

# Public Libraries for College Students!

by **Gretchen L. Freeman** (Associate Director for Technology, Salt Lake County Library Services, 2197 E. Fort Union Boulevard, Salt Lake City, UT 84121; Phone: 801-944-7527) <gfreeman@slco.lib.ut.us>

## Dual Citizenship

In the larger community beyond ivy-covered campus walls, college students are identified both as students and residents. This unique dual citizenship means they have access not only to the college library, but also to a public library serving the community where the student lives. While the public library does not serve specific curriculum or research needs, it offers a number of resources for college students. With a mission to serve community information and recreation needs, public libraries offer college students collections, facilities and services that complement those available to students on campus.

For academic and public libraries to form an effective partnership, each should understand the resources and strengths of the other. And librarians need to be aware of the resources their customers are able to access both inside and outside libraries on campus or in the community. Furthermore, students who are public and school library users during their school years are more likely to be successful in their academic endeavors. Librarians of all stripes have a common goal of creating lifelong library users who feel comfortable moving between libraries in various settings.

## Convenience — Just Around the Corner

In a large metropolitan area such as Salt Lake City or in rural areas, students may well live closer to a public library than they do to campus. In Salt Lake County, more than 80% of County residents live within three miles of a County library. For the student living at home for the summer or breaks, the public library can be an oasis for computer use, printing and quiet study. Virtually all public libraries now offer computers and Internet access for their customers or even guests to use. Many libraries also offer wireless Internet access for laptops — sometimes in a comfortable reading room with a cozy fireplace. For the student writing papers, the library will often have study carrels or tables in quieter areas. Public libraries are open year round and during the evenings and weekends, which is especially useful during academic breaks in the school year.

Today's college students have the ability to connect instantly with peers via computer, cell phones and text messaging to set up group study sessions. Public libraries usually offer study or meeting rooms that can serve as gathering places for group assignments. It's not uncommon to see groups working with laptops connected wirelessly to campus, to remote group members and to each other.

## Collection

The SL County collection, located in 18 community libraries spread over 700 square miles, numbers more than two million items representing 428,000 unique titles. The library's annual materials budget is over six

million dollars — a size equivalent to that of a larger academic research library, but spent in a very different pattern. Like a commercial entity, highest priority is placed on purchasing multiple copies in multiple formats of current titles and topics to satisfy diverse customer demands. We typically purchase 40 copies of best sellers, but have been known to purchase as many as 800 to 1,000 copies of extremely popular titles. We also purchase the same title in the large print, CD, DVD, and downloadable eBook and e-audiobook formats enjoyed by specific audiences.

Like all community libraries with limited shelf space and healthy materials budgets, we are constantly weeding the collection. For almost every copy added to the collection, another copy is weeded — creating a relatively slow-growing total collection size. But the emphasis for us is on currency and condition of materials to stimulate circulation. When a customer views our shelves, s/he should be attracted by colorful new materials in excellent condition on uncrowded shelves. Our Library managers know that to increase their circulation, they need to weed.

We mine catalog and circulation data regularly to tell us which titles have stopped checking out and which materials are dated or superseded. Recent popular titles — many still in good condition — are weeded aggressively when circulation drops. Statistically, the average item in our collections circulates five times during the year. Even so, the bestseller titles purchased in multiple quantities circulate more in their short circulation life than the materials we purchase in smaller quantities which may sit on our shelves for two or three years.

We spend around \$250,000 a year on database subscriptions to supplement our core databases, such as **EBSCOhost**, supplied through a state-wide program. Thanks to the state program, our own database dollars can be directed into “niche” topics such as genealogy, reader's advisory, test preparation, and home improvement. The per-use cost of databases for a public library is typically higher than that of an academic library, but subject databases supplement high-demand areas of the collection where we can't begin to supply enough topical materials across the system to fill customer needs.

