In a recent article in the Christian Science Monitor, writer Gregory M. Lamb points out that it is the public library and its books that are among the heroes of the current fantasy movie, Pleasantville. As teens in a seemingly perfect 1950s film world of black and white and gray begin to blossom into rosy flesh tones after visits to the library (among other activities), Lamb concludes that the movie is endorsing the need for self-exploration and that the public library has a role in facilitating that process.

Another writer, Geoffrey Nunberg, comments on the similarity between Bill Gates’ $400 million in gifts to public libraries in 1997 from both the Microsoft Corporation and his personal fortune and the bequests of Andrew Carnegie in the late 19th and early 20th Century that resulted in the construction of almost 2,000 library buildings in the United States. “Why libraries now?” Nunberg asks. “...What’s most striking about Gates’ gift is that once again America’s richest man should have chosen the public library as the object of his philanthropy....”

Why is the public library, both throughout the country and here in the Commonwealth, suddenly the object of attention in popular media and the public consciousness? The answer may be found both in the institution’s past as a facilitator of social progress through the creation of an informed citizenry, and its future role in a transformed information age where the quantity and quality of online information needs to be evaluated while the public library’s place in the community is preserved.
The public library in Virginia, an institution with a 200-year-old tradition, thrives through its ability to adapt to the changing needs of the communities it serves. It balances its traditional role of providing informational, cultural and recreational resources to local communities with the challenges of offering remote electronic information 24 hours a day to both the computer literate and computer "have nots."

Yet despite the availability of Internet access to information from home or work, the public library remains a place to visit—for preschoolers learning to read, school-age children seeking guided homework support, and adults seeking print material and the expertise of information navigators, such as librarians. In 1996-1997, Virginia’s 90 public libraries and their 336 branches and outlets recorded more than 27 million visits. Virginians visited their local library almost as often as they went to movies such as Pleasantville. (There were 29 million visits to Virginia movie theaters in 1996-1997.) In parts of Virginia, libraries are often the only cultural centers of the localities they serve.

The variety of Virginia’s libraries ranges from single units that serve two-mile square areas with populations of less than 3,000, to metropolitan and suburban library systems that serve populations of almost a million. But, no matter what the size, service area or budget of libraries in Virginia, they remain partners with their communities, contributing to economic development, community revitalization, educational support, and the maintenance of archival history.

Jefferson’s Legacy: Origins of the Public Library in Virginia

The concept of the public library as essential to social progress can be traced to Thomas Jefferson. In a May 19, 1809 letter to John Wyche, President Jefferson expressed his belief in the importance of county public libraries to democracy:

“I always read with pleasure of institutions for the promotion of knowledge among my countrymen. The people of every country are the only safe guardians of their own rights, and are the only instruments which can be used for their destruction, and certainly they would never consent to be so used were they not deceived. To avoid this they should be instructed to a certain degree. I have often thought that nothing would do more extensive good at small expense than the establishment of a circulating library in every county to consist of... well chosen books, to be lent to the people of the county under such regulations as would secure their safe return in due time!” [author's italics]

Before Jefferson’s time, Virginia’s libraries, for the most part, were in private collections. One of the earliest records of such a library in Virginia is that of Thomas Hargrave. In 1621, he willed his library to a proposed Indian school. By 1740, Virginia’s largest private library totaled 4,000 books and belonged to William Byrd II of Westover. The collection was large enough to require a private librarian.

The forerunner to the public library was the subscription library. Benjamin Franklin is credited with organizing the first such library in the United States in 1731. Because books were expensive and difficult to obtain, he suggested that members of his social/literary society bring their books to the club to be shared by all. This popular concept became the Philadelphia Library Company. When Virginia’s Alexandria Library Company formed in 1794, more than 16 such groups existed throughout the fledgling nation. Subscription libraries were a middle-class phenomenon, no longer limiting books to wealthy individuals or those of a certain class. It is with subscription libraries that the concept of “universal” access to information for all, a guiding principle of the public library movement, was born.

