What Can Your Library Offer that is not Available Anywhere Else?

To promote our libraries we must be able to define what a modern library should be. In a recent meeting of the PA Forward® steering committee, participants correctly concluded that this definition may be different for each library. What is important, needed, and valued in a community will vary from one location to another. In defining what libraries are, we should strive to communicate what problems we can solve or how we can provide unique opportunities. What can we do that can't be found anywhere else? That is the question.

When talking with students on my campus, especially newer students, I have a whole bit on why research libraries still exist in the age of Google and why people consistently seek out our services and resources. Many of these students have not been frequent library users and are skeptical that we have anything to offer them when they “never had to use a library before”, or they feel they can “get everything I need on the Internet”. One parent asked recently, “do people still use libraries”? Yes. Yes, they do. Why? Because we offer resources and services that are difficult to find elsewhere. Here are some examples.

**Everything is not online.**
Some people do not believe it, but it is true. Not every book is available as an e-book. Many older books only exist in print and not every new book has an equivalent electronic version. If you want to use certain books, like those that are no longer available to purchase, you need to use a library. Past issues of many newspapers and magazines are not available electronically and only exist on a library shelf, or on microfilm reels. If you’re doing very local or focused research, chances are sooner or later you’ll want to use a library’s archival collection to view letters, photographs, yearbooks, or diaries that have never been scanned or put online.

**Online information is not always free.**
Producing high quality information requires an investment of time and expertise so it is not always given away for free. Authors and publishers often seek payment to recover their costs and earn a profit. Nearly everyone has had the experience of clicking on an article title, but not being able to read it unless you find your credit card first. Modern libraries play a huge role here. Libraries purchase electronic content and facilitate easy access to article databases and e-books, so students and researchers don’t have to make a payment for each document they’d like to consult during the course of a project.

**Many Questions Do Not Have Easy Answers.**
It is easy to find answers to simple questions. Our users come to us when they have been unsuccessful with a difficult question or when they become frustrated searching on their own. Professional librarians are ready to help locate answers. Many thoroughly enjoy a challenge that requires use of various research tools and specialized databases. When a librarian has exhausted their resources and knowledge, they will connect users with another information specialist or other services.

**Technology.** Libraries offer convenient access to technology when one’s personal access is limited. This can include computers, internet access, printers, a 3D printer, video recording equipment, or virtual reality systems. Access to older technology is also valuable. On my campus
the library has the only public fax machine. Most students no longer have access to a DVD player. Most don’t have access to a VHS player, or a lantern projector for viewing glass slides. Where can they find one? The library.

**Quiet Space.** Many of our visitors come to the library to work alone or in small groups – and to get away from distractions of roommates, family, friends, pets, and everything else. Don’t underestimate the value of a welcoming, comfortable, and quiet workspace.

What your library can offer is very likely different than what my library, or other libraries can offer, and that is a good thing. The challenge is to identify and communicate how you can improve the lives of those you serve. The PA Forward framework provides some excellent resources and support to help you develop and enhance services that are likely not available anywhere else. Many people do not need to use a library every day, but when they need us, we’ll be here. After they have a positive experience, they will encourage others to visit too.

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**Why is a Research Library Important?**

- Everything is NOT online
- Online information is not always free to access.
  - The library maintains many online subscriptions to ebooks, professional journals, databases, etc.
- Answers to specific research questions can be difficult to locate. Professional research librarians can help.