Public Library Use Analysis Essay

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Introduction

A respondent from the survey analyzed in this paper left a parting note, "libraries are especially important for those who don't have all the resources I do… they support all areas of society!" In an ever-changing world, libraries remain a pillar of steady reliability, standing on a promise of being a "cornerstone of the communities they serve" (Libraries: An American Value). The survey I sent out asked ten adults, ages ranging between the early twenties to mid-forties, what they thought about the public library, if they utilized it, and what they thought were essential services that the library should provide. Their opinions and thoughts on the public library served as a small snapshot of the ideas and opinions of the people in my proximity. This survey revealed a fundamental shared truth: even if someone doesn't personally think the library is important to them, they do believe that libraries serve a vital role in society.

Purpose

The purpose of this survey was to understand how the people around me use public library resources and what they believe a public library should provide to its patrons. I was curious to see how they differed between each other and how their positions as students in higher education or adults working full time would influence what they thought about the public library.

Methods

I made a survey of fifteen questions, slightly modified from the original questions provided by Professor Sarah Park Dahlen. I asked ten people in my immediate sphere of influence if they would be willing to answer a survey for my Introduction to Library and Information Science class.

Participants

The participants of my survey included three men, six women, and one non-binary person. These ten people are those that I see at least once every other week, if not more frequently. I chose them to have a more transparent snapshot of the opinions of the people that I most often interact with. These included my close friends, coworkers, my fiancée, and a couple members of her family. I also asked them to participate because I knew that they would be prompt in responding to the survey, and all of them came through, responding within 24 hours of the survey being sent out.

Procedures

I used the prewritten questions to make a Google Forms survey and sent it out via email or link to nine of my ten participants. I verbally read the questions to the tenth participant and recorded her responses in the survey as well. I chose to use Google Forms because of my familiarity with how it works and the ease of access for my participants, all of whom had a Gmail account. For the tenth participant, she asked me to record her answers for her as she has trouble with technology and had never used a Google Form before.

<div align="center">

Selected Results

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Due to this essay's length limit, I focused on selected results to make a more in-depth analysis. If I were to do further research on this subject, I would analyze further all results. Chart one and table one show participants thoughts on the public library. Charts two and four show participants physical exposure to the public library. Charts three and five focus on internet use both inside and outside the public library.

Chart 1

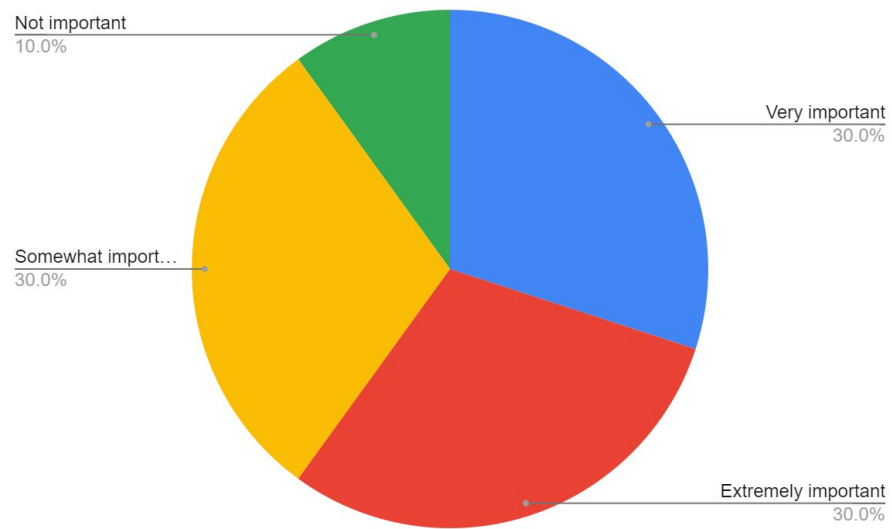*Describing how important the participants feel the public library is to them.*

