

# Where to Go Shopping for Information: Public Libraries or Academic Libraries?

by **Samantha Larsen Hastings** (Public Services Librarian, Salt Lake County Library Services, West Jordan Library, 1970 West 7800 South, West Jordan, UT 84088; Phone: 801-944-7646) <SLarsen@slco.lib.ut.us>

Why do college students frequent public libraries in the place of, or in addition to, academic libraries? For some of the same reasons shoppers choose **Wal-Mart** over the mall, one stop shopping, location, atmosphere and materials. Public libraries are an information seeker's **Wal-Mart**.

## One Stop

The "one stop" mentality is one of the main reasons patrons choose both **Wal-Mart** and public libraries. At a public library, patrons can borrow books for all ages fiction and non-fiction, movies, audiobooks, music to listen to, use online databases to do homework and consumer research, attend programming for themselves or with their children, they can get materials to learn foreign languages, they can surf the Internet, and more underneath the same roof. Public libraries are ideal for nontraditional college students who have families and need to multitask at their information store.

## Location

The convenience of location is another reason why patrons will go to a public library. Public libraries, like **Wal-Mart** stores, tend to be centrally located in most cities with easy public access, whereas academic libraries tend to be located on university campuses with limited permit parking. Often nontraditional, commuting, or distance Ed students live closer to public libraries than they do to academic libraries. For those college students, the choice of library is not so much a matter of collection and programs, but of proximity.



## Non-intimidating, Friendly Atmosphere

Everyone is welcome at **Wal-Mart**, just as everyone is welcome at a public library. When a patron enters **Wal-Mart** they are greeted at the door and they can find assistance throughout the store by "roving" employees. At public libraries, the librarians at the information desk should greet or at least acknowledge every patron they make eye contact with. Librarians have assigned "roving" times to circulate through the library assisting patrons who need directions, ready reference, help with reference questions, and give reader's advisory tips.

## Focus on Current, Popular Materials

Public libraries have many of the same sections as **Wal-Mart** stores, such as gardening, cooking, housing, pets, crafts, self-help, consumer, health, education, and travel. Public Libraries, like **Wal-Mart**, often do not carry older materials but focus on newer fiction and audiovisual popular items. **Wal-Mart** stores have many displays and signs to entice the browsing shopper to pick up and purchase items. Similarly public libraries display new titles and offer themed item displays to entice patrons to check out materials. Public libraries also provide "shopping lists" in the form of booklists or pathfinders on topics.

## Academic libraries more like a mall

While public libraries are like the local **Wal-Mart** store, academic libraries are like the mall. Academic libraries have larger collections, more physical space, special collections, services, a variety of specialty stores, departments, desks, and offer breadth and depth to academic topics. Often as a public librarian, I have recommended that college students go to their academic libraries for more resources, primary documents, and greater selection of online databases.

---

*"Reference is not just about resources. It is about users..."*

---

## Where to Go Shopping for Information: Public Libraries or Academic Libraries?

Public and academic libraries have different purposes and collections, both are needed by college students, whether they be traditional, nontraditional, commuter, and/or distance Ed students. As **Sara Fine** (1995) reminds, "Reference is not just about resources. It is about users..."<sup>1</sup> Libraries should support each other's services, programs, and collections by referring college students to the library that best meets the student's information needs. This can only happen when both public and academic libraries are aware of what the other offers. College students are shopping for information, are we sending them to the right store? 🐾

### Endnotes

1. **Fine, Sara.** (1995). "Reference and Resources: The Human Side" *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 21(1), 17. Retrieved November 26, 2007, from **Academic Search Premier** database.

Public Services Librarian, West Jordan Library  
1970 West 7800 South, West Jordan, UT 84088  
Phone: (801) 944-7646 • <SLarsen@slco.lib.ut.us>

Samantha L. Hastings

**BORN & LIVED:** Provo and Riverton, Utah and Reading, England.

**EDUCATION:** Bachelor of Arts from **Brigham Young University**. Master of Arts from the **University of Reading**, Reading, England. Currently working on a Master of Library Science from the **University of North Texas**.

**PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES:** Adjunct English faculty at **Utah Valley State College**. Associate librarian at **Orem Public Library**. Currently works as a public services librarian at the **West Jordan Library** and serves as the vice-chair of the **Utah Library Association's** Young Adult Round Table.

**IN MY SPARE TIME I LIKE TO:** Read, write, eat exotic foods, travel and play tennis.

**FAVORITE BOOKS:** *Pride and Prejudice* by **Jane Austen**, *North and South* by **Elizabeth Gaskell**, *The Blue Castle* by **L. M. Montgomery**, *The Blue Sword* by **Robin McKinley**, and *The Perilous Gard* by **Elizabeth Marie Pope**. 🌻