Young adults are an under-served portion of public library patrons. Despite the help that they could be offering this age group, public libraries are not appealing places for young adults. This research paper details the results of a survey administered to high school juniors in central North Carolina that attempts to answer the question of how public libraries can better serve young adults, both in terms of materials and programs offered, and also in terms of a comfortable physical space that teens will enjoy.

Headings:

- Libraries and teenagers
- Public libraries -- services to teenagers
- Library surveys
FINDING COMMON GROUND: A SURVEY OF YOUNG ADULTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THE PUBLIC LIBRARY

by

Kathleen M. Pierce

A Master’s paper submitted to the faculty of the School of Information and Library Science of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Library Science.

Chapel Hill, North Carolina
April 2005

Approved by

Brian W. Sturm
Table of Contents

Introduction ........................................................................................................... 2
Scope ....................................................................................................................... 4
A History of Services to Young Adults in Public Libraries ......................... 5
Young Adult Services Today .............................................................................. 12
Adolescent Development and Libraries .............................................................. 15
Methodology .......................................................................................................... 22
Survey Results ....................................................................................................... 23
Discussion ............................................................................................................... 29
Limitations of the Study ....................................................................................... 41
Conclusion ............................................................................................................ 42
Works Cited ............................................................................................................ 44
Appendices ............................................................................................................. 46

Appendix A: Letter to High School Teachers .................................................... 46
Appendix B: Letter to Parent/Guardian ............................................................... 47
Appendix C: Parent/Guardian consent form ....................................................... 48
Appendix D: Teen Assent form ........................................................................... 51
Appendix E: Survey .............................................................................................. 54
Introduction

Very young children—those who cannot yet read or are just learning to read—are among the public library’s best patrons. Of those young children who do go, they love the library and are excited about the books and programming it offers. Most public libraries have a large selection of picture books and early reader books, and most offer programs specifically for these age groups (such as Baby Time, Toddler Time, and the traditional Story Time, usually aimed at ages 1-7). Teaching familiarity with books and facilitating learning to read is something at which public libraries excel. A public library that did not offer a pre-school or toddler-targeted Story Time program would be rare indeed. And for this age group, going to the library is fun.

Around the high elementary and middle grades, however, library attendance drops, and there are fewer materials and programs aimed at this older age group. Going to the library is not as fun as it is for the preschoolers and kindergarteners, because these kids are not as interested in singing songs or having stories read to them. However, there are still materials and programs for the elementary grades to encourage the continuation of reading. Most importantly, this age group is still represented by the staff of the children’s department, which serves children (and their parents) from the time they are babies up to the age of 11 or 12, and so it shares the same resources and staffing that make the younger programs so successful.
Therefore, this age group’s unique needs are advocated for in the library, and have an identifiable place within it. Adults, of course, also have materials, programming, and staff devoted to their unique needs. The missing link in public library service is what is in between childhood and adulthood: young adults.

Too often, once the toddlers and grade-schoolers enter their teenage years, their interests are abandoned within the public library, hopefully to be picked up again once these children reach adulthood. There are separate materials, and sometimes special programming, for this age group, but the circumstances and setting of the materials in the majority of public libraries is hardly ideal. Materials aimed at teens are either lumped with the children’s materials, which offends this sensitive age group’s growing sense of independence and maturity, or lumped with the adult materials, which makes them difficult to find and identify. If these materials are separated into their own “Young Adult Section,” it is often poorly identified within the library; squeezed into an already tight space and therefore uncomfortable; unstaffed or understaffed, so that the young adult patron doesn’t know whom to ask for help; or a combination of these and other consequences of poor planning and neglect. Because most libraries constantly battle for funding, this is usually a question of too-few resources and not a deliberate intention. However, is it any wonder that young adults have such a low presence in the public library, and many hold it in low esteem?
Scope

My research question is: what do teens think a public library should be for them? The purpose of this study is to gain a beginning understanding of how young adults perceive the public library, and what they want in the public library in terms of physical space, materials, and programming. When this understanding is in the hands of the library staff, they can create or renovate their young adult space accordingly and make the public library more welcoming and comfortable for teens. With this understanding, public libraries will hopefully begin to see an increase in young adult participation in the library, as teens begin to feel that the library understands their unique needs and respects them as patrons. When they see that their public library and librarians are working to improve service to them, young adults’ attitude toward the public library should improve.

This topic is important to study because young adults are often, but not always, a neglected population at public libraries. As a result, this group can potentially become disinterested in the public library and what it offers at a critical time in their lives, believing that it does not address their needs and concerns. Teens can also lose interest in reading in general, which they may have had when they were younger. Thus, potential lifelong users of public libraries are being lost through mutual neglect—libraries aren’t meeting their needs, and teens are neglecting libraries. Though providing young adult services was very popular in the late 1960s and 1970s, it later waned in the face of budget cuts, but is currently being reexamined as a necessity and not merely a luxury. Many libraries are becoming more and more aware of this gap in library services, and are attempting to make changes in their collections and programming, which is a positive
sign. However, appropriate changes that will appeal to young adults can come only by first studying this group’s current attitude toward libraries and library preferences.

I also hope that this research can provide a model for library districts or school media centers who are struggling to determine and meet the needs of their young adult population. By detailing the research project, others may be inspired to replicate it to better serve their young adult population. I do not believe that other libraries should use my results to plan their young adult programming and collections; I do hope it illuminates the need to survey their own local teens to find out how they feel the public library can be improved.

**Literature Review**

**A History of Services to Young Adults in Public Libraries**

The term young adults as libraries use it is usually defined as between the ages of 12 and 18 (YALSA, 2004). Service to this group officially began in the early twentieth century in New York City and grew out of the already widespread services to children. In 1919, Anne Carroll Moore, Director of Work with Children at the New York Public Library and a passionate advocate for reading during childhood, appointed Mabel Williams as the Supervisor of Work with Schools. This was essentially the first “young adult” position, as it was Williams’ job to speak with children over the age of 12 in their schools. According to Williams, Moore created this position because “she didn’t want to lose these children from the Children’s Room, have them drop the public library entirely” (Campbell, p. 8). Moore was having the same problem with the young adults of her day
that public libraries are still experiencing today, though it is important to note that at the time Moore and Williams were working, “adolescence” was not regarded as a separate stage of life as it is today.

Moore and Williams were both committed to improving the library to meet this group’s needs. Their initial task was to help young adults transition from the children’s department to the adult department of the library. This task eventually grew to include organizing a young adult collection (chosen from adult books, as there were no “young adult” novels being published at this time) and inventing the first booktalks for young adults (Campbell, 1998). Through their outreach programs with staff, the two women were successful in convincing other librarians and administrators that this age group needed individual attention and services, and the practice of young adult librarianship began to spread to other library systems in the U.S.

A huge boon to the field came in the 1930s, when the philanthropist Nathan Straus left money to the New York Public Library in his will for the designated purpose of keeping young adults off the streets. The New York Public Library was able, with this money, to transform a little-used branch into the Nathan Straus Branch for Children and Young People, which became the center of young adult librarianship in the field, helping to establish the view that service to young adults was a necessity and not just a luxury. Another advancement for the field came a few years later with the opening of the Stevenson Room in the Cleveland Public Library. Like the Nathan Straus Branch, this room was devoted to arranging materials with young adult users in mind, and also included staff specially trained to work with fourteen to twenty-one-year-olds. The “young adult area” was born. The collections at the Nathan Straus Branch and the
Stevenson Room were carefully chosen from titles in the adult collection of the library, as young adult literature did not develop as its own genre until forty years later, in the 1960s.

Another important legacy from the work being done in New York was the publication of an annual list of books suitable for young adults. Because there were no books being written specifically for this age group, librarians were constantly scrambling for books to recommend to teens. Lists of books were in demand, and so in 1929, Williams and her staff put together the first annual list to circulate widely, called *Books for Young People*. Every year the list and the need for such a list grew, and it eventually became *Books for the Teen Age*, which is still being compiled annually by the New York Public Library and is a widely used resource for young adult librarians.

