A Comparison of Public, School, and Academic Libraries: Vital to Our Communities

In neighborhoods, schools, and higher education across the United States, libraries are serving learners of all ages as they pursue both their academic and personal information needs. These institutions, which offer complementary services in the common pursuit of providing top-quality information, access to technology, and safe spaces, often stand aligned in their desire to meet shared goals. These goals include:

- Achieving equity of access to information and resources
- Building a culture of reading
- Supporting lifelong learning
- Creating an engaged, informed citizenry

The library Ecosystem is an integral source of information for all communities. While many libraries pursue the goals listed above in similar ways, it is important to understand the fundamental differences between these institutions that make each a unique and crucial part of the communities they serve. A user of any one of these types of libraries today will become a user of another in the future.

Public Library	School Library	Academic Libraries
Mission To provide the tools and free access to support lifelong learning and engagement for all ages and all representations of the wider community.	**Mission** To empower K-12 students to be enthusiastic readers, critical thinkers, skillful researchers, responsible digital global citizens, and ethical users of information.	**Mission** To facilitate all research, scholarship, pedagogy, and learning while upholding tenets of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.
Users Any and all members of the public.	**Users** The specific members of a K-12 school community, typically limited to enrolled students and employed faculty and staff.	**Users** Currently enrolled students, faculty, alumni, international scholars, administrators, and local community members.
Staffing Degreed librarians with a Master's level education from an accredited program serve as their library's Information Professionals, alongside non-degreed support staff. Staffing should reflect the diverse communities served by the institution where possible.	**Staffing** Degreed librarians with a Master's level education and specialized education certifications manage effective school library programs with support from non-certified staff. Staffing should reflect the diverse communities served by the institution where possible.	**Staffing** Degreed librarians with specialized certifications and appropriately credentialed staff which reflects the diverse communities served by the institution where possible.
Collections are extensive and typically cover all possible age ranges and reading levels, with a wide selection of topics and material types. Though curated for quality and diversity, the focus of the collection is on providing unhindered access to a wide range of materials for enjoyment and information.	**Collections** are highly curated to include diverse materials almost exclusively published for the designated age range, reading level, and interest of the enrolled students, as well as materials at those levels that also support curricular and classroom activities. Some school library collections may also focus on professional development materials for faculty and staff.	**Collections** facilitate the curation of resources in various formats that support the institution's research goals, including academic and community-oriented activities. Collections will reflect all of our communities, including authors from and experiences of global BIPOC and/or traditionally underrepresented communities. Special Collections may provide exclusive materials and specific focus on rare or uncommon topics.

Public Library	School Library	Academic Libraries
Primary Services ● Providing free access to materials that support enrichment and learning for all ages ● Providing materials for entertainment for all ages ● Offering programming that supports community engagement, both educational and recreational ● Facilitating community engagement throughout the library's community	**Primary Services** ● Teaching information literacy and digital citizenship skills ● Providing other structured lessons that align with school curriculum ● Supporting classroom and school-wide objectives ● Collaborating with classroom teachers, school staff, and administrators ● Providing access to reading material, technology, and information resources ● Offering safe spaces within the school, with a focus on Social Emotional Learning	**Primary Services** ● Teaching information literacy and digital citizenship skills in alignment with broader curriculum, programmatic goals of the institution, and professional standards. ● Develop programs in alignment with the library's mission and that of the institution. ● Offering different modalities of interaction, including asynchronous, synchronous, and live in-person. ● Sensitize users to the nuances of diversity and inclusion in scholarship. (e.g. Citation Justice). ● Support Scholarly Communications initiatives including Open Access ● Provide versatile spaces that support community, collaborative, and individual needs ● Facilitate community engagement
Scope Addresses the interests and needs of the community at large, with a focus on serving the public in all ages and stages of life. May include events, outreach initiatives, information and awareness campaigns, and community partnerships.	**Scope** Highly structured and designed to meet specific academic goals, curricular requirements, state or national standards, and student needs. Includes carefully crafted lessons, assignments, and assessments, and a focus on skill building, preparation for next academic steps, and college and career readiness.	**Scope** Adaptable and flexible programs designed to meet academic goals, curricular requirements, and student and community needs. These activities include events, outreach initiatives, information and awareness campaigns, and community partnerships.
Hours Often extensive and typically include daytime, evening, and weekend hours.	**Hours** Typically limited to school hours, with some limited additional before and after school availability. Typically not open when schools are closed.	**Hours** Flexible to reflect the needs of the community and the academic calendar.

As the chart above demonstrates, while public, school, and academic libraries are institutions with complementary goals, none could reasonably be expected to stand in the place of the others. Rather, these institutions build upon each other's work by leveraging their unique strengths to address issues of access, equity, and lifelong learning in ways that are neither duplicated nor equaled by any other available resource. **All** libraries remain vital pieces of their respective communities.