Not important
10.0%

Very important
30.0%

Somewhat import…
30.0%

Extremely important
30.0%

Chart 2

Examining the frequency of participants exposure to the public library

Monthly
10.0%

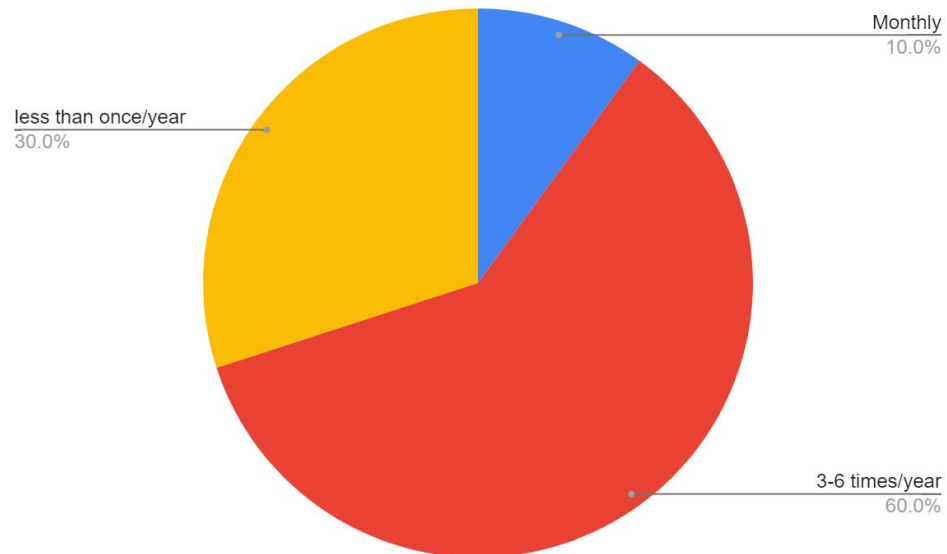less than once/year
30.0%

3-6 times/year
60.0%

Chart 3

Examining the frequency of internet searching outside of the library
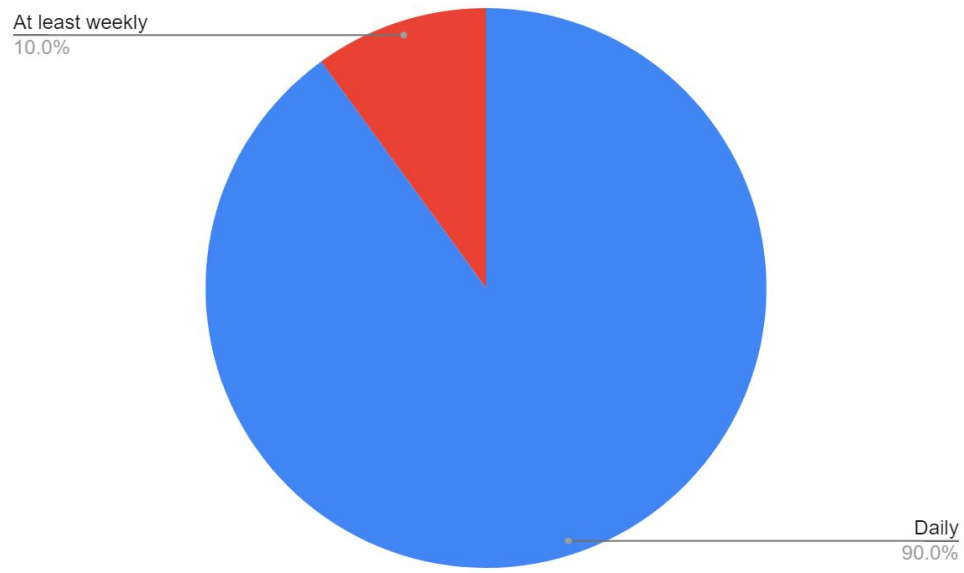
Chart 4