The first “public” library in Virginia was the Virginia State Library, initially authorized by law in 1823, and established in 1828 under the Act of the General Assembly passed that year. Originally designated as a repository of the Commonwealth’s government archives, the Library, through its Extension Division, would, many years later, also become the impetus behind the development of county libraries originally envisioned by Jefferson.

For the rest of the 19th century, there was limited public tax support for libraries. When Andrew Carnegie donated $41 million dollars between 1890 and 1917 for almost 2,000 library buildings throughout the U.S., only two Virginia communities, Norfolk and Waynesboro, accepted a total of $78,000 for public library construction. Seven other Virginia libraries refused Carnegie offers of more than $200,000, perhaps in part due to criticisms in the popular press of the time of “tainted philanthropy.” The Progressive-era argument ran that institutions of “cultural and moral enlightenment” should not accept money that had been acquired illegally or by unethical means. There may have been suspicions about the motives of the Northern industrialist, Carnegie, in the more rural, less prosperous Southern states. A more practical reason for refusing Carnegie grants was the stipulation that local jurisdictions pledge annual support of no less than...
10 percent of the capital cost of the building. In Virginia and other rural states, this amount of tax revenue was difficult to find. As a result, by the end of the 19th century, there were only three public libraries in Virginia.

A revision of the state constitution in 1902 gave the Virginia State Library more independence by establishing a Library Board as a governing corporation, with five members elected by the State Board of Education. Also, a full-time State Librarian was appointed for the first time. By 1904, the State Library had become a conduit for “traveling libraries,” which consisted of 50 volumes “carefully selected, comprising history, biography, science, belles lettres, poetry, drama, agriculture, medicine, fiction, etc.” Books selected in those early years reflect some of the same (updated) eclectic interests of library users today: A History of the Growth of the Steam Engine, Manual of Cattle Feeding, Three Hundred and Sixty-Six Dinners, Camps in the Rockies and works of fiction by Ellen Glasgow, Robert Louis Stevenson, Victor Hugo and Thomas Hardy.

The traveling libraries were accompanied by a bookcase and a miniature cataloging outfit and set up in country stores, post offices and other county locations. Private contributions supported the libraries. The books were donated and the transportation was paid by railways and steamship companies.

These early traveling libraries were the seeds for more permanent institutions, and by 1930 there were 43 communities in Virginia with public libraries.

**Development of State Aid and the Full Funding Debate**

Requests for state aid for libraries date back to 1930 when the Virginia State Library requested $50,000 for the 1931-1932 biennium. Due to more urgent needs in the Commonwealth, the Depression was not the best time to seek aid for libraries, and the bill containing the request died in committee. Six years later, Randolph W. Church, then Assistant State Librarian, developed a “Regional Library Plan for Virginia,” which included a request for a state grant-in-aid program. No action was taken, however.

In this vacuum, Virginian David K. Bruce, married to Alisa Mellon, the daughter of Andrew Mellon, donated 12 library buildings to Charlotte County and 11 surrounding counties. The librarians working in the buildings came to be known as “Bruce’s children” and he expressed his regard for libraries much later, when he said, “All libraries are good. They’re one of the few institutions that never did anybody any harm.” In making these donations, which involved expenditures of $25,000 to $40,000 per building, Bruce’s only requirement was that each county board of supervisors establish a county public library system in accordance with state law, and appropriate sufficient funds for maintenance and operation.

Prior to 1942, not a single county or regional library system had been established solely with local tax funds. In each situation, substantial funds from outside sources were necessary to meet initial costs.

During World War II, while Governor Colgate W. Darden, an advocate of public education and the library’s role in education, was in office, the first state appropriation of $50,000 was allocated for grants-in-aid to public libraries. The bill favored rural libraries. County and regional libraries serving over 35,000 could qualify for up to $15,000; city libraries were limited to $5,000. State aid grew to $400,000 by the second year of the 1969-1970 biennium. This was the first time libraries received the amount of aid for which they were eligible under the terms of the 1942 law.

