

12 Ways Libraries Are Good for the Country

By Leonard Kniffel

A gift from *American Libraries* magazine of one dozen ideals toward which libraries strive.

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Americans love their libraries, and advances in technology have multiplied the ways in which libraries enrich the quality of life in their communities. Whether they are in an elementary school or a university, a museum or a corporation, public or private, our nation's libraries offer a lifetime of learning. To library supporters everywhere—Friends, trustees, board members, patrons, and volunteers—*American Libraries* magazine offers this gift of 12 ideals toward which librarians strive as they provide comprehensive access to the record of human existence. It will take all of us, in a spirit of pride and freedom, to maintain libraries as a living reality in a free nation through the 21st century.

1. Libraries sustain democracy.

Libraries provide access to information and multiple points of view so that people can make knowledgeable decisions on public policy throughout their lives. With their collections, programs, and professional expertise, librarians help their patrons identify accurate and authoritative data and use information resources wisely to stay informed. The public library is the only institution in American society whose purpose is to guard against the tyrannies of ignorance and conformity.

2. Libraries break down boundaries.

Libraries of various kinds offer services and programs for people at all literacy levels, readers with little or no English skills, preschoolers, students, homebound senior citizens, prisoners, homeless or impoverished individuals, and persons with physical or learning disabilities. Libraries rid us of fences that obstruct our vision and our ability to communicate and to educate ourselves.

3. Libraries level the playing field.

By making access to information resources and technology available to all, regardless of income, class, or background, a public library levels the playing field and helps close the gap between the rich and the poor. Libraries unite people and make their resources available to everyone in the community, regardless of social status. There are more public libraries than McDonald's restaurants in the United States.

4. Libraries value the individual.

Libraries offer choices between mainstream and alternative viewpoints, between traditional and visionary concepts, and between monocultural and multicultural perspectives. Library doors swing open for independent thinking without prejudice. Library collections and services offer the historical global, cultural, and political perspective that is necessary to foster a spirit of exploration that challenges orthodoxy and conformity.

5. Libraries nourish creativity.

By providing an atmosphere that stimulates curiosity, libraries create opportunities for unstructured learning and serendipitous discovery. As repositories not only of books but of images and a wide variety of media, libraries offer access to the accumulated record of mankind with assistance from professional staff delivering these resources through the physical library, the web, and outreach services.

6. Libraries open young minds.

Children's and young adult librarians offer story hours, book talks, summer reading activities, career planning, art projects, gaming competitions, and other programs to spark youthful imaginations. Bringing children into a library can transport them from the commonplace to the extraordinary. From story hours for preschoolers to career planning for high schoolers,

children's librarians make a difference because they care about the unique developmental needs of every individual who comes to them for help.

7. Libraries return high dividends.

Libraries offer big returns to the communities they serve—anywhere from \$1.30 to \$10 in services for every \$1 invested in them. Strong public and school libraries make a city or town more desirable as a business location. Americans check out an average of more than seven books a year from public libraries, and it costs them roughly \$34 in taxes—about the cost of a single hardcover book.

8. Libraries build communities.

People gather at the library to find and share information, experience and experiment with the arts and media, and engage in community discussions and games. No narrow definition will work for libraries. There is the community of scholars, the deaf community, the gay community, the gaming community, and countless others, each with its libraries and specialized collections. Libraries validate and unify; they save lives, literally and by preserving the record of those lives.

9. Libraries support families.

Libraries offer an alternate venue for parents and their children to enhance activities traditionally conducted at home by providing homework centers, parenting collections, after-school programs, outreach, one-on-one reading, and early literacy programs. Like the families they serve, libraries everywhere are adapting to meet the economic and social challenges of the 21st century. In libraries, families find professionals dedicated to keeping their services family-friendly by offering a diverse selection of materials to which people of many backgrounds can relate.

10. Libraries build technology skills.

Library services and programs foster critical-thinking skills and information literacy. Nearly 100% of American libraries offer internet access and assistance with problem-solving aptitude, scientific inquiry, cross-disciplinary thinking, media literacy, productivity and leadership skills, civic engagement, global awareness, and health and environmental awareness. Library patrons search for jobs online, polish résumés with word processing software, fill out applications, research new professions, sign up for career workshops, and look for financial assistance. Public

libraries serve as technology hubs by offering a wide range of public access computing and internet access services at no charge to users.

11. Libraries offer sanctuary.

By providing an atmosphere conducive to reflection, libraries induce a feeling of serenity and transcendence that opens the mind to new ideas and interpretations. In the library we are answerable to no one. We can be alone with our private thoughts, fantasies, hopes, and dreams, and we are free to nourish what is most precious to us with the silent companionship of others who share our quest. Libraries are places where computers and databases provide superior access to information and they offer an atmosphere of light and textures that beautiful architecture and design foster.

12. Libraries preserve the past.

Libraries are repositories of community history, oral narratives, and audiovisual records of events and culture, and when these local resources are digitized and placed online as digital libraries, communities and cultures thousands of miles away can share in the experience. Libraries and information science and technology enable us to communicate through distance and time with the living and the dead. A library is a miracle kept available by the meticulous resource description and access that is the work of the librarian. Libraries preserve the record and help their patrons make sense of it in the Information Age.

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