

Libraries Continue Their Evolution to Meet Changing Needs

BY CAROLYN NOAH
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On any given day, your public library welcomes toddlers to story time and provides a gathering place for seniors, a safe place for teens, a career resource for job seekers, and a gateway for new Americans. Public computers are jam-packed with users waiting in line.

Municipal libraries in Massachusetts have a tradition of advocacy for all citizens. The Boston Public Library welcomes users with the words “Free to All.” Equal access is a strongly held value for libraries and consistent with their role in helping to build an informed, engaged citizenry.

Are today’s libraries sleepy, traditional places? Not on your life. Technological change has accelerated over the last decade, but change is familiar to libraries. They have evolved from hushed reading rooms to responsive community centers and from hosting old-fashioned card catalogs to electronic access points that integrate all kinds of media with a single click. Libraries have advocated for one emerging medium after another: books, cassettes, CDs, DVDs, and now virtual resources.

Libraries continue to be vital community centers. Since 2000, library visits statewide have increased 50 percent and circulation has increased 29 percent. Generally flat funding has increased the pressure, because traffic increases while resources don’t. Libraries are responding by engaging users in traditional and non-traditional ways, collaborating with other community organizations, providing a focus for the local creative economy, helping to preserve local cultural heritage, leveraging their buying power, and using electronic resources to expand far beyond traditional walls.

Engaging Users

Municipal libraries engage users in nontraditional ways to build community connections. One model is the teen program at the Leominster Public Library, which has invested in teen services since 1978, when a separate space for teens was advocated by author and trustee board member Robert Cormier. The Cormier Center for Young Adults, affectionately known as The Bob, provides space and programming to keep teens connected with the library, the

community and one another. By convening a Teen Advisory Board, the library stays close to the pulse of teen interests. The center has responded to programming requests from teens, from card tournaments to gaming nights. Its website offers links for homework help as well as tips for safe Web surfing. “Lots of people have wonderful feelings about the library as children,” says Library Director Susan Shelton. “Because of the commitment we make to teens, they have strong connections as adults and become lifelong library users and supporters. They recognize the library as an important place in the community and a place to bring their own children.”

Next spring, the Burlington Public Library will launch its third round of “one-book, one-community” programming, a technique now being used by libraries as a way to involve a large audience in books and dialogue. The library starts by inviting community members to select a focus title. The choices are always of high interest, but they also provide themes to open, thoughtful dialogue. Burlington Library Director Lori Hodgson assembles an advisory committee that has included municipal department heads, business

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people and others. With their input, she plans at least eight events to highlight each book. The 2011 selection, for example, was *Dark Tide: The Great Boston Molasses Flood of 1919*, by Burlington native Stephen Puleo. Library events included a molasses bake-off, North End tours, a family gingerbread story time, music programs, and a kids' program to make a molasses flood. The library invited Puleo to speak, and the library's book groups invited residents to a discussion of the book. Events were attended by adults, children and teens from every ethnic group. The business community supported the program, and many representatives of the Rotary Club and the Chamber of Commerce participated. "Burlington Reads is a tremendous effort, and it's worth it," Hodgson says. "The community anticipates it. As soon as one program is completed, people ask, 'What will we read next?'"

Community Partnerships

Libraries have become community centers by building partnerships and collaborations with other municipal and nonprofit organizations. In Spencer, the Richard Sugden Library collaborates with schools, the senior center and an independent organization that works to find assistance for seniors. The library is a drop-off point for the local food pantry. It collaborates with local banks for financial and computer literacy training in the library. The staff works with Project Able to build digital access to Spencer's history. The library fields a Massachusetts Environthon team. The library provides a venue that is perceived as welcoming and neutral in the community.

"As we think out of the box, we see ourselves as the center for community connections," says Spencer librarian Mary

Baker Wood. "More and more people who were not traditional library users come for one of these programs and stay to support the library. Our selectmen hear from people who have unexpected connections. We provide the best return on tax dollars that we possibly can. The building is a vibrant, safe place for people to come and meet."

Libraries are magnets for the local creative community. They host book and author talks, concerts and gallery space. The Newton Free Library plans weekly Sunday concerts and offers two gallery spaces that rotate monthly. "There's competition for those spaces," says Programs and Communications Director Ellen Meyers. A teen gallery provides the opportunity to display the work of high school artists and to create celebrations of their work, bringing together students, teachers, musicians, local businesses, municipal officials and cultural organizations. The library's commitment to culture is embedded in its mission.

Preserving Cultural Heritage

Another important role of contemporary libraries is preserving local cultural heritage through digitization. Libraries identify valuable resources for their communities, ranging from early newspapers to photographs and high school yearbooks. They prepare items for digitization and work with other organizations (Digital Commonwealth, for example) to scan and then to provide access. Once complete, the resource is searchable and available to everyone via the Web.