In the late 1960s, several groups lobbied for more state aid to libraries and a change in the state aid formula. In 1966, the Public Library Development Committee of the Virginia Library Association (VLA) reported to the State Library Board that “21 percent of Virginia’s people are still without public libraries.” The committee proposed a system of library service which would divide the state into 18 areas, but the board, reluctant to add to the levels of bureaucracy in the state, did not approve the committee’s report. A 1967 fact sheet issued by a Virginia House of Delegates member, who supported more aid to libraries, compared increases in state aid between 1957 and 1967 to various educational and recreational institutions in the Commonwealth. Libraries had received a 54 percent increase in state aid over that decade, while public schools had received a 237 percent increase and parks and recreation a 1,420 percent increase.

But the VLA’s report had started the ball rolling. In 1968, a consulting firm hired by the State Library Board published another report, “A Public Library Program for the Commonwealth of Virginia,” which proposed a new state aid formula. The State Library Board also prepared an aid formula proposal. In 1970, following an intensive public relations campaign, which included a series of hearings throughout the state, the legislature passed the formula endorsed by the State Library Board, which had as its objectives to: a) encourage localities to spend money on their libraries; b) take into account the actual cost of library service, which depends upon population, and to a lesser degree, area; c) encourage regional libraries.
With the passage of the 1970 law, libraries had gained an aid formula, but not necessarily the full funding of that aid. The aid formula passed in the 1970 law required: a) $.35 of state aid for every local dollar spent on libraries up to a ceiling of $150,000 per library or system; and b) $.30 per capita for the first 600,000 persons for each additional city or county served; and c) $10 per square mile of area served with an additional grant of $20 per square mile for systems serving more than one city or county. According to that formula, in 1970, libraries should have received $3.2 million from the state. In reality they received less than 20 percent of that amount, or $400,000. By 1980, state appropriations were providing seven percent of the funding for public libraries, an increase of four percent from a decade earlier. Local and federal funding for all libraries had actually decreased. The libraries most affected by the decreases were regional and city libraries. For county libraries, which tended to serve more rural areas, the proportions of total budget borne by both local and state funding had increased.

In the past 28 years, libraries have moved from approximately 18 percent of full funding based on the state aid formula in 1979, to 73 percent. Actual appropriations in that same period increased from $400,000 in 1969-1970 to more than $14 million in 1997-1998. However, particularly with the cost of new technologies, the issue of full funding is still critical for Virginia's libraries. At its 1998 session, the General Assembly embarked on a three-step plan to restore full funding. For year one, the 1998 Assembly added $1.4 million to the level of funding already in the budget. Governor James S. Gilmore III signed the increase into law. To achieve the second step, VLA and other public library supporters are asking that $2.8 million be added to bring libraries to within 85 percent of full funding. While this second-year increase was not included in the 1998-2000 budget, new budget language was passed by the General Assembly and signed into law by Governor Gilmore which established:

"It is the objective of the Commonwealth to fully fund the state formula for state aid to local libraries. The additional appropriation in the first year begins a three-year phase-in of full funding. It is the objective of the General Assembly to complete the phase-in in fiscal year 2001."

Because state aid is used primarily to buy books, materials and build library collections, whereas local revenue supports personnel, facilities and operating expenses, proponents of full funding argue that 27 million visits per year place a heavy burden on library resources and that, because of the state aid shortfall, library purchasing power has not kept pace with inflation. From 1987-1997, inflation was 38.4 percent and state aid increases were only 26 percent. During the last decade, state appropriations to local libraries were $32 million less than the formula required. VLA has pointed out that the additional $2.8 million would add 140,000 more books, at $20 per book, to the collections of Virginia's libraries in just one year.

The Public Library at the Millenium: Benefits and Costs of Technology

The development of the Internet into a mainstream source of information in the last five years has changed the face of public library service in Virginia and throughout the nation. In the library movement of the past century, the concept of "literacy" centered on the importance of books and reading. Now, a wider concept of "literacy" focuses on "access to information." Computer literacy is key to social mobility, and lack of universal access to technology may create a gulf between information "haves" and "have nots." Providing information in electronic formats and access to that information has created a number of new policy and funding issues for public libraries.

