Frequently Asked Questions

Q: What was the purpose of this study?

A: Most of us have always believed that public libraries are valuable community resources, but we had no hard data to support that belief. The study done by the University of North Carolina's School of Information and Library Science not only proves the validity of our belief but also shows the significant extent to which nearly all of us rely on public libraries.

Q: What's the main finding of the study?

A: That the 474 public libraries (actually 630 including satellites such as branches and bookmobiles) serving nearly 12 million Pennsylvanians provide a return on investment of $5.50 in benefits for every $1 of tax support. That means a return of $55 for every $10 of local, state and federal taxes we invest in supporting our public libraries.

Q: How did the study arrive at that number?

A: As taxpayers, we collectively dedicate $249 million in tax dollars annually for public libraries. If we didn't have public libraries, the economic loss would amount to $1.34 billion, the study calculated. The bulk of the loss would be due to the higher cost of finding and using alternative sources of information. It also would include lost library jobs, lost library purchases and lost revenue from library-related businesses.

Q: How many Pennsylvanians use public libraries?

A: Of 9.1 million adults in Pennsylvania, 51.6 percent (4.7 million people) visited a public library over the course of a year and 13.2 percent (1.2 million people) connected with a public library online.

Q: Who uses our public libraries?

A: Public libraries in Pennsylvania totaled 40.8 million in-person visits in the year preceding the study – 48.2 percent by adults; 39 percent by school-age children; 8.4 percent by adults who brought children; and 4.4 percent by tourists. The study underscores that all age groups – from preschoolers to retirees – and virtually all income groups rely on public libraries. Even other libraries, those at Pennsylvania's public and private schools, turn to public libraries about 350,000 times a year for interlibrary loans of books and other materials. Businesses and government agencies routinely use public libraries millions of times a year to find work-related information or do research.

Q: What are the top 10 reasons people visit a library in person?
A: According to the study, people visit a library in person to:
1. Check out a book
2. Ask a librarian for help finding information
3. Read a book, magazine or newspaper
4. Use reference materials
5. Use a library computer to access the Internet
6. Attend a lecture or other kind of program
7. Use the library catalog
8. Ask a librarian to conduct a reference search
9. Check out a video, DVD, CD or audiotape
10. Use a library computer for a purpose other than connecting with the Internet

Q: What kinds of information are most people looking for when they visit a public library in person?
A: According to the study findings, only 23.7 percent visit for recreational or entertainment purposes; 16.9 percent to get information for work-related activities; 16.4 percent to get information on personal or family issues; 13.1 percent are students doing school-related work; 12.7 percent are retirees or others pursuing lifelong learning; 11.7 percent are preschool children engaged in learning activities; and 5.5 percent are teachers doing school-related work.

Q: Does that differ from people who use a remote connection to a public library?
A: A large number of people who use a remote connection – close to half – are researching family or personal issues.

Q: Why do people use public libraries rather than finding information other ways?
A: According to the study, users say they turn to public libraries because they're convenient and easy to use, the information is trustworthy, public libraries are the best source of information and using the library saves them time and money.

Q: How important are public libraries?
A: At least half the time, users considered the information they obtained from their public libraries, whether in person or by remote connection, to be "absolutely essential" to them.