Examining the frequency of how often participants borrow physical items from the library
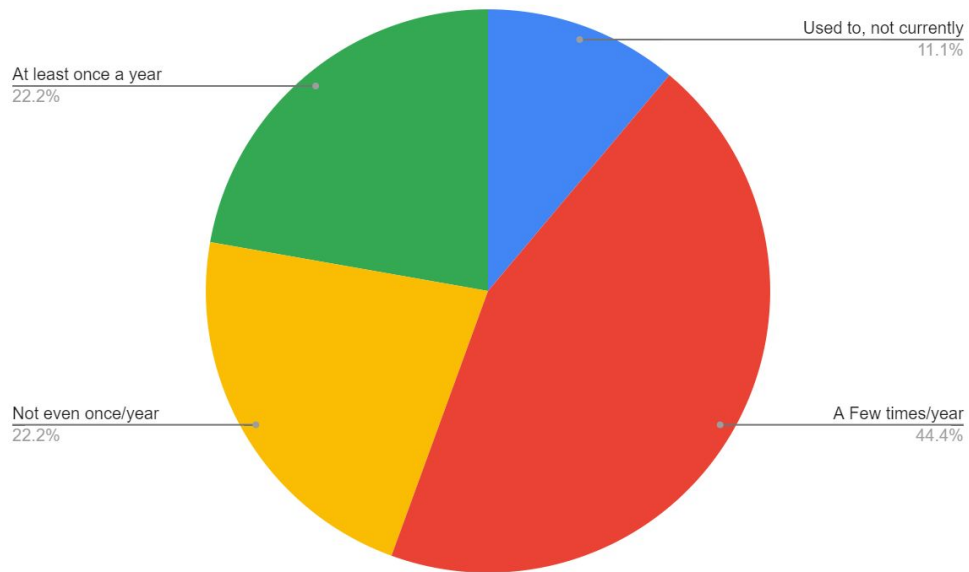
Chart 5

Examining what the participants use the internet at the public library for
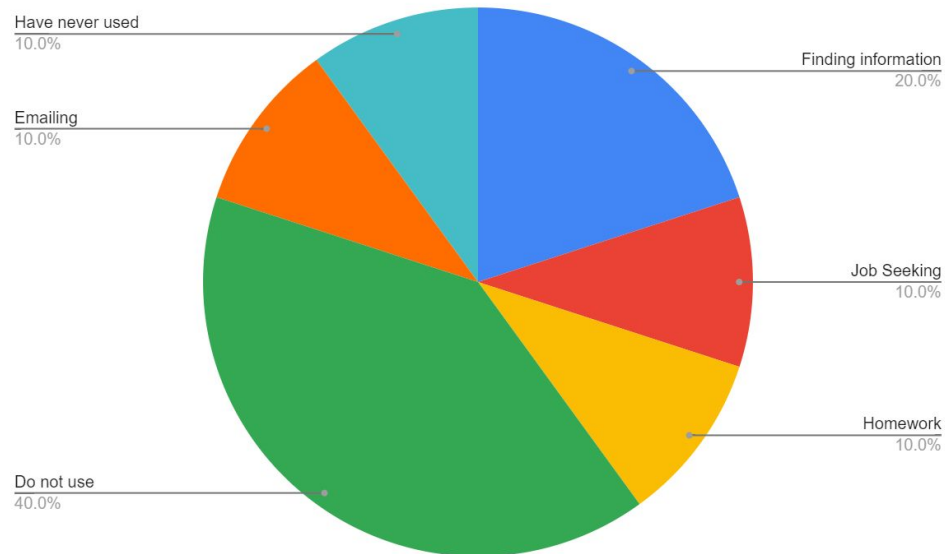

Table 1

Short answer questions about essential materials and services from a library

Participant	What essential services should a public library provide?	What essential materials should a public library provide?	Are there any additional comments you would like to make?
1	Employment services, internet, research and homework help, computer skills workshops, ESL help	Computers, printers, scanners, fax machines, copiers, WiFi, books, reference materials, journals	My library use has gone down a LOT since COVID and since being out of undergrad - I typically use the library for research and help with citations
2	Internet access, research help, access to archives	Pleasure reading, books for research and general knowledge, journals, ebooks, audiobooks	I don't use the public library as much as I used to, however when I was a kid I did look forward to going there and finding a new book to read. Or I'd get really excited when the bookmobile came to my elementary school.