Another pioneer of young adult librarianship was Margaret Edwards, who began working in the 1930s and quickly became the dominant figure in this field for many years. Her book, *The Fair Garden and the Swarm of Beasts*, details her experiences and guiding philosophy in working with young adults, and is still widely read today. Always bold and outspoken, her career in librarianship began at the age of 30, when, after being fired for impertinence from her job teaching Latin, she was hired at the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore. The director, Joe Wheeler, was looking for someone to design and implement a program for working with young adults, as he had heard of the new directions being taken in New York and Cleveland. Ms. Edwards took the job and immediately threw herself into it. Her overarching belief was that librarians should develop young adults into lifelong readers, and not spend their time merely “answering reference questions and pointing out the location of books on the shelves,” as
she described the adult librarians’ work (Edwards, p. 15). She brought to the job a passion for reading that she wanted to impart to her teenage patrons and high standards for her work that she believed they deserved.

Edwards was not one to let something as petty as others’ opinions stop her from doing her work. The changes that she made in order to provide exemplary service to young adults may have ruffled many feathers in the Baltimore library system, but she did not waver from her course. With a close working relationship with and the full support of Joe Wheeler, the library director, and the belief that she was doing important work, Edwards was unfazed by obstacles or unfriendly attitudes toward her work, and had almost as many detractors as she had admirers.

The most controversial program she implemented had to do with training her new staff. When Edwards began her work, she realized that she was woefully ignorant of the literature in the area in which she was working. She defined the position of a young adult librarian to be a reader’s advisor first and foremost, but had not read enough of the books in the library to make the best suggestions to her teen patrons, and so she read incessantly. She read “in streetcars, on buses, in my dentist’s waiting room, and on lunch hours” until she could recommend books with confidence and with genuine enthusiasm, which she admits took nearly a year to accomplish (Edwards, p. 15). She also demanded that her staff of librarians be as well read as she. Edwards’ program required that each staff member read 300 books taken from the New York Public Library’s annual *Books for the Teen Age*, which by the mid 1930s had over one thousand books listed. Once they read ten books, staff members were to discuss the books with Edwards in her office, in a chair termed “the hot seat” by one staffer who went through it (Campbell, p. 35). They
discussed the books in terms of literary merit and usefulness for the developmental processes of a teenager. Although some people requested a transfer or resigned, Edwards states that the majority of assistants were grateful for the experience and felt it was invaluable to their work in recommending books to teens. And the proof, to Edwards, was in the circulation: “As a rule, all the books the assistant had read circulated constantly, while those he had not read sat on the shelves” (Edwards, pp. 22-23). To Edwards, the high circulation validated the high standards she had for her staff.

This program and the circulation figures resulting from it illustrate Edwards’ opinion that getting young adults to read and to enjoy reading was the foremost aspect of her job, and she took it and its possible consequences very seriously:

My assistants and I believed that we should attempt through books to take each individual, whatever his reading level, and develop him to his full potential as a reader, widening his interests and deepening his understanding until he came to know that he was a member of one race—the human race—and a citizen of one planet—the earth (Edwards, p. 89).

Edwards went so far as to state that other materials apart from reading material did not belong in the library, though she did make a special exception for films. Mabel Williams recalls meeting Edwards when the latter was visiting the New York Public Library’s young adult rooms in the mid 1930s. Edwards was shocked to see board games as an enticement for young adults to come into a library that had had a problem with juvenile delinquency. Edwards later told an interviewer that “this was one activity I could not accept… I may be wrong, but I’ve always felt that fun and games and entertainment as ends in themselves are not justified in the library” (Campbell, p. 23). Many young adult librarians today might disagree with that statement, but for Edwards, the entertainment of
reading, not entertainment for its own sake but with the ideal of personal betterment in mind, was the most important asset a library had to offer its patrons.

While Williams was working in New York assembling the influential *Books for the Teen Age* list and Edwards was in Baltimore training legions of staff in her methods, other notable events in the history of young adult librarianship occurred that further cemented the field as distinct and its work as necessary. In 1929, the American Library Association (ALA) instituted the Young People’s Reading Round Table, formally recognizing this area of librarianship and giving its professionals an official discussion forum. In 1949, this Round Table became its own section and renamed itself the Association of Young People’s Librarians (AYPL). In 1952, the AYPL began publishing its annual list, *Significant Adult Books for Teens*. A few years later, the AYPL evolved again, this time into its own division in ALA, and renamed itself again in 1957 as the Young Adult Services Division (YASD) (Rogers, 1979). This change was especially significant because it formally split the children’s and young adult areas of librarianship. YASD continued to publish the annual list, again renamed to its now current title, *Best Books for Young Adults*. *Best Books for Young Adults* and the New York Public Library’s *Books for the Teen Age* are still considered the authorities on quality fiction and non-fiction in the field.

During all these changes and advancements in young adult librarianship at ALA, Edwards continued to be the dominant figure into the 1960s, when the art of young adult literature began to firmly take hold. It is worth noting again that when Edwards, Moore, and Williams were shaping the direction of library services to young adults, books and other materials written specifically for young adults did not yet exist. In 1942,
the novel *Seventeenth Summer* by Maureen Daly became the first book written especially for young adults, and it was widely embraced by libraries. Edwards was particularly fond of it. However, the genre was slow to develop even after this landmark work, and it was not until the late 1960s that the young adult novel really took off, with the publication of *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton, written while the author herself was a teen. Edwards had retired in 1962, five years previously, but continued to work as a consultant and expert on the subject of young adult librarianship. Despite the proliferation of young adult novels that followed *The Outsiders*, Edwards was very skeptical of the genre, perhaps because she had had poor experiences with the ‘junior novels’ of her era that she regarded as substandard. When asked in 1987 to make a list of the best books for young adults, the only “young adult” novel on it was *Seventeenth Summer* (Campbell, 1998). In spite of the lack of endorsement by this giant of the field, young adult literature caught on and flourished in the late 1960s and 1970s, and young adult librarianship followed in its wake.

Beginning in the late 1960s, school libraries experienced a large increase in their federal budget money, and middle and high schools were able to use this additional funding to hire more staff, buy these new novels written specifically for teens, and generally raise public awareness of service to young adults (Rogers, 1979). Public libraries also benefited from increased funding and publication of young adult novels during this time. With more money to buy more books, the most noticeable change in serving young adults was the physical space: more was needed, and the 1960s and 1970s saw many new facilities built or redesigned specifically to serve young adults. Library programming also flourished, moving beyond the traditional booktalk that Moore and
Williams developed in New York. Libraries began to focus on serving young adults’ information needs, and not just reader’s advisory, which Edwards had seen as her principal task as a young adult librarian (Rogers, 1979). Public libraries began instituting programs to help young adults do school research or personal research on their own. Offering more services to this age group further solidified their status in the public library as separate from children’s and adults’.

This flourishing of youth services happened under the direction of YASD. Their mission was “to advocate, promote, and strengthen service to young adults as part of the continuum of total library service” (YASD, 2004). Even in the economic downturn of the 1970s, when libraries started losing the funding they had once gained, YASD continued to institute committees to advocate for young adult services and publish lists of the best books for teens, including *Best Books for Young Adults*. However, despite YASD’s growing influence and body of work, when the budget was tight, young adult services in public libraries was often the first division to be cut, and enthusiasm and funding tailed off significantly in the late 1970s and 1980s (Jones, 1998).

**Young Adult Services Today**

The high point of young adult services in public libraries was in the 1960s and 1970s, but there has been a renaissance occurring in the field, beginning in the 1990s. It is interesting to note that this renaissance again comes on the heels of a renaissance of the young adult novel (Jones, 1998). For example, the Los Angeles Public Library, the largest public library system in the country, created the position of Manager for Young Adult Services in 1994 after realizing that their library was losing patrons around age
thirteen. Many other urban libraries began to follow suit (Cart, 1998). The trend started in large urban areas and is still in the process of trickling down to the smaller urban, suburban, and rural libraries in the United States.

Within the field, there are now two publications devoted solely to young adult services in public libraries, *Voice of Youth Advocates* and *Young Adult Library Services*, the latter of which is published by ALA. The Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA), which succeeded YASD in 1992, has become an even better-known and successful force within ALA. YALSA has modernized the professional guidelines for service to young adults, instituted yearly awards to recognize outstanding young adult librarians and young adult-aimed books, and created the successful “Teen Hoopla” website (now residing at http://www.ala.org/ala/yalsa/teenreading/teenreading.htm). The advocacy and enthusiasm that YALSA has brought to young adult services has greatly increased the field’s profile once again and is greatly influencing the progress seen in young adult services in the public library.

