

U.S. Library Program: Summary of Research Reports

For more than a decade, studies have consistently demonstrated that a divide exists between those who have access to computers and those who do not. This divide has formed along the lines of income, race, education levels and geography.

In 1997, the U.S. Library Program (“the library program”) at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation was launched with the idea that placing computers in libraries might be an effective way to serve those who were least able to access technology. These grants have included software, training and technical assistance.

Since the inception of the library program, the Public Access Computing Project (PACP) at the University of Washington has been engaged in a multi-year, multi-method, independent research project designed to gauge its effectiveness. This effort has assessed the impact of the U.S. Library program on patrons, libraries and communities, and has provided feedback to the foundation that has been used to continually improve the design and implementation of the program.

This document is intended to serve as a high-level summary of the 23 evaluation reports issued by PACP over the last four years.

Major findings of the PACP evaluations:

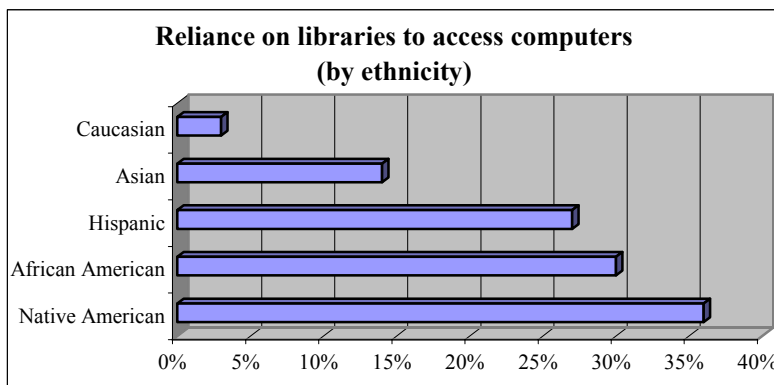
- Access to computers through libraries is providing a measurable public good.
- As a result of offering public access computing, libraries report a significant increase in visits and in circulation.
- Libraries need help sustaining public access computing.

“We are noted as being the only free access to computers and the Internet in our small community. We feel we are more connected to the world than before.”

–Librarian

Public libraries provide the only access to computers and the Internet for many people, including those who are lower income, minority, unemployed or have less than a high school education.

- Twenty percent of library patrons who reported using these computers have no other computer access. Thirty percent have no other Internet access.ⁱ
- Among the poorest adult library computer users (those with household incomes below \$15,000), 30 percent indicate the library provides their only access to computers and 37 percent indicate the library provides their only access to the Internet.ⁱⁱ
- Libraries provide the only computer access for 16 percent of those with less than a high school education, compared with 3 to 6 percent of those with a high school diploma or additional years of education.ⁱⁱⁱ



Source: Heuertz, Linda, et.al. Public Libraries and the Digital Divide.

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Patrons rely on the computers to learn and practice technology skills, conduct research and keep in touch with family and friends.

- Lower income patrons are more likely to use computers for job-seeking-related needs; higher income patrons rely on access to library computers to conduct research.
- Obtaining medical information is particularly important to patrons in rural communities and small towns.
- Teens use the computers to complete research or honors class homework, conduct volunteer projects such as teaching computer skills to adults and play games.

How Library Patrons Use Computers:

Keep in touch with family/friends	52%
Write/print reports	42%
Get information about current events	35%
Learn/practice computer skills	33%
Do schoolwork	33%
Learn about a medical problem	31%

Libraries are being utilized more as a result of offering public access computing. Patrons using computers visit libraries twice as often and stay twice as long.

- “Everything is up,” including patron traffic, the rate of new patrons, and the reputation of their libraries.
- In 2002, libraries participating in the U.S. Library Program reported an average increase of 36 percent in library traffic and a 9 percent average increase in book circulation.
- More than three-fourths of administrators reported increases in library traffic since the computers were installed. More than one-half reported increases in book circulation.
- 57% of very low-income people (those earning less than \$15,000 per year) used the library in 2001, up from 34% in 2000.
- Though library visits are up, few libraries have added staff or hours. While librarian job satisfaction has increased with the renewed popularity of libraries, workload and stress levels have also increased.

Public access computing has had a significantly positive impact on libraries serving rural and small towns.

- Rural and small town libraries represent almost four-fifths of all public library systems, serve about 17% of the nation’s population and are often considered to be understaffed and underfunded.^{iv}
- Librarians and patrons report that having public access computers that are connected to the Internet has provided substantial new opportunities for them and their computers. With small spaces and limited budgets, the Internet provides these remote libraries with an expansive window to all kinds of information that is “not on site”.^v
- Rural and small town patrons use the library for a variety of purposes including write/print reports (42%), learn about a medical problem (33%), learn about local events (26%), write or print a resume (23%), and find a job (22%).^{vi}
- Small town and rural library staff report that public access computing service has improved the visibility and reputation of the library within the community.^{vii}

“I live in a very poor community, and I am a single parent of a 7-year old... I have used the library computers to write my resume and even get a Pell Grant to go back to school.”