For much of the history of the development of public libraries in Virginia, the goal had been to provide universal service to all citizens of the Commonwealth. Periodic reports would report on how close this goal was to being achieved. By 1967, 20 percent of the Commonwealth's population still did not have access to a public library. By 1980, that number had been reduced to only five percent.

Now the availability of public Internet access in libraries is one of the issues of importance to Virginia's public libraries. The Library of Virginia has surveyed public libraries concerning public Internet access in each of the past three years. In 1997-1998, they found that no library has been able to implement a system that provides access and content equal to local demand. There are 600 public Internet access computers available in the Commonwealth's 90 library systems, or about one computer for every 11,200 citizens. Of the 386 total library locations or outlets, 188 do not offer public Internet access at all. At present, 45 percent of public access to the Internet outside of home, school or business is at the public library. One goal of a new technology plan proposed in Infopowering the Commonwealth: Virginia's Public Libraries: Electronic Resource Libraries for 21st Century Information, prepared by the Library of Virginia, is one Internet access point for every 3,125 citizens. This objective is part of an effort to provide universal and equal access to
all Virginians to information resources, regardless of income or education level.

A recent study, Losing Ground Bit by Bit, by the Benton Foundation, a group concerned with the effect of communications on public policy, notes: “...80 percent of families making more than $100,000 [in the U.S.] have computers. By contrast, of those families making less than $30,000 a year, only 25 percent have computers...of people with an undergraduate degree or higher, 53 percent use the Web, while only 19 percent of people with a high school education or less are Web users.”

But providing universal access to information does require significant funding. While Carnegie library communities only needed to provide 10 percent above capital costs, in the electronic world support and maintenance costs sometimes exceed capital costs by a factor of anything from 200 to 500 percent.

The plan outlined in Infopowering the Commonwealth asks for $17,345,120 in state funds over a three-year period, about $6 million per year. As part of the plan, the technology infrastructure for libraries would be enhanced through: Internet connectivity grants for all public libraries without Internet access or without adequate hardware to access the World Wide Web; ongoing connectivity subsidies to the World Wide Web for each library system; and replacement grants for older computers and for additional stations. In addition, the information content would be augmented through an “Electronic Resources Library” (ERL) hosted at the Library of Virginia. This would involve the creation of a Web site at the Library of Virginia with access to databases, including a full-text periodical database, an encyclopedia and children’s material, as well as links to authoritative Web sites in major areas of interest, including state information, job information, health, business and legal information.

In the past, the state has provided a modest amount of financial support for the high cost of technology that public libraries must bear.

But funding is only one aspect of the public library’s new relationship with technology. As adherents to the concept of “free access to information,” public libraries have had to struggle with the problem of Internet filtering. In the first case of its kind in the country, a U.S. district judge ruled on November 23 that the use of filters on public access Internet stations in Loudoun County public libraries violated the rights of free speech and failed to serve a compelling government interest. Loudoun’s Library Board had adopted one of the country’s most restrictive library Internet policies in 1997. This same issue is addressed in Infopowering the Commonwealth. Virginia’s technology plan recommends that the state require all public libraries offering public Internet access to create, adopt and file with the Library of Virginia an acceptable Internet use policy. The policy must provide provisions that prohibit use of a public library’s computer equipment and online services to access obscene material and prevent juvenile access to content harmful to minors.

Why the Public Library Survives

A recent IBM ad on television shows an Italian wine grower explaining to his granddaughter that he had just gotten his music degree via electronic study from Indiana University, because the school had put their entire library online. This is slightly misleading, since only a small part of the library’s music collection has been digitized, but the ad does reflect a commonly held belief among technophiles and the general public that, since the book will soon be obsolete, the decline of the traditional library is imminent. Therefore, money should not be spent to replace or expand library facilities. This is a shortsighted view on several fronts. First, even those most inclined to predict the demise of the public library recognize its role as an archive for community information. Libraries throughout Virginia are the repositories of local information of significant value to historians and genealogists. Secondly, despite advances in digital reading technology, the book will always remain the medium of choice for the study of complex texts.