The Jones Library in Amherst has been a leader in creating special digital collections. Digital Amherst, according to the library's website, "brings our town's history alive through a collection of images, multimedia, and documents that reflect the independent spirit of our people, creative works, and culture." Among its online exhibits are the Peoples of Amherst; Amherst and the Muses (creative artists and "inspired residents"); Amherst Architecture; Business, Industry and Transportation; Amherst's Changing Physical Landscape; and Amherst's Champions (sports and social life). The collection provides information



PHOTO COURTESY OF PAUL PRATT MEMORIAL LIBRARY, COHASSET

A boy learns about anatomy with the help of a computer program in the Children's Room at the Pratt Memorial Library in Cohasset. The Children's Room provides services, materials and programming for children through grade five.



PHOTO COURTESY OF LYNNFIELD PUBLIC LIBRARY

Children and parents gather to hear stories at the Lynnfield Public Library.

about famous individuals with strong ties to the town, such as Daniel Shays, Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost. One photo collection shows vintage, uniquely shaped milk bottles from Amherst dairies. Digital Amherst includes the type of local lore that cannot be found on Wikipedia.

Providing Connectivity

Public Internet access is provided in nearly every public library, and people line up to use computers during open hours. People rely upon the library to stay in touch with loved ones or to search for jobs. Students count on connectivity to get homework done. Business people stop by to download documents for their next meeting. In some small Cape Cod and western Massachusetts communities, libraries may be the only source of Internet connectivity.

Library directors acknowledge the use of library Wi-Fi after hours, when users may connect from the parking lot to accomplish tasks they can't do from home. "We noticed the increased use of our wireless before and after hours several years ago by people both sitting in their cars and on our outside benches and steps," says Haverhill Public Library Director Carol Verney. "We're delighted that people have access when they need it and consider it a vital public service, as all libraries try to accommodate new and changing patron usage patterns."

Libraries Without Walls

Increasingly, municipal libraries are institutions without walls, accessible anytime. Through their library's membership in one of the state's nonprofit online resource-sharing networks, residents

can, from the comfort of their home, request traditional books or movies from across town or across the state. The physical items—more than seven million of them last year—are moved overnight to the borrower's home library at less than the cost of a postage stamp.

The rise of electronic books, magazines and other publications provides more virtual access as well as great challenges. Recently, *Newsweek* and the *Encyclopedia Britannica* announced the end of printed versions. Publishers are trying to predict the time when ebook sales will outpace print sales, as has already occurred on Amazon.com. The growing demand (by double-digit percentages) for ebooks creates new economic and equity pressures, as libraries negotiate the need to continue to supply traditional reading while increasing the numbers of electronic formats they provide. Municipal libraries contend with ebook publishers and distributors that have varying policies, costly (to libraries) business models, and varying amounts of interest in working with traditional library markets. Some book vendors embargo popular titles, insist on purchase agreements that force libraries to license, rather than own, electronic titles, or limit the number of times ebooks can be read before they must be repurchased.

In the next six months, the state's libraries, with the leadership of the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners, will pilot an ebook sharing project that will offer libraries the opportunity to purchase and access ebooks on a shared electronic platform. Libraries' success in negotiating a positive working relationship with ebook providers will be a defining issue of the decade.

Libraries leverage their buying power through collaborative purchases. Through their no-cost memberships in the Massachusetts Library System, libraries can join the Massachusetts Higher Education Consortium to take advantage of large discounts on library materials and supplies.

Providing Value

The value of a local library can be transparent to its users, but it typically exceeds by a large margin the library's per-person tax contribution. To respond

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The Attleboro Public Library provides children, teens and adults with access to an online resource called the LearningExpress Library. The ebooks, exercises, practice tests, skill-building courses and other resources help users achieve goals such as college preparation, GED preparation and U.S. citizenship.

