from libraries. This is the easiest way to help fund these institutions, as it can show the extent to which the average person is using their library. The more that people are seen using this tool, the more it is seen as a priority to the people who make the budget.

Additionally, taking the time to look through and understand your local library’s available resources can make you a better advocate for these institutions. This can help you learn more and, if you share that information with others, can increase traffic to the website and to these available tools. Educating yourself on the ways in which your local library is benefiting all members of your

community can be a fast and effective way of supporting these institutions.

When I was a child, the Tulsa City County Library was giving me more than a set of stickers everytime I completed my summer reading program; it was giving me encouragement to keep learning, exploring and, most of all, loving my local library.