3	I think a public library should provide an online holding/request system, space for physical browsing, space for sitting and reading/working, public computers and internet so you can work on your own computer, and a separate children's section.	DVDs, audio books, physical books of all topics	Libraries are especially important for those who don't have all the resources I do to simply buy media or use one's own devices to access the internet, but they support all areas of society!
4	Internet/computers and printers for public use	Information about government procedures (voting or jury duty), manuals and law books, informational and self help books	
5	Internet access, access to books	Multiple genres of books, as well as include books that are for entertainment and books that are educational	
6	Free access to information media and internet; courses for things like resume creation and search engine or electronic device use; research aid	Literature in all forms (books, magazines, newspapers, plays, etc.), music, movies	
7	Internet access, knowledgeable librarians	Computers, books, articles, etc.	
8	Free book check out, free internet, etc	Books/newspapers, computers	
9	In addition to the obvious (everything the library provides currently) if they have room for special applications like photoshop, illustrator, or working with STL files for 3D printers for people to use who can't afford these expensive applications. I also think it's important to provide a safe and quiet place for people to work.	Books, information, news, music, movies.	
10	Already provide, get kids to read, should be something for older kids to keep them wanting to come to the library	Books, textbooks, but increase the limit so you could check it out for a semester, computers, job hunting so you don't have to go up tp the county, classes for kids for budgeting, digital literacy, life skills	I love the library, I spent every day up there when I was a kid, anoka county library was the best ever, microfiche, how we looked up articles

Discussion of Results

The two most prominent services that the participants agreed the public library should

offer were job assistance and free internet access. Nearly all participants said they think that

libraries should provide free internet access, and several noted that libraries should have more

general knowledge about how the world works readily available. While all participants do not

use the public library any more frequently than monthly and rarely even borrow items from the

library, only one said that the library was not at all important to them. Later on, it was noted that

all participants' core belief is that public libraries should be places that should serve the

community.

Job Assistance

One participant, who verbally went through the survey with me, explained that she

thought public libraries should have job hunting tools available to the public as there is less

stigma around going to the library than going to a county office seeking help getting

employment. A couple of other participants agreed that public libraries should offer support with

employment assistance. These responses seem to align with priorities in many public libraries.

73% of public libraries provide programs that assist individuals in applying for jobs, create

resumes, and prepare for interviews, according to the 2019 ALA "State of America's Libraries"

report.

Access to Free Internet

Another topic that 90% of participants agreed on was that public libraries should provide

free internet access. This aligns with OCLC's "From Awareness to Funding: Voter Perceptions

and Support of Public Libraries in 2018" found. "There was a large jump (from 39% in 2008 to 64% in 2018) in those who rate wireless Internet as a highly important library service" (2018, p .9). Free internet access is also an important service that John Horrigan noted in his look at public library trends in 2016. "An emerging library 'service' is its Wi-Fi connection, which can be used separately from the hours library buildings are open: 7% of those 16 and older say that they have connected to a library's Wi-Fi system when the library building itself was closed" (Horrigan, 2016). 90% of participants search for information daily, yet while only 20% utilize the internet at the public library, 90% also note that free internet access should be available to the public.

Conclusions

Overall, my participants mostly agree that public libraries should provide free access to the internet. Utilizing library services and materials isn't something that many participants consider. However, there is still an underlying understanding that the public library should provide access to materials that the public may need. A report conducted by the Institute of Museum and Library Services titled "Public Libraries in the United States: Fiscal Year 2016" noted that "a core function of public libraries is to provide patrons with open access to information resources. Access to the Internet is one of the many valuable resources public libraries provide, particularly helping those who otherwise lack access to web-connected computers or devices" (p. 29). Having access to the internet inherently means that those who do need help with job searching have a place to go to if they do not otherwise have access to the internet. This is the most vital service that can be offered.

Now that I see how the people I interact with regularly regard the library and what services they believe a public library should provide, I am sure there is a basic understanding that the public library is there should they ever need it. Even if not all of my participants think the library is important to them, they all note that the library and its services are still crucial in the community.

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