Despite a resurgence of enthusiasm for this field, there is still a long way to go in providing complete service to young adults in public libraries. While it may seem that young adults are purposely staying away from public libraries, research conducted in 1995 shows that 25% of public library users are in fact young adults (U.S. Department of Education, 1995). Despite this fact, only 11% of U.S. public libraries, as of 1989, have the a position designated solely for young adults, and only 16% of the libraries without a specific young adult specialist require any in-service training to help librarians serve young adults (Chelton, 1989). In a branch system, there is often a Young Adult Coordinator or a similar position at the central level, but not at the branch level. This
means that a large portion of teens do not have a familiar face that they can identify in the public library as available for them and their needs. More often than not, young adult librarians share other responsibilities in the adult or children’s services departments, and are not solely devoted to service to young adults, usually because most libraries do not have “Young Adult Librarian” as one specific position (Bishop & Bauer, 2002).

Therefore, these librarians can’t focus all of their concentration or attention on the teen population, and collection development and programming suffer. Librarians must take it upon themselves to advocate for improvement of services to young adults, and often lack the financial and moral support they need at the administrative level to make improvements. Many librarians who coordinate teen programs must continually set forth a rationale for providing such services, as there is often no stated mission for this age group in the library documents. Therefore, service to teens suffers, and this suffering shows when young adults no longer have a visible presence at the public library.

This state of young adult public library services is almost tragic because of research that has proved that teenagers need libraries just as much as the preschoolers do. In a report titled *Kids Need Libraries* and delivered at the Second White House Conference on Libraries, several important skills that can greatly increase the chances of success for young adults were identified, including:

- the ability to listen, speak, and write effectively; the ability to use modern technology to locate information; the desire to become lifelong learners; respect for the rights and dignity of all people; and the self-confidence to believe they can create a better world (Mathews et al., 1990).

Education and parenting are important avenues to help children develop these qualities, but libraries can assist by providing instruction on using computers and the Internet,
encouraging exposure to different books and films and thereby different ideas, and providing a supportive place where teens can explore the world and their place in it. (Mathews et al., 1990).

There is increasing evidence that young adults want to be involved in the events at the public library that affect them. Teens are joining Young Adult Advisory Boards, volunteering at the library, working there part-time, helping plan young adult programs, etc., but they need the library to guide them and invite their participation (Bishop & Bauer, 2002). They want to feel important and needed. The enthusiasm for public libraries is there, if the libraries can find a way to unlock it.

Of course, unlocking it is not easy. How can we as librarians know what programs will draw young adults into our public libraries, facilitate their development, enrich their lives, and perhaps make them better people? Access to all the great resources within the library, without young adult attendance, is not effective enough. We need to learn what teens are willing to come to the library for, what sort of layout, materials, and programming they want, in order to meet their needs as a population. The only way to do that is to ask them.

Adolescent Development and Libraries

An interesting change in perceptions of libraries and librarians takes place over the course of most children’s development. Young children enjoy going to the public library, and like the librarians who are working there. In fact, children are almost indoctrinated into liking them, as libraries and librarians overall have traditionally been represented well, as friendly, warm, and supportive characters in children's literature
(Feehan & Buie, 2004). Unfortunately, a change occurs when children enter their adolescent and teenage years which can alter this perception. The public library becomes unnecessary and uncool to the young adult, and can even be perceived as a hostile and unwelcoming place (Meyers, 1999; North Carolina Library Association, 1999). While the high school library may be a helpful resource and an acceptable locale to study or do homework, the public library holds very little appeal for the average teenager (Vavrek, 2004; DeMarco & Newcomer, 2002). This perception is unfortunate, and libraries are missing out on an opportunity to help the growing number of teens in the U.S. According to United States Census Department information, by 2010 there will be more teenagers in the U.S. than ever before (Jones, 2002). More teens in a community will mean the public library will be met with demands for more information needs that require solving, and more books for pleasure reading.

As Mabel Williams in New York and Margaret Edwards in Baltimore realized, and today’s young adult librarians are aware, a library and its young adult collection must speak to the physical and psychological development that adolescents experience. As a distinct period of life, adolescence presents many challenges for young adults and those who work with them. Edwards understood this fact and called for sympathy and flexibility when working with teens. She wrote that “there is no age group more important than the young adults, who in a few short years will be guiding the destiny of this nation” (Edwards, p. 19). In order to properly serve this age group, librarians and staff need to be familiar with and understand the developmental changes that adolescents experience. If a library is not aware of these changes and does not structure the physical
space, materials on display, and programs offered accordingly, it could lose many teens as soon as they walk in the door.

One of its first major theorists, Piaget is still dominant in the field of cognitive development. His stages of child development end at the “formal operations” stage, which children acquire around the age of 11 of 12. That is also the age that they become, in library terms, young adults. At this stage, these young adults begin to be able to think abstractly about concepts, and are able to reflect on ideas that they have heard or read. They are also able to begin distinguishing between what is real/concrete and what is possible/abstract.

Another dominant thinker in the field of cognitive development was Vygotsky. While Piaget only touched on the impact that socializing can have on the developing child, Vygotsky went much further. His key concept was that knowledge was co-constructed between participants. According to Vygotsky, social interactions with other children, but especially with adults who could guide the interaction, were a key element of a child’s cognitive development. The more developed adult or child, such as a parent, older sibling, teacher, or librarian, is able to guide the younger child into making developmental steps that they may not be able to take alone or with a peer. Vygotsky called the gap between what a child can do on his own, and what he can do with others helping him, the “zone of proximal development” (Meece, 2002).

Piaget’s and Vygotsky’s theories of cognitive development end at around the same time in a child’s life—the age of twelve. However, it is now accepted that a twelve-year-old’s cognitive processes do not stop developing at that age, but rather continue to grow as the children mature into adulthood. At this time, they are just
beginning to be aware of new ideas, and should be exposed to as many different ideas as possible so they may be well-informed as they construct an identity and a system of values. The young adult area of a public library can be the ideal place for this exploration to begin for many reasons.

First of all, a public library has a much wider breadth of materials, covering many different topics, than a school library or home library. Young adults will be able to select books written specifically for their age group, books written for adults, or even books written for children, in order to satisfy their curiosity. The public library can therefore be seen as in congruence with a child’s zone of proximal development—on their own, children can read only at a certain level, but with the assistance of a guardian or librarian, the whole library is open to them and represents functions of which the child is capable, but that are still in the development process.

Second, a young adult beginning to think abstractly about ideas may have trouble expressing exactly what they are looking for. A well-trained young adult librarian can be a big help to someone who is shy or reluctant to ask a question. They may also be curious about ideas that they are not sure how to express. A well-led teen focus group that allows freedom of discussion, especially on topics that could be considered sensitive or controversial, could be greatly beneficial at this stage in a young adult’s life.

Finally, a well-equipped teen area in a public library would continue to support and broaden these goals as teens move into adulthood, instead of ending when teens leave the children’s area. By teaching him to use the catalog, helping him select books, and then drawing away to let the teen browse and select materials on his own, a capable
young adult librarian can be seen as a “guided participant,” a term coined by cognitive psychologist Barbara Rogoff to describe the process by which an adult can directly or indirectly teach a child. In these above reasons, we can see how libraries can make appropriate use of adolescent development theories, and construct a welcoming area where teens can continue to develop into mature, responsible adults.

Another developmental psychologist, Erik Erikson, had a large impact on the way adolescent development is perceived. His theory of psychosocial development ranged from birth to late adulthood. Unlike Piaget and Vygotsky, he did not believe that development stopped at a certain age, but that it continued throughout one’s lifetime. He also was much more flexible in the age ranges for each stage. He believed that during adolescence, which he described as the time from age 10 to age 20, young adults are seeking identity and overcoming confusion. Teens are developing a sense of identity, but it is constantly being questioned, by themselves and by others. At this stage in their lives, they need to be able to explore new and unfamiliar ideas—alternatives to their present way of thinking, and options for their upcoming future. Again, the public library can be an excellent place to meet these needs, because of its wide range of materials, its commitment to intellectual freedom, and its hopefully supportive but not oppressive environment of the young adult area.

