

# Turning the page

## Exploring the changing role of Saint Paul's public libraries

A brief primer

Saint Paul is home to fourteen public library branches, including the bookmobile. Historically, libraries have been physical spaces that provided collections of content. They were largely grounded, individual-focus, and content-oriented. This content was primarily books. Recently, libraries have been taking on a broader role in their communities. Libraries are increasingly connected, community-focused, and creation-orientated. In Saint Paul, this change has come to fruition in computer use, the Innovation Lab, book clubs, and homework centers.

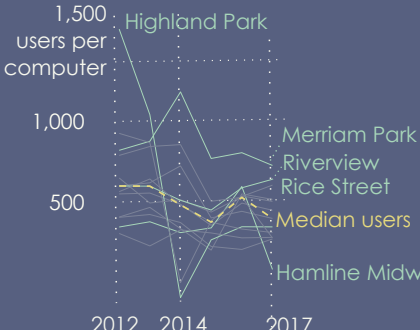


Even with so much change, the core purpose of libraries has stayed constant. They are still central sources of information for their community, whether that information comes from books, tinkering, WiFi access, or community programs. And the changing role of libraries is nothing new. In the early 20th century, Carnegie libraries included bowling alleys, music halls, billiard tables, swimming pools, and gymnasiums!

## Digital spaces

As libraries seek to respond to needs, many have found themselves providing more digital services.

Public computers are no longer the only way for libraries to provide digital access. In fact there are downsides that have led to lower usage rates: they are stationary and have short time limits. Librarians in Saint Paul and other cities found people sitting outside connecting to WiFi after hours, so they started loaning WiFi hotspots. Cardholders can borrow hotspots for up to a week for free. In 2018 to further expand access to library services, SPPL partnered with Libraries without Borders to create pop-up libraries called "Wash and Learn." On select Saturdays, laptops and books were available for people to use while waiting for their laundry near Rice Street.



## Creation-oriented

Makerspaces and skills training encourage a more creative use of the libraries.

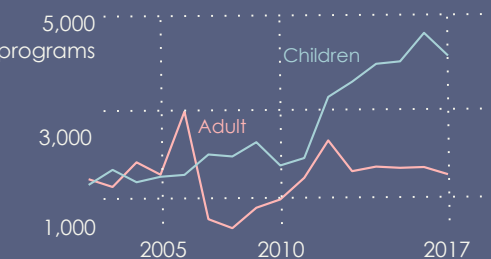
There are about 50 makerspaces in US public libraries according to the Urban Libraries Council. The Central Library in downtown Saint Paul has an Innovation Lab that is free to use for library cardholders (with a supply charge for some materials). It includes 3D printers, sewing machines, laser engraving, and much more. All of this is available to the public after a short orientation course. There is also the Createch space at Arlington Hills, Rondo, Sun Ray, and Rice Street specifically for teens.



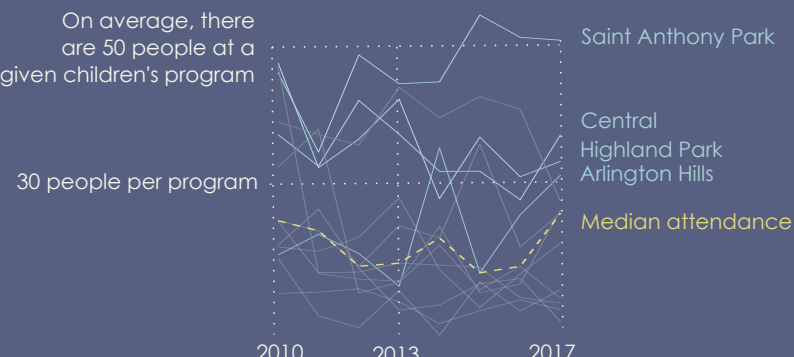
## Community-focused

Library programs provide a space for community development. These can include classes, book clubs, and lectures.

Since 2003, the number of programs offered has generally increased, with the children's programs driving this trend. The definition of "adult program" changed in 2006 to include fewer activities.



Some libraries, particularly Saint Anthony Park, have fairly high average attendance at their children's activities like STEM storytime



The branches have different ways of centering user-experiences. At Arlington Hills, there's a children's area with dollhouses and toys. Additionally, patrons can leave sticky notes on a wall in the main area indicating services and features they'd like to have in the future. SPPL has also been thinking beyond their traditional role. As of early 2019, there is now a social worker at the highest-need branches.

Since these spaces are new (and not just new to Saint Paul), librarians are still working to make them more diverse and equitable.

Gender diversity of Createch users from November 1, 2015 and May 1, 2016



One of the concerns with public makerspaces has been how to appeal to diverse groups of people and promote inclusivity. The librarians in charge of Createch had an issue they wanted to solve: far more teen boys were using their space than teen girls. One of their goals had been to increase repeat visitors, but they found that repeat visitors were more likely to be male. From talking to the girls, staff learned that they wanted time to feel like the space was their own, when they could play their own music and try new things in a friendlier environment. Since then, the creation of "Girl's Night" has helped to diversify Createch's audience.

## Libraries still serve as content collections that reflect their patrons

Top 10 items at each branch in 2018  
Branches ordered L-R based on total check-outs

