

THE COMMUNITY AND THE LIBRARY

The community has changed, without doubt, but so have libraries. The 20th century public library was focused on internal operations and processes. The 21st century public library orientation is shifting to face outward and focus on community engagement and external partners.

The [American Library Association](#) and the [Harwood Institute's Libraries Transforming Communities](#) is leading this change and transforming the public library from an internally focused organization to a community-facing public service.

Libraries as a Community Service

As public libraries transform and engage the community they have a direct impact on community well-being. They are directly impacting the quality of life by supporting: community connections, lifelong learning, economic well-being and cultural development. However, practically, how does this happen?

□ **Public libraries connect communities** and are one of the few bridging organizations connecting a wide variety of agencies tackling the problems of social isolation, inequality and marginalization by providing access to the resources required to build a better life and a better community. In many communities public libraries are the “first responders” that connect people in need with the information, services and help they require.

□ **Public libraries support lifelong learning**, helping people read, learn and make a real difference in their well-being – whether that is about their financial situation, employment potential, their health or about new technologies. Public libraries break down the barriers to [literacy](#) and bridge the [digital divide](#),



filling the gaps in formal education and supporting personal learning and research by providing access to: learning resources, introducing families to books and reading, organizing English language classes for new Canadians, supporting book clubs, encouraging personal learning, answering questions plus supporting students and researchers.

□ **Public libraries promote economic well-being** and are economic generators. A healthy community enables businesses to create jobs which support sustainable economic growth and economic prosperity. Public libraries promote economic well-being by:

- Helping people learn new skills and preparing for or re-entering the workplace
- Assisting jobseekers
- Providing resources for the growth and development of small businesses
- Helping people make the most of their income

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Public libraries are also [economic generators](#) returning \$4 to \$6 for every municipal dollar invested in a public library. The public library is a good investment.

□ **Public libraries are cultural hubs** enriching the lives of people by inspiring people through access to books and learning. Libraries are spaces in which people can meet, use technology, and experience what it means to be part of a vibrant community. They also collect, preserve and provide access to local history, community archives and celebrate local authors.



So what are folks doing at the library?

The [Pew Research Centre](#) 2013 research into public library usage indicates that over 53% of Americans have visited a public library in the past 12 months and 77% [believe](#) access to computers and the internet are “very important” library services. Even though this data is based on American libraries, it is reflective of Canadian library usage.

The Pew [studies](#) have also revealed some surprising facts about libraries and the way we use them. For example,

▶ People over age 65 are [less likely to have visited a library](#) in the last 12 months, however, younger Americans are just as likely to be library users.

▶ 10% of Americans have never used a library. However, their positive view of libraries is due to the fact that 40% of non-users have someone in the household who is an active library user.

▶ eBook reading is increasing gradually, [but just 4% of Americans are “eBook only” readers](#). Those who read both e and printed books prefer different formats for different circumstances. People prefer eBooks for speedy access and portability, but want printed books when reading to a child.

So what kind of library user are you?

The new public library user is very different from their grandparents. To begin to assess these changes, the Guelph Public Library has a survey to learn how Guelph library habits and attitudes compare with national trends. Are you a “Library Lover,” an “Information Omnivore” or totally “Off the Grid”? Take the Guelph Public Library [engagement quiz](#) and learn how your library habits stack up.

The [Andrew Carnegie](#) model of going to the library to check out books and read newspapers is less reflective of current usage. It is being supplanted by public libraries that have a direct impact on their community, support lifelong learning, promote economic well-being and are a community hub. It has been the rise of information and communications technology that has given public libraries a new life.

If you live in Canada and need internet access, help applying for a job, want to learn how to use an eReader or research your family tree, welcome to the 21st century public library. This is what public libraries do 24/7 each and every day.

Kitty Pope , CEO
Guelph Public Library
kpope@guelpubl.ca
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