In their landmark work on this developmental stage, Adolescence, Elizabeth Fenwick and Tony Smith give a breakdown of the stages in which these changes occur. According to their research, there are three stages: early, middle, and late adolescence. Early adolescence, roughly ages 11-14, is when young adults are leaving the library, if they attended it as a child. The traditional “children’s services” in a public library serves
children up to the ages of 11 or 12, and young adult services is supposed to pick up from there. The features that characterize this stage are a yearning for independence from their family, a desire to fit in with and impress friends and peers, and a feeling of self-absorption. In a library where young adult services are lacking, adolescents at this age can begin to feel that the public library has nothing to offer them.

Teens move into middle adolescence around age 15 or 16. This stage is marked by a gradual widening of the teen’s world view. They become slightly less self-absorbed, slightly less concerned about what peers and friends think, and more willing to take risks. They also begin to form a system of values and morality from their experiences, both direct and indirect. Late adolescence is defined as the years after 16, and is characterized by the young adults setting goals, thinking more about the world around them and how they fit into it, and attempting to establish themselves, perhaps shakily at first, as adults. They are also beginning to think about life after high school.

This distinction of three stages of adolescent development is also echoed by psychologist Melanie Rapp. Rapp also emphasizes peer-to-peer relationships as key to development, and especially relationships that relate to sex. Adolescents’ search for a self-identity and innate curiosity converge on the topic of romance and sex, especially in early and middle adolescence (Rapp, 1998).

The common link in the developmental stages as outlined by Fenwick & Smith and Rapp, and to a lesser extent by Piaget, Vygotsky, and Erikson, is that adolescents are attempting to develop an identity for themselves for the first time in their lives. These teens expect their own area in the library, and they want the library to carry the magazines, music, movies, and books that their friends and peers are talking about. They
want the library to show them what the world has to offer, and help them prepare for it. Libraries, if they are a part of the life of a young adult and have an understanding of the development they are going through, can have a huge impact on what identity teens ultimately choose.

Public libraries can, and in many cases do, provide access to enriching materials—books, magazines, the Internet—but in the case of this age group, access is not enough. Young adults are not adults, and still need the guidance and moral support, along with a certain level of independence, that children do. Programming specifically for them can make a huge difference by providing this guidance and support. Young adults can feel comfortable in libraries, and view them as a safe haven away from home or school. Discussion events, such as booktalks, can be seen as a social outlet, a comfortable way for young adults to try out new ways of thinking and points of view, without the fear of getting a bad grade, as in school (Alvermann et al., 1999). Another way of helping teens let their guard down and enjoy the public library is to organize events that may have nothing to do with books. Libraries now collect music and movies, and an event involving those media could garner more enthusiasm and more attendance, and raise the status of libraries in teens’ eyes (Fine, 2004). Librarians need to break away from safe, traditional events based around books to best serve the teen population of today.
Methodology

Sampling Frame

The sampling frame was juniors at a high school in central North Carolina. The survey was handed out in seven Junior English classes. English classes were chosen because all juniors must take English. Through the Media Specialist, I was able to reach English teachers who would permit me to distribute the surveys in their classes. I spoke in their class briefly to explain the survey and hand the students a packet to take home.

Questionnaire

The Academic Affairs Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill reviewed and approved the letter to high school teachers, the introduction letter to the parent/guardian, the parental/guardian consent, the teen assent form, and the survey (see Appendices). The survey was designed to gauge what teens thought about the public library as it currently is, and what teens envisioned a better young adult space in a public library could be.

I handed out 150 packets. Each packet contained the letter of explanation to the parent or guardian, one consent form for the parent/guardian and one for the student, the survey, and an envelope for the student to return both consent forms and the completed survey. I then placed a large, covered box in the classroom, where the students placed the envelopes, with the surveys and consent forms, inside. Once the student returned the consent forms and the survey, his or her involvement in the study ended.
I came by every few days to collect the envelopes. Once I verified that each survey had the required student and parental consent form accompanying it, I assigned a matching number to each survey and consent form, not for identification purposes, but in case a parent or student changed his or her mind about participating and wanted to withdraw their survey. Such an event never occurred.

The surveys and consent forms were kept in separately locked containers, and only I had access to both pieces of data. I then performed a percentage-based analysis (but not a statistical analysis) and qualitative analysis on the survey responses. The results are detailed below, and the surveys and consent forms have now been destroyed.

**Survey Results**

I received 42 surveys from the 150 that I handed out, which is a 28% response rate. Three surveys were discarded because of incomplete consent forms, and one was discarded because it was filled out on the first page only, for a final sample of 38 surveys. Most were fully completed, though 21% of the surveys had one or two questions unanswered.

**Library Attendance**

Nearly all respondents (92.1%) said that they do go to the public library. This group is quite evenly divided between those who go fairly often ("once or twice a month") and those who go quite rarely ("once or twice a year"). None responded that they went “more than once a week,” 5.7% responded that they visited “once a week,”
45.7% responded that they visited “once or twice a month,” and 48.6% responded with “once or twice a year.”

The respondents who do use the public library gave a number of reasons for doing so (although some chose not to answer this section, or answer it only partly), but the two most common reasons were research/school work and reading for pleasure. Eighty percent cited research and 68.6% named reading for pleasure as a reason. In fact, on 57.1% of surveys of library users, these were the only two reasons mentioned. Another interesting reason that came up in 15.8% of the surveys of library users was that services at the library are free. Other reasons mentioned were to study (10.5%), convenience (2.6%), for unspecified “information” (2.6%), which could be interpreted as either personal information or information for school, music (2.6%), and to get books for others (2.6%).

Only 7.9% of survey respondents stated that they did not visit their public library. These respondents cited five different reasons for not going to the public library: going to a bookstore instead was mentioned twice; and the following reasons were each mentioned once: using the Internet for research instead, “the library doesn’t have the books I want”, it’s not close, or the person uses their school library.

Layout and Materials

For Question 6, I asked respondents to design a new Teen Space for the public library. In Question 6a, I asked them to draw a representation of the physical layout of this new teen space. Of the 86.8% who drew a design, 72.7% drew very detailed and clearly labeled designs, often taking the entire back page.
Question 6b asked teens “What kinds of things would you include in your space for teens to use?” “Things” was a purposely vague term, so as not to lead the respondents into answering a specific way. This tactic appears to have worked, as the respondents came up with a large variety of “things” they are interested in seeing in the teen space. For the results to this question, I incorporated what the respondents wrote in section 6b, and also what they drew and labeled in the drawings for Question 6a.

The most popular requests was for comfortable seating, by 78.9% of respondents, and listed first 23.7% of the time. Couches were a popular request, as were bean bag chairs. However, 36.8% of respondents also wanted a separate seating area for quiet or independent study. The next most popular request was for Internet access or computers (76.3%). Computers or the Internet is often listed first (42.1%), and is preceded by modifiers such as “lots of” and “definitely.”

In addition to being comfortable and having access to technology, 52.6% of teens who responded also wanted special seating areas to work or talk in groups, like a lounge area. Of respondents, 23.7% want to be able to listen to music (live and recorded), 18.4% want to be able to eat or buy food, 15.8% specifically mentioned making coffee available, and another 15.8% want to be able to watch TV or movies. One teen even suggested a foosball table.

These teens also mentioned more traditional library materials: 76.3% mentioned that they would have books in their teen area (the same number that requested computers), with 18.4% specifically referring to “teen” or “young adult” books. Often when books were not specifically mentioned, they were included in the drawings. Another 39.5% teens would have magazines, 15.8% would place a reference or
circulation desk in their teen space (presumably with a staff member also present), 10.5% want to check out movies and music, and 7.9% would have newspapers.

The last “thing” that many teens mentioned often was the style or design of the physical space, with 60.5% of teens requesting such features as better lighting, funkier furniture, bright colors, or other design elements. Other things that appeared in the drawings or in answer to Question 6b were printers, encyclopedias, poetry, maps, a copy machine, and an information board (all mentioned one time).

