Calculating the Value of Libraries

June 12, 2017: New Hampshire's devotion to its libraries can be seen in every corner of the state. Whether a community's library is large or small, in a new building or an historic one, open seven days a week or a just a few, we Granite Staters love our libraries and we make great use of them. In fact, just last year we made 7,329,879 visits to them, all throughout New Hampshire.

Because our public libraries do not charge membership fees to those who live in their particular towns or cities, it can be easy to forget about the actual monetary value they provide to patrons. But it's important to remember that every time a patron checks out an item from a public library, uses a computer station, attends an event or uses any other service a public library provides, that person is saving money that may otherwise have come out of his or her pocket.

Many libraries have "Return on Investment" calculators on their websites that allow you to figure out what it would have cost you to purchase the items you can check out from that library at no charge, while others post those savings on your checkout slip. It can be really eye-opening to see how quickly that value adds up.

Here's an example: You and your family are planning to take a short vacation, so you stop by your library for a couple of hot new bestsellers (average retail: $27 each). While you're there, you explore the travel section and grab a guidebook ($12). Your youngest is learning to read and picks out three picture books ($20 each) and your teen grabs five magazines ($3.50 each), plus you get an audiobook ($20) that you can all enjoy in the car.

What would that cost you if you'd purchased all of those items? $163.50—and that's what you checked out during this one visit. If you use your library on a regular basis, the annual savings can be astronomical— especially if you regularly borrow movies ($4.50 for three days' rental), use a computer ($12 per hour at a copy center), do research using a database ($20 per month to subscribe), take advantage of museum pass program ($9 per person per visit) or attend an event hosted by the library ($12 elsewhere).

These estimates are just the calculable hard costs of what libraries provide. There are other benefits that don't come with a price tag: the person who relies on a library's computers to find a job; the grandparent who takes his granddaughters to Story Time so that they can develop both a love of reading and learn to share; the student who would not be able to complete her degree and start a solid career if she had to purchase all of the books she needed to complete her coursework; the teens for whom libraries are a place to develop new interests both independently and with their peers. It's impossible to tally the positive impact each of those examples—and many others—have on our communities and our state.

The next time—and every time—you visit your public library, take a moment to add up how much you've saved by taking advantage of the services you've received. With all that libraries have to offer, you're sure to realize what a great investment they are.

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