Academic and public libraries can readily complement each other in the area of database subscriptions since neither can afford to license everything. SL County licenses only databases that permit remote access for home use by our customers, which means convenient access for students from campus or from home. Public libraries are becoming increasingly proactive in telling students about databases available to them on campus and academic librarians are letting their students know of databases available to them online with a public library card.

## eBooks and e-audiobooks

Public libraries spend more these days to develop virtual collections with eBooks and e-audiobooks to supplement their physical collections. These electronic formats are easier to purchase, don't need shelving or handling, and are available for customers to download 24/7. Some of the eBooks, such as *Cliff's Notes* and language learning, are relevant to college curriculum; others may simply offer a format more convenient for this younger generation to carry in a backpack or on a digital device.

## Circulation — More than a Million a Month

Circulation is the public libraries' bread and butter — and they do it extremely well. Circulation for SL County in 2007 totaled 13.6 million and usually increases 4-6% every year. Audio-visual circulation (CDs, DVDs, video, books on tape and books on CD) represents 43% of that total system-wide. Circulation is evenly split between adult and juvenile materials in all formats. For SL County, circulation is at the core of our operations, receiving constant attention and technology funding to increase our efficiency. Most recently we implemented self-service checkout in all 18 libraries to improve customer service and reduce waiting at the circulation desk.

Students can easily place materials on hold through the online catalog and pick them up at the closest branch on self-service hold shelves, use self-service checkout, and renew materials online or by phone. Many public libraries notify their customers of holds or materials coming due through email, phone messaging, or even text messaging — making it easy for the savvy student to locate and borrow materials that may be in heavy demand on campus. SL County processes 150,000 such hold requests per month and moves nine tons of material throughout the library system every day. Public libraries have been transporting materials to customers at no charge since the advent of the online catalog — something the commercial world has yet to offer!

## Merchandising the Collection

Public libraries spend considerable effort to merchandize their collections and increase circulation by borrowing techniques employed in bookstores. All new books are on special face-out shelving and custom-built display units near the front entrance of our libraries for three to six months. We invest in thematic and seasonal displays throughout our libraries. At every opportunity, we employ face-out shelving — at the end of a shelving range, with acrylic book and AV holders, with slat wall displays, and even with “power wall” sections. A power wall groups all materials in a selected subject area, such as travel books or cookbooks, with face-out shelving, colorful

*continued on page 36*

graphics, and props.

SL County librarians highlight materials in a quarterly newsletter called *Shelf Life* and we review new book and media releases on our Website. Our branches provide the same look and feel as a bookstore — with the advantage of free loan and a catalog for those who are looking for specific titles. Public librarians, like independent booksellers, have to be adept at giving reading recommendations to all ages in many different genres. Customers also find booklists and featured titles to browse. College students, like the rest of the populace, are enticed to read more with attractive merchandising and knowledgeable staff.

### **Reference and Reader's Advisory**

The public library reference desk is a familiar lifesaver for students of all ages. Just like their colleagues at a university, public reference librarians know their collections and how to guide research. In fact, the questions typically fielded by public librarians range widely (and wildly) over the interests of toddlers through seniors. What college librarians can provide using depth and breadth of materials, the public librarian needs to locate quickly in more limited resources targeted to answering specific questions. For undergraduates, fewer and more specific resources may be just the right thing. The public librarian brings a different perspective to locating resources in non-academic collections.

Many public libraries employ a technique called “roving reference” to initiate a reference interaction with customers. Librarians are as-

signed to rove in the library during a portion of their on-desk time. Roving encourages less intimidating encounters for customers who may be shy about approaching a reference desk or “interrupting” a librarian at the desk.

“Are you finding what you need?” is often the prelude to a reference or reader's advisory dialog. Roving librarians also develop skills in reading body language and behaviors to identify customers who may not be finding what they need. Customers learn to look for library staff in the stacks who can help them locate materials.

