EFFINGHAM PUBLIC LIBRARY

2023 Community Survey Report

During the month of April 2023, the Effingham Public Library undertook a survey to evaluate several aspects of the library and our services. On a regular basis, every library in Illinois is tasked with evaluating their building and whether it meets the needs of the community served. Parts of the survey address this element and key findings will be discussed. The library is also tasked with regularly evaluating the services provided and ensuring that the community is both aware of those services and that they address the needs of the community. Finally, the survey also explores areas for development in marketing the library effectively.

We used a variety of methods to reach the intended audience, including posting on our Facebook/Instagram pages, providing a paper survey in the library, a targeted email to all email addresses in our marketing database, asking community groups to share the link, and the use of Facebook's ad service to increase our reach to non-regular users of the library. Initially, we had a goal of 200 responses, but by the close of the survey, we had 305 responses. Of those responses, 97% had visited the library at some point in their past. Nearly 2/3 of those responding had visited the library at some point in the last month.

Evaluating Awareness and Use of Library Spaces

When asked about the awareness of the various library spaces, there was overall good awareness of the spaces. One space, however, does stand out for additional attention of its existence—the Art Vault. At least 50 people responded that they were not aware of this space, which was by far the highest number.

More interestingly, there are certain areas of the library that were not heavily used by the respondents that could benefit from better marketing of what is offered in these areas and/or reconsideration of their function. Genealogy, Computers, Café/Reading Room, Study Rooms, Teen Room, Study Tables, and Children's Programming Room all had at least 150 respondents note that they did not use these spaces. What is interesting to note about many of these spaces is that they are very use specific, meaning that for a lot of them, a patron would need to be aware of the function of that space and have a need to access that space. For example, the Genealogy Room serves a very specific function and has a narrow audience for that service. Similarly, the Children's Programming Room would serve a different, but again, very specific audience that would have a limited window of time when that space is useful.

Evaluating Appreciation of Library Spaces

When asked how people would rate their overall feelings of each of the spaces, the results were very polarizing for each space. Either respondents thought well of the space, noting it as either "Amazing!" or "It's OK," or they noted that they had never used the space. In fact, excluding Adult Fiction, New Items Display, and 1st Floor Bathrooms, at least 1/3 of each spaces responses noted that they had never used the space. Some spaces on the second floor went as high as 2/3 of the responses had never used the space. This included 2nd Floor Computers, Study Tables, Teen Fiction, and Teen Room.

Evaluating Awareness and Use of Library Services

In addition to asking about our physical spaces, we also asked about our services that we offer. We evaluated 25 services, ranging from "traditional" services, such as checking out items to our non-traditional services, such as our Human Services Case Managers. Our most used services on the survey were Checking out traditional physical items and the ability to request items from other libraries with both of those scoring well over 2/3 of the respondents having used the service. Other strong services with at least 1/3 of the respondents having used the service include Printing, Checking out eResources, Adult programming, Children's programming, Reference, Wifi, Public computers, and the Summer Reading program.

Overall, there appeared to be strong awareness of our services, even if respondents hadn't used the service. However, there are a few exceptions that might warrant increasing marketing efforts around, including Checking out special items (library of things), Human Services Case Managers, and the ability to take your Effingham Public Library card to nearly any public library in Illinois.

Evaluating Appreciation of Library Services

Similar to library spaces, when we asked people to rate their overall feelings of each of our library services, we got a much higher rate of people reporting that they had never used the service than on the previous question that asked about usage. And, again, nearly all responses were favorable with regards to those that had used specific services.

The only service that received an appreciable amount of negative responses was Checking out eResources. Based on the comments, this is likely because of the long wait lists for items.

Open Ended Questions on Library Spaces and Services

We received a wealth of feedback in the 4 open ended questions that we posed.

When asked what library spaces should be added, removed, or otherwise improved upon, three key themes emerged. The first was more study space. The study rooms are

frequently full and having more access to those rooms would be beneficial. The second was access to creative spaces. We had several comments reflect a desire for a space to experiment with different technologies and/or craft things. Finally, there is a strong desire for more room in the Children's area. Comments were plentiful regarding the fact that it is frequently cramped and that they would like to see more play spaces for specific age groups.

When asked similar questions about what services could be added, removed, or improved upon, three themes emerged as well. The first was in regards to items collected. Suggestions ranged from improving our access to eResources to more New York Times bestsellers. The second theme was around Programming. Comments again ran a range of themes, including looking at different times so that working parents of young children could access programs as well offering take home programs for kids and adults, similar to during the pandemic. Finally, the largest theme was around our non-resident card. There still appears to be a strong desire for expanding our library services into the unserved territories surrounding the library. We have a lot of community members that are moving here from other areas that had been served by a public library and it's challenging to communicate why they would have to pay "extra" for access to the library.

Marketing Methods

Our final question was meant to gain a better understanding of how respondents become aware of all that happens at our library. The strongest response by far was via social media with over half reporting this method as how they discover what is happening at the library. Library emails also received strong responses as well as in-person methods of learning about services/events from library staff and/or general word of mouth. The two weakest methods were the library newsletter and the local newspaper.

Final Thoughts and Recommendations

Given the wild swing in the levels of usage between the two types of questions, it's possible that respondents did not understand either one or both of the questions that asked about usage. Given the variability in responses, drawing any firm conclusions is a challenge, but changes can be considered to address some of the overall themes.

There are clear areas that we can improve upon with marketing our services and spaces. We plan to use Orange Boy, our targeted marketing service, to much greater effect this year. We can send targeted emails throughout the year and we can also pay for boutique services to create a multi-method campaign to improve a specific metric, such as increase card redemption or increase circulation in a key area. We are currently exploring this service and plan to present a proposal to the Board of Trustees in the coming months.

We also plan to use the feedback regarding our collections and how those can be more tailored to our community to improve our overall circulation numbers. The same concept will be used to improve our programming offerings. This might require adding additional programming staff and/or adding more resources to collection development to meet the demands and will be evaluated throughout the year in anticipation of FY2025.

With regards to our spaces and their use, there are some long range items for the Board to consider, specifically on the 2nd floor. The 2nd floor is un-evenly utilized. Awareness and usage of the Teen area is not strong and is a space that could be re-envisioned for a different purpose. One option might be to add a creative lab space co-located with the teen collection. The other area for exploration is the Children's Room. Prior to the pandemic, this space was slated for a remodel because of the high usage. That plan was shelved while we navigated pandemic life; however, it might be time to revisit and revise the plans to expand this area. This would obviously be a multi-year project between fundraising and construction.

Finally, the issue of expanding the service area continues to be a topic of discussion. While there is no right or wrong path towards accomplishing the goal of increasing access to library services, this is clearly still a topic on the top of many non-residents' minds.