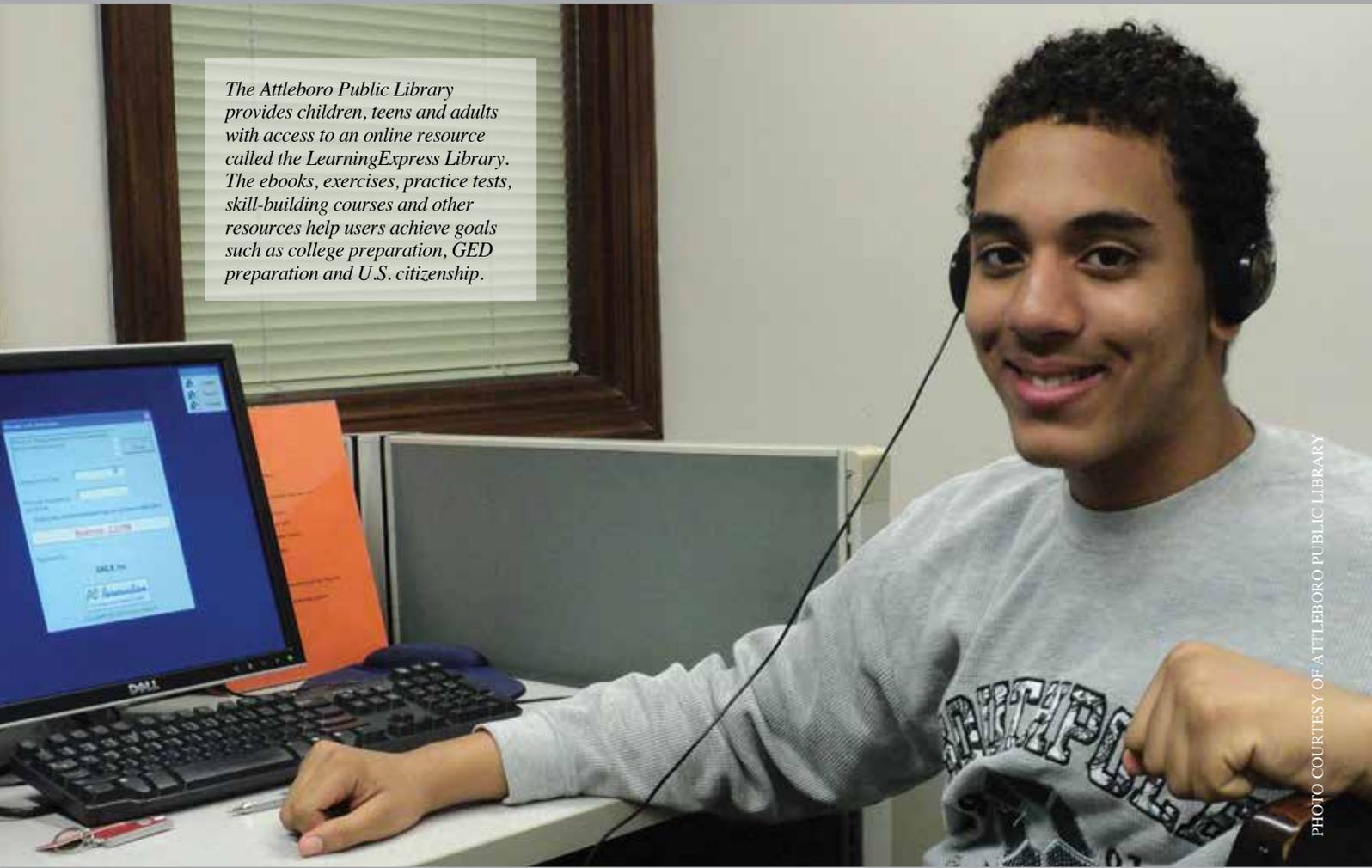


PHOTO COURTESY OF ATTLEBORO PUBLIC LIBRARY

to the communication challenge, the Haverhill Public Library is one of many that provide a Library Use Calculator. A user enters his family's monthly use of each service and can learn the total value of their use with a few clicks. The results can be impressive, with a family of four easily exceeding \$500 in monthly value by borrowing books, attending programs and using museum passes.

The most valuable resource in the library, however, goes home at night. The library staff brings added value and helps users to find the information they need. Librarians navigate the complex world of free Internet information and trusted online materials curated by librarians.

"We're going to be here well past forever," asserts Dinah O'Brien, director of community services in Plymouth and president of the Massachusetts Library Association. "As long as there needs to be a navigator, libraries will be involved at some point in the navigational stream—making recommendations, keeping up with change, being the load leveler."

"The library," adds Susan Shelton, "is a place where people can connect in the community. There are people who use the library virtually, and that's an important part of service that will continue to grow. But people will continue to need a space where they can make connections." The library is that space. 🌟

RELATED RESOURCES

Burlington Public Library:

www.burlington.org/departments/library

Digital Amherst:

www.digitalamherst.org

Digital Commonwealth:

www.digitalcommonwealth.org

Haverhill Library's Value of Service Calculator:

www.haverhillpl.org/donate/library-use-calculator

Leominster's Cormier Center for Young Adults:

www.leominsterlibrary.org/teens.htm

Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners:

mblc.state.ma.us

Massachusetts Library System:

www.masslibsystem.org

Newton Free Library:

newtonfreelibrary.net

Sugden Library, Spencer:

www.spencerpubliclibrary.org