**Programming**

There was less consistency of opinion when it came to Question 6c, in which teens were asked to come up with two ideas for library programs, events, or activities. Most respondents answered this question fully. However, 13.2% of respondents wrote down only one idea, and 7.9% didn’t write anything, or simply wrote “no idea.” Despite this, the respondents did suggest many different ideas that illustrate what they think a library could offer.

Many respondents suggested programs that could be considered in the realm of “traditional” library planning. Of respondents, 36.8% suggested a book club (and 14.3% of these wanted genre-specific book clubs), 18.4% wanted a book sale or book exchange, and 13.2% suggested book signings with authors, especially local ones. One teen helpfully added that “a lot of famous ones [authors] live in NC like Nicholas Sparks, etc.”

Help, in various forms, was another popular choice: 13.2% of respondents indicated that they wanted to see “seminars” or “tutorials” on how to use the library and its resources, 7.9% mentioned that they wanted lists of reading recommendations, and
10.5% listed that they wanted “staff help” of some sort. One person mentioned SAT prep classes, another wanted help getting into college, and 7.9% asked for a discussion group to discuss teen issues or current events. Help is also requested by a teen who asked the library to be lenient in regard to overdue fines. In total, help of some sort was mentioned by 47.4% of respondents.

In addition to libraries helping teens, some respondents also wanted to help in the library. 10.5% suggested that the library offer volunteer opportunities for teens, one suggested a group to help younger kids read, and one person suggested a program to promote literacy in general. More ideas mentioned were contests with prizes (7.9%), movie screenings (5.3%), programs similar to the Battle of the Books program (5.3%, with “more mature reading”), a reading competition that is popular in middle school, poetry readings (2.6%), an opportunity for teens to share their own work (2.6%), SAT help (2.6%), games (2.6%), a dance (2.6%), and even a “carnival” (2.6%).

Color

Questions 5 and 6d and 6e were intended to have respondents think metaphorically about the public library. Question 5 asked teens, “If you could assign a color to the public library, what color would you give it?” I was less interested in the color they chose than in the reasons they felt that color represented the public library. The responses fell into basically two camps. The first was a more positive view of libraries, represented by the colors blue (the most popular, suggested by 34.2% of teens), green (7.9%), lavender (2.6%), orange (2.6%), yellow (2.6%), and light red (2.6%). These colors were chosen because they saw the public library as “calm,” “peaceful,” and
“relaxing.” These colors, and especially blue, represent a calm, quiet haven away from the outside world, which is how 55.5% report that they view the public library.

The more negative camp chose colors like gray (18.4%) and brown (13.2%) as its representatives, as well as white (7.9%) and off-white (2.6%). White was not completely negative; it was more of a mixed color, cited as “quiet, “simple,” and “kinda boring [sic]”; however, the overall tone of the adjectives used to describe white lean more toward the negative than the positive. Off-white, brown, and gray, on the other hand, undoubtedly represented negative perceptions of public libraries, and made up 36.1% of responses. These colors were accompanied but such adjectives as “dry,” “drab,” and, of course, “boring.” Including white, 44.4% of respondents had a negative perception of public libraries. Two respondents did not answer Question 5, which is why the total number of colors is 36 and not 38.

The new colors chosen, in Questions 6d and 6e, had much fewer negative connotations than the old colors. Blue was the standout, with 31.2% (13.2% respondents did not change their color, but kept it blue, while 18.4% of others changed it from another color to blue). This time, there was no other color that came close to blue, because the “boring” factor, as represented by the brown-gray color, was eliminated with the respondents’ preference for their new library design. In fact, there was only one negative adjective used at all: the library was still “bland,” according to one user. This negative sentiment was toned down, as the full quote reads: “bland, but welcoming and friendly—it’s a library, after all.”

Green was the next most common color, with 21.2% of votes; red was selected 10.5% of the time; pink, purple, and orange, were each selected 7.9% of the time; yellow,
dark red, and multicolored were selected 5.3% of the time; and brown and gray were each selected 2.6% of the time. This gray, however, is described as “still a calm, comforting area,” and the respondent who chose brown is also the one quoted for “bland” in this paragraph.

Discussion

Response Rate

The response rate was higher than expected, considering that the respondents had to take the survey home and return it the next day, as opposed to completing it in class, and that they also had to obtain a parent or guardian’s permission. The high rate may be due to the fact that 54% of the surveys were distributed in Honors English classes, whose students may be more diligent than the non-honors students. These three classes exhibited a higher response rate (45.7%) than the other four non-honors classes (7.2%). Overall 86.8% of the surveys came from these honors classes. Once the surveys were collected and numbered, I was no longer able to distinguish between the honors and non-honors students, and do not include such information in my analyses except in this section.

Library Attendance

Of teens surveyed, 92.1% said that they did use the public library. This high result may possibly be because the teens knew that I am an aspiring librarian myself, and they may have altered their opinion somewhat for my benefit. Many teens were not
afraid to be truthful about a negative perception of public libraries, but others may have felt subtle pressure from me to like libraries more than they actually do. It could also be that the number rose because honors students happen to use the public library often, as 86.8% of respondents were honors students. It could be that students in this municipality happen to use the library regularly. However, since nearly half of the students (48.6%), said they use it “once or twice a year,” it could also be that they are just infrequent users without a visible presence at the library.

The remaining 7.9% of respondents said that they do not use their public library. Of the six reasons that were given to explain the answer, four implied that the library is unnecessary to these teens’ lives. For example, 5.3% of respondents buy their own books. One respondent stated that “I don’t use the library to read books because I go to the bookstore.” The same respondent followed that “I don’t use the library for research because I use the Internet.” Another respondent’s reasons implied frustration at the public library: it “never seem [sic] to have the book I’m looking for available” and “the library isn’t very close to me.” These responses reflect potential users who have been turned off to using the public library out of either frustration or a perceived lack of need. If a library could provide more of the resources teens want, and better advertise the resources that they have, perhaps these nonusers could be converted into users.

As reported above, nearly half of the respondents answered that they went to the library once or twice a year, or 48.6%; 45.7% of others chose the next more frequent option, “once or twice a month.” The nearly even division between these two responses could imply that there was no adequate answer that falls in the middle of these—such as
“once every two months” or “five or six times a year.” A middle option might have yielded different results.

Of the 5.7% who responded “once a week” (two survey respondents), both identified themselves as serious readers, one stating “I love reading” and the other “I really like to read.” From these two remarks, it seems clear that for these students, the public library is the place to satisfy their desire to read, and that is why they are such frequent users.

When asked why they use the public library, the two most popular responses were reading and research/schoolwork. Eighty percent of respondents reported that they use the library for research, and 68.6% use the library to find reading material. These two reasons are not surprising: reading and homework are a large part of these students’ lives. A recent study showed that teens spend three hours a week doing outside reading, and six hours a week outside of school on homework (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). These reasons are also the same that adults most commonly cite when asked why they use the public library. A study of why adults use public libraries found that motivations for use could be divided into two main categories that fit with the categories young adults cite: “personal edification”, or reading for pleasure, and “vocational or political growth”, or research/school work (Marchant, 1994).

An unanticipated appeal the public library has for these teens is the fact that it is free: 15.8% of teens cited this reason. Typical responses that express this idea were: “to read new books without having to buy them,” “Everything is free,” and “[to] get books I don’t want to buy.” Although this number is not a majority of the respondents, it is clear that some teens appreciate the fact that they do not have to pay to use the resources and
materials available at the library. High school students are unlikely to be working full-time and although there is much hype about how this generation has expendable income and extreme spending power, they may not have either the money or the inclination to spend it on books.

Related to the costs of using a library, another respondent commented that teens she knew were intimidated by high overdue fines, and that was why they didn’t use the library: “Seriously, many people I know don’t check out books or go to the library to avoid fines + remembering exact due dates—there are so many to remember at school anyways.” Meyers also found that teens are unhappy with restrictive fees that can come with library use (1999). Perhaps these teens feel betrayed when something that is expected to be free has a “hidden” cost, such as public libraries’ overdue fines.