Public library reference has certainly changed in a Web world. Reference questions used to range from ready reference to in-depth research. Today customers often find quick answers themselves using Web search engines. They turn to librarians for tougher research questions in more specific areas, such as business law or finance. We hope that successful encounters with knowledgeable reference librarians establish a pattern that students carry with them into their future academic careers and lives.

### **Interlibrary Loan**

When a student needs resources outside those offered by their own public library, they will likely find convenient interlibrary loan or reciprocal borrowing arrangements. A large public library typically borrows (and lends) several hundred items a month for its customers via interlibrary loan from libraries across the country. Students who live near several different public libraries may well find that a library card for any is a card for all, with the same borrowing privileges from a much larger combined collection. Often the online catalogs are set up for convenient searching across

multiple individual collections.

### **One-stop Shopping**

College students raising young children can take advantage of library programming, reading clubs and Storytimes designed to entertain and promote reading. The student as Mom or Dad already models the importance of reading in their studies — and can check out quality children's books for their kids to read during study time. The children of students learn an important lesson that reading is an enjoyable way to learn or play together or alone. Families will also enjoy access to free DVDs and entertainment videos at the public library — an economical family activity on a student budget.

And speaking of budget, finding a job in the local off-campus community might be easier with resources available at the public library. Libraries help job seekers with ads and applications, as well as local newspapers and advertising newssheets. Computer resources for test taking and online applications may supplement what students find with on-campus employment offices. And after getting the job, income tax forms and tax help (provided by knowledgeable volunteers) are available each tax season at most public libraries.

While the public library will never replace what university libraries offer students to support research, they provide complementary collections, facilities and services. Libraries should support each other's programs and refer their mutual patrons to the library that best meets their information needs. Wise students take advantage of the strengths of public and academic libraries by virtue of their dual citizenship in both. 🌿

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Gretchen L. Freeman

**BORN & LIVED:** Born and raised a native Nebraskan; lived in Missouri, South Carolina, and Utah.

**FAMILY:** Married to **Mike Freeman**, **UVSC** Library Director, and parents of son, **Sam**.

**EDUCATION:** **Fulbright Scholar**, M.A., M.L.S., M.P.C.

**FIRST REAL JOB:** In my first professional job in 1980 I was a cataloger at **Richland County Library** in Columbia, South Carolina. It led to the library's first computer project setting up a list of standing orders on an **Apple 2-E** and I was hooked. In 1985 we automated circulation with a little-known company from Utah called **Dynix**. We ran 41 dumb tubes on a refrigerator-sized computer with 512K memory! The library world made a seismic shift when our public could see the current status of our materials. I remember a hot debate about whether or not our patrons should place their own holds online.

**FAVORITE BOOKS:** I always recommend *You Just Don't Understand* or *Talking 9 to 5* by **Deborah Tannen** as guides to gender communication differences. It was so helpful in my career to understand that men and women are driven by inherently different styles when they interact with each other in any setting.

**PET PEEVES/WHAT MAKES ME MAD:** What makes me mad so often is the lack of common courtesy around us. **Lynn Truss** explains what I mean (with good humor) in her book *Talk to the Hand; The Utter Bloody Rudeness of the World Today, or Six Good Reasons to Stay Home and Bolt the Door*. It's maddening when people we encounter every day don't appear to realize or care that their cell phone conversations, car stereos, barking dogs etc. intrude on others. And even more so, that being bothered is somehow the victim's fault. I guess I'm old-fashioned in believing that each of us is responsible for respecting the rights and space of others.

**MOST MEANINGFUL CAREER ACHIEVEMENT:** I'm very fortunate to have worked with so many talented, dedicated colleagues throughout my career, both in libraries and in the vendor world. As a vendor, I worked with hundreds of libraries to help them be even more successful and adaptable using technologies. I've learned something new every day for more than 25 years and I've loved the satisfaction of solving problems for libraries. Who could ask for anything more? 🐾