

The public library: a student's second home

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This article is the first in a series celebrating the very special relationship between British Columbia's post-secondary and public libraries. Let's begin by looking at how post-secondary students are already using their local public libraries as well as their college or university libraries.

Port Moody Public Library is filled with students from about 2:00 in the afternoon until closing every day, and on weekends. Most are Simon Fraser University (SFU) and Douglas College students.

Students use Port Moody Public Library because it is close to home, convenient, and a comfortable, familiar environment, according to Chief Librarian Diana Guinn and Community Services Librarian Barbara Buxton. Port Moody Public gets busier with students around exam time, just as academic libraries do.

A recent student survey at SFU supports this anecdotal evidence. While 94% of undergraduates do use the SFU library, more than half had also used a library other than SFU for academic purposes in the past year.

Alternate libraries most used by SFU students are Vancouver Public Library (51% of respondents, or about a quarter of SFU undergrads altogether), other public libraries (37%), Burnaby Public Library (32%), and UBC Library (23%).

The primary reason for using an alternate library is because of its convenient location or proximity to home. Other reasons are to locate material not available at SFU, or to supplement research.

SFU Reference Librarian Sandra Wong's experiences help explain why students sometimes go to public libraries for materials.

Recently, a student found that an item in the SFU library was already checked out. With Sandra's help, the student found that her local public library, Coquitlam, had two copies on the shelves.

Sandra often helps students find needed materials in public libraries, particularly popular titles that are likely to be a part of a public library collection. The catalogues of Burnaby and Vancouver Public Libraries are the ones searched most often, as these are the largest collections in the Lower Mainland.

Recent research at Vancouver Public Library indicates that post-secondary students are a significant portion of users. This is particularly true at VPL's very popular Central Branch, where more than 1 in 10 users is a college, technical institute or university student. First year college and university students, in particular, tend to be heavy users of the public library.

Survey results match the experiences of front line staff at VPL, who find that first year students tend to rely heavily on public library resources until they become familiar with their college or university libraries.

The top 3 student activities at VPL are borrowing materials, studying, and locating information. Many students complimented VPL on its services, physical layout, and staff. As one student put it, “for us students, the library is our second home”.

Like SFU, VPL found that students generally use the public library in addition to their school library rather than as a substitute. 83% of the students who use public libraries ALSO use their school libraries.

In regards to why students go to public libraries for materials, one student commented that VPL sometimes has books not available at UBC library. Another student said, “I go here [to VPL] for books to get a broad view of my topic and go to the SFU library for journal articles”.

Some students go to public libraries for computers and internet access. There are students who go to Port Moody Public Library to complete coursework and send in assignments.

There must be a real need for students who use public library computers for coursework, as there is heavy demand for these resources at public libraries which have resulted in restrictions such as time limits. For example, there is a two hour time limit on word processing stations at Port Moody. People who use public library computers for internet or word processing generally do so because these services are not available at home, or there is a temporary problem with a home computer.

Non-academic uses of the public library by students include searching for employment and summer job information.

Potential future students occasionally use public library internet access to apply for college or university.

Interestingly, Nelson Municipal Library gets a lot of ILL requests that appear to be for distance ed students, according to Deb Thomas, Chief Librarian. It is not clear why students go to public libraries for this service, which is offered by their educational institution. Perhaps it is easier to pick up the material at the public library?

It makes sense for students to use their public libraries – the one constant library service that is available to all of us throughout our lives.

Future students start off developing needed literacy skills through preschool storytime, continue to build and develop reading and writing skills throughout elementary school

through programs such as summer reading clubs, and begin to learn academic research skills through the programming Vancouver Public Library develops for this crowd.

During study breaks in between years or degrees, students can keep up their reading and research skills through their public library. Alumni have a means of connecting to a wide assortment of resources after graduation – all through the convenience of their local public library.