On the whole, the reasons the respondents visited the public library were unsurprising ones. If public libraries take the time to examine the implications of these reasons for young adults, they could make their young adult collection more appealing and increase circulation. Books and other reading materials should be displayed more prominently and more attractively so that teens can find them and will want to read them. If teens are coming to public libraries to do research for school or personal reasons, the library needs to provide resources and staff that can help with this research, and it should also advertise and expand this service. If teens are not using the public library because they are worried about incurring heavy fines, perhaps grace period of one or two weeks for patrons under 18 might allay fears. Nearly half of teens are going to public libraries to do schoolwork. There is a captive audience there for libraries to advertise their
services more effectively once the staff has a better idea of what appeals to teens, and possibly widen their teen audience.

**Layout and Materials**

Most respondents (86.8%) responded to Question 6a and drew a new layout for a young adult library space. These drawings included traditional library materials, such as bookshelves, desks, computers, etc. The drawings also included non-traditional materials (a projector, a sun room, a foosball table, etc.) that indicate teens are ready for a change in how the public library is designed for them. Their responses taken as a whole show that they want a public library that is visually appealing, comfortable, ideal for doing school work.

One change that jumped out from the drawings was the shape of the space itself. 69.7% of drawings were a traditional square or rectangular shape. However, 30.3% were an unusual shape: four included odd angles to create tucked-away corners for the teen area; two were completely circular in shape; one was the shape of a fourth of a pie; one had a large, round room off a rectangle; one was shaped like a boombox; and the final was five interconnected squares, all serving a different purpose.

These drawings of unusual shape illustrate the desire these teens have for something completely new, and completely different, at the public library: 15.2% of them used the word “fun” to describe their new layout (71.4% of the total who described the new library as “fun”), comfortable was used 12.1% of the time, and “lively” and “bright” were each mentioned in 6% of drawings. As one student described her new layout (the five interconnecting rooms): “This layout is fun + appeals to teens because its [sic]
different + unusual + unlike any other average library.” It is interesting to note that this
teen responded that she did not use the public library (the other nine all answered yes to
that question). Perhaps if it were more interesting, fun, and comfortable, the public
library would draw in as regular users her and other teens like her who see the library as
“boring, neutral, quiet.”

This desire for something new, different, and exciting in the library space came
up again in response to Question 6b. While writing that they wanted comfortable
couches and computers and other things, many teens also mentioned design features that
they would like to see implemented: 10.5% of teens wanted the area to be “spacious,”
three wanted bright colors, 7.9% wanted specific decorations such as posters and
pictures, one suggested “fun-shaped shelves,” another wanted “interesting/fun tables,”
and one suggested that curtains be used as decoration. Lighting was a factor: 26.3% of
respondents stressed the importance of light, especially natural light, which according to
one teen is “more positive and open feeling.” In 28.6% of the drawings, windows were
given significant consideration, with skylights, bay windows, and even a “large sun room
for reading” added. Bad lighting was noticeable and not appreciated: fluorescent lights
were singled out as a “killer in classrooms” by one respondent. Libraries should avoid
being seen as similarly boring to teens as schools can be, with their uncomfortable desks
and fluorescent lighting.

It is telling that teens notice and have a strong opinion about every aspect of the
library, including the lighting. They have to feel comfortable in a place to enjoy it, and
bad lighting, especially in an area where people are invited to spend long periods of time,
can be an extreme turnoff for these teens. On the whole, 69.7% of teens suggested design
features that could be called “superficial,” but are clearly important to teens. These findings support the findings that teens judge libraries on the basis of perceived ‘coolness’ (Meyers, 1999). Making the library more visually appealing can draw teens in and make the library seem less uncool.

As mentioned above, comfortable seating and computers were the most popular requests for the remodeled young adult area. Despite many respondents’ belief that a library is peaceful and calming (as 55.5% intimated in their answers to Questions 5), the practical reality must be that it is also not specifically “comfortable” to these teens. Typical library furniture, such as plain wooden desks and chairs, might be practical, but these teens think it is uncomfortable, given that 78.9% of respondents asked for comfortable seating or couches. Adding more comfortable furniture in the young adult area of a public library seems like a quick and easy way to make teens feel more welcome.

Another addition to the teen area that would please its audience is also not surprising—computers (and implied Internet access). Computers and the Internet are regular fixtures in this generation’s life. According to the Teenage Life Online survey in 2001 by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, 73% of teenagers use the Internet, and of those, 71% of students reported using mainly Internet sources on their last research project. We can expect that those numbers will only have risen in the four years that have passed since this report was published. Many public libraries have only one computer area, and many other libraries separate out the children’s computers and the adult computers, but there is no data on how many have separately located young adult computers. From their responses, it is clear that they want their own designated
computers, with Internet access. According to one respondent, a teen area needs “a lot of computers so kids can access more info b/c usually all computers are full at the library.”

This comment evokes one made by Margaret Edwards as she discussed the special attention that young adults need, and that the public library does not always supply:

> When administrators eliminate YA work they usually compliment themselves by saying, “We treat teen-agers just as we do the adults.” I’ll say they do. They make it possible for the teen-agers to join the 84% of all adults who never speak to the librarian, who have learned to shift for themselves whether they know their way around or not, and who can always rely on the catalog for advice and inspiration.” (p.93).

As Edwards suggests, and the teen respondents of the survey seem to concur, young adults need to be treated as a special group. This means that within their designated space in the public library, they should also have their own computers, seating, books, and other features designed and implemented especially for them.

In addition to computers and comfortable seating, desks were a common request. Teens wanted large desks for group work, and single desks for quieter, independent studying or reading. They also listed books and bookshelves, magazines, newspapers, a circulation desk and a reference desk. These responses show that while many teens used their imaginations to conjure up unusual libraries, they were still mindful of the practical functions of a library, and what it should provide to a community. The three things these teens mention most are the most concrete services today’s public libraries provide: a place to sit, books to read, computers to use. These teens do not lose sight of these services, which illustrates that they have a fixed idea of what a library provided to a community. The respondents do not attempt to change or eliminate these functions. They are improving them, while also trying to make the public library a warmer, more relaxed, more comfortable atmosphere for teens.
More comfortable, to this generation, means more like a coffee shop, a comparison that should not come as such a surprise. Many large bookstores have coffee shops inside, and these coffee shops are a common place for teens to get together, study, or relax. As one respondent wrote, “Many teenagers now go to coffee shops to study instead of the library, so a place to buy coffee would be very popular.” The name “Barnes & Noble” was employed twice, with one teen imploring the library to “sell coffee like Barnes & Nobel [sic]!” In fact, a lounge seemed like a good model to emulate. According to one teen, “I chose this layout [with a lounge] b/c most young adults are bored by a normal library format.”

If the furniture or the lighting or the layout makes teens feel uncomfortable, bores them, or reminds them of school, teens won’t like the library, and if they don’t like it, then they won’t become regular library users who can benefit from all of the direct and indirect services that public libraries have to offer. Teens want the library to be comfortable, fun to hang out in, and full of important resources they need for school or life. Judging from these surveys, if a library were more like a coffee shop, teens would spend more time there, and perhaps develop a lifelong library habit.

Programming

This question, 6c, seemed more difficult for the participants to answer than Question 6b: 21% of teens offered only one idea or none at all. This result is possibly because the most cited reasons for going to the public library, for research and for pleasure reading, do not involve any “activities.” Another reason teens had more trouble suggesting library programming that they would be interested in could be that the most
common things requested for the teen area in Question 6b (computers, comfortable seating, group seating, and books) were also not tied to any “activities.” These are all things that teens do on their own or with friends, but usually without librarian assistance, and they are not events but everyday activities.

Another reason may be that teens who are less familiar with the library may not be aware of the variety of programming libraries offer, and over half of respondents do not go to the library or go only once or twice a year (or 52.6%). It could also be that the library they visit does not offer much programming, or programming is offered but poorly advertised and therefore these teens aren’t aware of what is being offered. Or perhaps these teens felt that once the library installed the computers, comfortable seating, coffee shop, movies, and design features they requested, there would be nothing else for the library to do, and the teens would feel comfortable being left to their own devices in the area of the public library provided for them.