The process of reading involves the physical turning of pages and actual weight of the book in the hand. One writer has suggested that “reading Proust in a scroll window is like viewing Normandy through a bomb sight.” The book will remain the
preferred form of reading for novels, histories and biographies, which make up the bulk of public library collections.

Secondly, the cost of digitization is enormous. Just putting the 17 million books in the Library of Congress online is estimated to cost around a billion dollars at today’s rates. But, most importantly, the public library remains a significant part of a community and a gateway to digital information because of librarians. Networked computers require a lot of support, not just to keep operational, but because people need assistance in determining how to decipher information on the World Wide Web, and even, since standards vary, how to get it displayed. While commercial search engines help, it is librarians who, through years of experience, can evaluate and organize online information. Staff in public libraries help create user-friendly access to information.

The Public Library’s Value to Virginians

According to 1996-1997 statistics, it cost Virginia’s public libraries an average of $22 per person to provide services to the state’s 6.7 million residents. Local government revenues allocated for those services averaged $19.02 per person. For that slight sum, more than 3 million Virginians used library cards for over 50 million circulation transactions. Virginia libraries own 16.7 million copies of more than 5.9 million book titles, which includes adult, children and young adult books. In addition, the Commonwealth’s public libraries provide periodicals, government documents, subscription volumes, audio-visual material, video material and other media for a grand total of 21 million items available to Virginia citizens.

But beyond numbers, public libraries provide more than any statistics can demonstrate. A cancer patient credits the library with helping him find more aggressive treatment; part-time school librarians enthusiastically welcome bookmobile visits from the public library to enrich their resources; new immigrants learning English join a book discussion group designed just for them; 300 volunteers move a library’s contents across town; and a city library system donates its bookmobile to create a library outlet in one of the state’s most rural counties. These are just a few of the ways public libraries are integral to the Virginia communities they serve. As communities change, libraries change with them, but they still remain places to share information.

A young librarian, asked about the future of libraries in a recent article in American Libraries may have said it best: “New libraries will have more space for computers and less for books, but they will still have room for people to exchange ideas.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mr. Clay has been director of the Fairfax County Public Library since 1982. The system has 19 branches and more than 700 employees with a budget of $20 million.

Patricia Bangs of the Fairfax County Public Library Public Information Office and Elizabeth Lewis of the Library of Virginia Development and Networking Division assisted in the research and preparation of this article.
Virginia Beach Public Library (VBPL), located in Virginia Beach, Virginia is a comprehensive library system serving Virginia Beach, an independent city with a population of 450,000 in the Hampton Roads metropolitan area of Virginia. The library supports the educational and leisure needs of citizens with a system of area libraries, a bookmobile, a virtual library, the Wahab Public Law Library, the Municipal Reference Library, and the Special Services for the Blind and Visually Handicapped. The public library transcends national and cultural boundaries -- no matter where you are in the world, they are an essential part of creating and maintaining an educated and literate population. But today, public libraries are at a turning point. The way we access and consume information has changed dramatically in the 21st century, and this presents major challenges and opportunities for public library systems across the world. The advent of new technologies has changed some of our reading habits. But our need for shared, community-centred spaces to find information and connect with others is unlikely to change any time soon. To survive in the digital age and stay relevant, public libraries need to be brave and innovative. They must embrace both the physical and virtual. Public libraries should give access to both: books and the software. It is up to person whatever her or she finds more practical and comfortable to utilise. [by - Anastasia Shytina].

Sample Answer 2: It is a fact that public libraries are present in almost all cities across the globe, due to its emerging needs. First, by providing latest media in libraries, a lot of youngsters will be interested in coming to the library, as they are very comfortable with using the latest technology. For example, consider the software which helps in learning a language. The present era is the blessing of technology and these technological advancements should be embraced as many ways as possible. In Arlington, Virginia, the public library has already published several online issues of Quaranzine, a community-sourced collection of artwork, poetry, photos, and stories about life during the pandemic. The Hartford Public Library in Connecticut has moved their immigrant services online, including providing legal help to complete citizenship applications and prepare for citizenship interviews. Serendipitous moments spur other ideas. Many families lack the hardware or internet access or familiarity with technology to help their children do their schoolwork.