-- Library Patron

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Libraries need help sustaining public access computing. Library administrators, staff and patrons point to the necessity for technical support and continued training.

- Librarians say the training component of the U.S. Library Program differentiates it from other programs that provide machines or hookups for public access computing. Staff in libraries that received onsite training say they are better able to deal with the challenges often presented by public access computing.^{viii}
- Approximately half of all library administrators anticipate a need to upgrade their public access computing resources in the near future, including adding more computers (83 percent), technical expertise (53 percent) and more training (49 percent).^{ix}
- As few as 25 percent of libraries offer technology courses and more informal assistance. One in two people indicate they would take a library computer class if one were offered. Administrators report several factors limiting their ability to offer such courses, including insufficient funding, inadequate number of staff, deficient staff technical skills, lack of computers or space.^x
- State librarians say that local community members, especially those with lower incomes, have come to depend on library computers, and that local library staff will do “whatever it takes” to sustain public access computing programs.^{xi}
- Library administrators see providing computer training for patrons as the greatest challenge they face in sustaining public access computing in their libraries, followed by technical support and training for staff.^{xii}

“I obtained my first computer-related job as a machinist because of the confidence I received from Internet training courses at the library.”

--Library Patron

Support for public access computing in libraries is widespread.

- The Library Program grants have made important contributions in all states by initiating, complementing, or sustaining public access computing services.^{xiii}
- Public access computing is now an attribute of public libraries that local community members —especially the poor—depend on.^{xiv}
- Library patrons are happy to have computers in the library and want more. The greatest frustration for the patrons is often related to too many people wanting to use too few computers.^{xv}
- Most Americans (76 percent) believe that computers and Internet access offered by public libraries is helping to bridge the nation’s digital divide.^{xvi}

We are from a poor state and our community is “as poor as could possibly be” and yet we are going “to sustain [the Gates] grant in some way or other, because we cannot afford to cut off that outside contact.”

-- Librarian

ⁱ Heuertz, Linda, et.al. Public Libraries and the Digital Divide.

ⁱⁱ Moore, Elizabeth J., Andrew Gordon, Margaret Gordon and Linda Heuertz. It’s Working. Seattle, WA: September 2002.

ⁱⁱⁱ Heuertz, Linda, et.al. Public Libraries and the Digital Divide.

^{iv} Heuertz, Linda, Andrew Gordon, Margaret Gordon and Elizabeth Moore. The Impact of Public Access Computing on Rural and Small Town Libraries. Seattle, WA: 2003.

^v Huertz, Linda, et.al. The Impact of Public Access Computing on Rural and Small Town Libraries.

^{vi} Huertz, Linda, et.al. The Impact of Public Access Computing on Rural and Small Town Libraries.

^{vii} Huertz, Linda, et.al. The Impact of Public Access Computing on Rural and Small Town Libraries.

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- ^{viii} Heuertz, Linda, Andrew Gordon, Margaret Gordon and Elizabeth Moore. Variations on a Theme: State Librarians Reflect on the U.S. Library Program. Seattle, WA: 2002.
- ^{ix} Gordon, Margaret, et.al. Unique Aspects of Gates Library Program Help Libraries and Patrons.
- ^x Heuertz, Linda, et.al. Public Libraries and the Digital Divide.
- ^{xi} Heuertz, Linda, Andrew Gordon, Margaret Gordon and Elizabeth Moore. Variations on a Theme: State Librarians Reflect on the U.S. Library Program. Seattle, WA: 2002.
- ^{xii} Gordon, Margaret, et.al. Unique Aspects of Gates Library Program Help Libraries and Patrons.
- ^{xiii} Heuertz, Linda, Andrew Gordon, Margaret Gordon and Elizabeth Moore. Variations on a Theme: State Librarians Reflect on the U.S. Library Program. Seattle, WA: 2002.
- ^{xiv} Heuertz, Linda, Andrew Gordon, Margaret Gordon and Elizabeth Moore. Variations on a Theme: State Librarians Reflect on the U.S. Library Program. Seattle, WA: 2002.
- ^{xv} Gordon, Margaret, Elizabeth J. Moore, and Andrew C. Gordon. Library Patrons Heavily Use Public Access Computers & Other Library Services and Want More. Seattle, WA: May 2001.
- ^{xvi} Gordon, Andrew C., Margaret T. Gordon, Elizabeth Moore, and Anne Boyd. Support for Public Access Computing Widespread and Strong. Seattle, WA: March 2002.