Of the teens who did answer this question, many suggested traditional library programs, such as book clubs, book sales, and author visits, indicating that some teens do have at least a passing familiarity with library programming. Help, in various forms, was also requested by teens, which illustrates that respondents are aware that a library is a place that can solve questions and offer information when teens need it. One form of help often requested was general help using the library. While many students get this kind of training in a school library, it is unusual to see in a public library, but there clearly is the interest for it (13.2%). It seems unlikely that teens would come to the library simply for a tutorial, but if librarians could fit it within another program, or have helpful and informative brochures available, they could serve teens better.
The fact that nearly half of teens (47.4%) requested some form of help shows that there is a need for information in the young adult community. Meyers, in her 1999 study, also found that teens want help with research, and both she and Bishop & Bauer (2002) cite teens’ desire for opportunities to work or volunteer in the public library. If more teens begin to see the public library as a place where problems are solved and opportunities arise, the general esteem in which it is held could go up, especially when paired with a teen-friendly design.

If teens aren’t familiar with programming that could be offered to them, this can be a great opportunity for a public library to surprise them with less traditional library programs that can widen a teen’s opinion of a public library—movie night, a pizza or ice cream party, or live bands are all things that could draw in teens that teens might just not realize are possible for a public library to host (or sponsor in another venue). A very small number of respondents requested these types of programs. If a public library can surprise teens with a ‘cool’ program not traditionally found in a library, perhaps they could alter teens’ perception of them as “calm” and “peaceful” or worse, “drab” and dull.”

Color

In Question 5, the library was seen by nearly all respondents as either calm and peaceful, or boring and dull, and neither term conjures much excitement. “Calm,” “peaceful,” and “relaxing”: it is remarkable how often those adjectives and synonyms (“tranquil,” “welcoming”) were used in the surveys—those five words alone are cited a total of 30 times (34.9% of all adjectives used) along with “being free,” evoking “the
sky” or “the ocean,” “refreshing,” “comfortable,” and “cozy.” These colors, and especially blue, represent a calm, quiet haven away from the outside world; 55.5% of respondents report that they view the public library in this way.

However, these positive adjectives never express an emotion more intense than “calm” or “comfortable.” “Exciting,” “cool,” or “fun” were never mentioned. While these adjectives do not necessarily imply that teen who describe the public library this way are dissatisfied with it, clearly there is room for improvement. Despite “calm” and “comfortable” being positive terms, the adjectives that come up in Question 6e show that this is not the only way that teens want a public library to make them feel.

Negative adjectives were expressed by 44.4% of respondents in Question 5. Gray, brown, white, and off-white were the colors teens chose to illustrate their perception of the public library as boring or drab. These colors themselves are plain and dull, and evoke a more traditional view of public libraries as out-of-date and boring. Some respondents admit to choosing these colors because they are the color of books, bookshelves, or paper itself. This choice shows that teens identify libraries with books only, and to them, that is boring. These colors illustrate the ‘uncoolness’ that a library possesses in teens’ eyes.

Thankfully, the library as uncool was gone once teens redesigned the space to suit their needs. The most common adjectives used in Question 5 (calm, relaxing, and such synonyms), were mentioned again, but less frequently—22 times, as opposed to 30 times—and with more varied vocabulary than the five terms cited above. Negative adjectives were almost completely gone. The most noticeable change was the addition of new adjectives that the respondents felt described the new teen area as designed by them:
fun, which was never mentioned in Question 5, was now mentioned seven times. Five people said “bright”, four said “exciting,” and “happy,” “cool,” and “vibrant” were each mentioned three times. These words were not used once when answering Question 5.

It makes sense that the respondents would prefer their own designs over the design of the current public library, but the adjectives they chose for their designs are telling. It is true that calm and peaceful can be considered positive terms, that do not indicate a negative impression of public libraries. However, given the shift in Question 6 away from such terms indicates that libraries can be calm and exciting at the same time. These teens want an area that is comfortable, fun, and bright, with places to study quietly and places to socialize more loudly. They want the best of both worlds—a library with books for pleasure, information resources, and quiet study areas—a calm place; and a hang out place with coffee and food, music, magazines, and a place to sit with their friends—a fun place.

Limitations of the Study

The results of this survey are indicative only of the opinions of students in one grade at one central North Carolina high school, and cannot be generalized to apply to all teens in the U.S. The survey itself may have been self-selecting. It is very possible that those who use the public library were more enthusiastic about taking the survey, and those who don’t use it were more disinterested in taking the survey, thus skewing the numbers so highly in favor of library-goers (92.1%).
The survey results could be skewed because far more girls responded than boys (81.6% to 13.1, with 5.3% of names of indeterminate gender). Girls may have felt more comfortable responding, and boys may have felt less, because of my gender. There is a possible bias here that may have caused my extremely low rate of return from boys. Because women and libraries traditionally go hand in hand, boys may have felt uncomfortable and out of place when thinking about them. A similar study conducted by a male researcher may yield different results.

Conclusion

This research project intended to answer the question of what young adults want in a public library. From the survey results, we see that young adults today want a mixture of traditional library functions with a much more casual atmosphere. The teens who participated in this survey were very clear in their desire for resources like books, computers, and seating that would help them study, both in groups and individually. They also wanted books, magazines, movies, and music to satisfy their desire for entertainment.

However, these teens wanted these traditional library offerings to take place in a setting that resembled a coffee shop more than a library. The seating had to be comfortable, so that teens could sit and relax for long periods of time, and it had to be arranged so that teens could sit in groups and talk with their friends. Combined with this coffee shop-style seating, food and beverages were requested, making the library more a
place where teens would feel welcome and comfortable, and less like a place where teens felt unwelcome, uncomfortable, and that their unique needs were uncared for.

These findings are consistent with Meyers’, Bishop & Bauer’s, and other researchers’ findings, and also with Moore, Williams, and Edwards’ philosophies, which show that teens place a value on library façade as well as library services and materials. Public libraries must begin to recognize and address the concerns of their young adult populations, or they will be underserving a significant portion of their community. Their intentions should not be just to make the library seem cool and friendly to teens, but to make it a welcoming place where teens can find their information and entertainment needs met with professionalism, respect, and the proper materials and programming this unique group requires.
Works Cited


Fine, J. R. (2004). Six degrees of... *Young Adult Library Services: The Journal of the Young Adult Library Services Association, 2*(2), 41-44.


To the teachers of junior students at … High School:

My name is Kathleen Pierce, and I am a candidate for a Master’s degree in Library Science at UNC-Chapel Hill. This semester, under the guidance of my faculty advisor, Dr. Brian Sturm, I am working on a research project about young adults and public libraries. Specifically, I want to know what young adults currently think about their local public library, and how they feel it could be improved. I have chosen one age range, juniors, to study. I would like to administer a short survey, which is attached to this email, to as many junior classes at … High School as possible, in order to get as many responses as possible. The method I will use is:

- I will speak in your class briefly to explain the survey and hand the students a packet to take home. This packet will contain a letter of explanation to the parent or guardian, one consent form for the parent or guardian and one for the student (2 copies of each), the survey, and an envelope in which the student can return both consent forms and the completed survey. The UNC-Chapel Hill Behavioral IRB requires parental permission AND teen assent for me to conduct research with minors.

- I will place a large, covered box in your classroom, where the students can place the envelopes. I will come by every day — at your convenience — in order to collect the envelopes and to discourage tampering or theft of surveys.

I believe this method is best to minimize the amount of class time that I will take up—I should need only five minutes with your students to ask for their help and give instructions. During these five minutes I will also stress that their participation is completely voluntary, and that their responses will be kept confidential.

I believe that this topic is important to study because young adults are a somewhat neglected population at public libraries. As a result, these individuals can potentially become uninterested in the public library and what it offers, believing that it does not address their needs and concerns, and can lose interest in reading in general. Thus, potential lifelong users of public libraries are being turned away. Appropriate changes in public libraries that will appeal to young adults can come only by first studying this group’s current attitude toward libraries and library preferences.

