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Understanding the library’s Internet usage

By JEANNE WALSH [Reference Librarian, Brooks Memorial Library, Brattleboro, VT]

Recently, the Brooks Memorial participated in the Impact Survey, a national tool developed by the University of Washington Information School with the support of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

The survey helps libraries understand how their communities use and benefit from free access to computers and the Internet at the library. We are grateful to the survey participants and to local businesses that supported the effort with incentive prizes: Amy’s Bakery Arts Cafe, The Works Bakery Cafe, and Mystery on Main.

The library currently offers 20 public computers, thanks to financial support from the Friends of Brooks Memorial Library. Library staff members also assist members of the community in using the technology to achieve goals in their lives.

Of the survey respondents who reported visiting the library in the past year, 86 percent used a public access computer or the library's wireless network during their visits. Details are on the library’s website ([www.brookslibraryvt.org](http://www.brookslibraryvt.org)), but here are a few highlights: — 42 percent of computer/ Internet users said they used library technology for employment needs; 28 percent searched for a job online; 19 percent applied for a job by submitting a resume or filling out an online job application.

— 58 percent reported using library technology for civic engagement; 43 percent learned about a political activity, candidate, or social cause; of those, 69 percent got involved with an activity, candidate, or cause.

— 50 percent used library technology to get information on health and wellness topics; 30 percent reported learning about diet or nutrition; of those, 84 percent made a change to their diet.

— 49 percent used library technology to stay in touch with family and friends and to build and maintain social networks.

A huge percentage (78 percent) of public access technology users received help from a librarian when using the computers or Internet at the library. Of those users, 65 percent have access to the Internet at home, school, or work but still choose to use the library's technology. This shows that the library offers critical resources and services even as people increasingly have their own Internet connections and devices.

In the overwhelmingly positive comments from library technology users, several needs were expressed repeatedly: more computer time, more space for computer stations, and more staff time for assistance.

Community members who want to help sustain (and possibly enhance) public technology services at the library can support the effort in several ways: by becoming involved in the Friends of the Brooks Memorial Library, by contributing to the Giving Campaign (see donation button on the library website), and by understanding local library tax support that sustains staff hours.

In his recent proclamation on information literacy (<http://libraries.vermont.go> v/node/42), Governor Shumlin noted that in an “increasingly digital and interconnected world,” information literacy is “a foundation for an engaged citizenry, vital to economic prosperity, social cohesion, the success of the democratic process, educational opportunity, and enhanced quality of life.” Brooks Memorial Library is proud to promote the health and well-being of our communities through its commitment to accessible technology for all of our citizens. We need continued support to follow through on that commitment.

Jeanne Walsh is the reference librarian at the Brooks Memorial Library in Brattleboro.

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