Research Topic: Exploring the Impact of U.S. Public Libraries

Research Experience for Master’s Students
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The United States has a long history of public libraries which maintain a strong tradition of community outreach and service, beginning with the principle that its resources should be made available to everyone. The community mission of libraries leads them to offer a range of programs and resources, ranging from cultural activities, meeting spaces, computer literacy classes, tutoring services, and so forth. Many librarians additionally provide informal advice and guidance to individual library patrons on a variety of issues.

The public library’s community outreach mission, however, is often eclipsed by their better-known capacities as book-lending institutions. In this project, our goal is to conduct background research, interviews, and focus groups about local public libraries in order to gain an understanding of the range of impact that public libraries have on their communities, separate from book circulation. The project will be the first step in a larger effort to understand and quantify the effect of U.S. public libraries.

The research will involve the following components:

- Determining criteria for inclusion of specific libraries in the study.
- Selection of a set of public libraries according to the criteria.
- Background research about the selected libraries.
- Literature search about the impact of U.S. public libraries.
- Interviews with librarians, library patrons, and others associated with the selected libraries. [In some cases, focus groups may also be used.]
- A write-up of the research, with intention to submit to a scholarly journal.