I cannot accomplish this research without you, the teachers who are in direct contact with these young adults every day, and so I am asking for your help. Please help me reach as many juniors as possible, to maximize my rate of return so that my research is successful. Feel free to contact me, or my faculty advisor, at any time if you have any questions or concerns. My email address is ---------, and I can be reached at --------- . Dr. Brian Sturm’s email address is ---- --------, and his office phone number is --------- . We would be happy to speak with you.

I thank you for your time and consideration in reading this letter. Please let me know if you can help me with this research.

Sincerely,

Kathleen Pierce
M.L.S. Candidate
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Dear … High School Parent or Guardian:

My name is Kathleen Pierce, and I am a candidate for a Master’s degree in Library Science at UNC-Chapel Hill. This semester, under the guidance of my faculty advisor, Dr. Brian Sturm, I am working on a research project about young adults and public libraries. Specifically, I want to know what young adults currently think about their local public library, and how they feel it could be improved. I have chosen one age range, juniors, to study. Your child is being asked to participate in this study because he or she is a high school junior.

In the packet that your child brought home is the survey that I hope he or she will fill out. Once the survey is returned to school, your child’s participation in the study will be complete. Although you are not asked to answer any questions, I am seeking your permission for your child’s participation first, in accordance with the ethical guidelines about conducting research on minors. It is very important that you first consent to your child’s participation. Your child may then decide whether or not he or she will consent to participate. If your child does participate, he or she must return both signed forms, plus the completed survey.

Your child’s responses will be kept entirely confidential. Once I receive the forms and surveys, I will assign a matching number to the top of each form. I will keep the forms and surveys in separate, locked compartments, to which only I will have access. Should you or your child decide that you no longer want the survey to be considered in the study, I will be able to match up the proper form with the proper survey and then destroy them both. Once I have finished writing the research, I will destroy both the forms and the surveys.

I have included a copy of the parental permission form for you to sign, and another copy for you to keep for your records, and have done the same for your teen. Feel free to contact me, or my faculty advisor, at any time if you have any questions or concerns. My email address is ------------, and I can be reached at ------------. Dr. Brian Sturm’s email address is -------------, and his office phone number is -----------. We would be happy to speak with you. I thank you for your time and consideration in reading this letter, and I hope that you and your teenager will agree to join me in this research.

Sincerely,

Kathleen Pierce
M.L.S. Candidate
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
What are some general things you should know about research studies?
You are being asked to allow your teen to take part in a research study. To join the study is voluntary. You may refuse to give permission, or you may withdraw your permission for your teen to be in the study, for any reason. Even if you give your permission, your teen can decide not to be in the study.

Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This new information may help people in the future. Your teen may not receive any direct benefit from being in the research study. There also may be risks to being in research studies.

Details about this study are discussed below. It is important that you understand this information so that you and your teen can make an informed choice about being in this research study. You will be given a copy of this permission form. You and your teen should ask the researchers named above, or staff members who may assist them, any questions you have about this study at any time.

What is the purpose of this study?
The purpose of this research study is to explore what young adults think about the current state of public libraries, and what they would like to see in a public library in the future.

How many people will take part in this study?
If your teen is in this study, your teen will be one of approximately 100 people in this research study.

How long will your teen’s part in this study last?
The survey should take only 15 to 30 minutes to complete, and there will be no follow-up questions or interviews.

What will happen if your teen takes part in the study?
If you and your teen consent, he/she will fill out the survey. He/she is free to ignore any questions that he/she wishes not to answer. The teen’s responses will be kept confidential. His/her grades will not be affected in any way.
**What are the possible benefits from being in this study?**
Research is designed to benefit society by gaining new knowledge. Your teen will probably not benefit personally from being in this research study, but will contribute to our understanding of public library service for young adults.

**What are the possible risks or discomforts involved from being in this study?**
There are no known risks involved in this study.

**How will your teen’s privacy be protected?**
In order to protect confidentiality of responses, the principal researcher, Kathleen Pierce, will assign a matching number to each survey and consent form. The surveys will be kept in a locker, to which only Ms. Pierce will have the combination, and the consent forms will be kept in a locked file cabinet in Dr. Sturm’s office. No one will have access to them but Ms. Pierce. They will be destroyed once the study is complete. Teachers and administrators will not know whether or not your teen participated in this study, and your teen’s participation or not will have no effect on his or her academic standing whatsoever.

Participants will not be identified in any report or publication about this study.

**Will your teen receive anything for being in this study?**
Your teen will not receive anything for taking part in this study.

**Will it cost you anything for your teen to be in this study?**
There will be no costs for being in the study.

**What if you are a UNC employee?**
Your teen’s taking part in this research is not a part of your University duties, and refusing to give permission will not affect your job. You will not be offered or receive any special job-related consideration if your teen takes part in this research.

**What if you or your teen has questions about this study?**
You and your teen have the right to ask, and have answered, any questions you may have about this research. If you have questions, or concerns, you should contact the researchers listed on the first page of this form.

**What if you or your teen has questions about your teen’s rights as a research participant?**
All research on human volunteers is reviewed by a committee that works to protect your rights and welfare. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Behavioral Institutional Review Board at ---- or ------. You are given two copies of this permission form. One is for you to keep for future reference, and one is to be returned to Ms. Pierce.
**Parent’s Agreement:**

I have read the information provided above. I have asked all the questions I have at this time. I voluntarily give permission to allow my teen to participate in this research study.

_________________________________________
Printed Name of Research Participant (Teen)

_________________________________________  _________________
Signature of Parent   Date

_________________________________________
Printed Name of Parent

**Title of Study:** Young Adults and Public Libraries  
**Principal Investigator:** Kathleen Pierce
University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill
Assent to Participate in a Research Study
Adolescent Participants age 15-17
Social Behavioral Form
Title of Study: Young Adults and Public Libraries
Principal Investigator: Kathleen Pierce
UNC-Chapel Hill Department: School of Library and Information Science
Email Address:  
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Brian Sturm
Study Contact telephone number:  
Study Contact email:  

What are some general things you should know about research studies?
You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your parent, or guardian, needs to give permission for you to be in this study. You do not have to be in this study if you don’t want to, even if your parent has already given permission. To join the study is voluntary. You may refuse to join, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study, for any reason, without penalty.

Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This new information may help people in the future. You may not receive any direct benefit from being in the research study. There also may be risks to being in research studies.

Details about this study are discussed below. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about being in this research study. You will be given a copy of this consent form. You should ask the researchers named above, or staff members who may assist them, any questions you have about this study at any time.

What is the purpose of this study?
The purpose of this research study is to explore what you think about the current state of public libraries, and what you would like to see in a public library in the future.

How many people will take part in this study?
If you decide to be in this study, you will be one of approximately 100 people in this research study.

How long will your part in this study last?
The survey should take only 15 to 30 minutes to complete, and there will be no follow-up questions or interviews.

What will happen if you take part in the study?
If you consent, you will fill out the survey. You are free to ignore any questions that you wish not to answer. Your responses will be kept confidential, and your grades will not be affected in any way.
What are the possible benefits from being in this study?  
Research is designed to benefit society by gaining new knowledge. You will probably not benefit personally from being in this research study, but you will contribute to our understanding of public library service for young adults.

What are the possible risks or discomforts involved from being in this study?  
There are no known risks involved in this study.

How will your privacy be protected?  
In order to protect confidentiality of responses, the principal researcher, Kathleen Pierce, will assign a matching number to each survey and consent form. The surveys will be kept in a locker, to which only Ms. Pierce will have the combination, and the consent forms will be kept in a locked file cabinet in Dr. Sturm’s office. No one will have access to them but Ms. Pierce, and they will be destroyed once the study is complete. Teacher and administrators will not know whether or not you participated in this study, and your participation or not will have no effect on your academic standing whatsoever.

Participants will not be identified in any report or publication about this study.

Will you receive anything for being in this study?  
You will not receive anything for taking part in this study.

What if you have questions about this study?  
You have the right to ask, and have answered, any questions you may have about this research. If you have questions, or concerns, you should contact the researchers listed on the first page of this form.

What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?  
All research on human volunteers is reviewed by a committee that works to protect your rights and welfare. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Behavioral Institutional Review Board at ----- or -----. You are given two copies of this permission form. One is for you to keep for future reference, and one is to be returned to Ms. Pierce.
Participant’s Agreement:

I have read the information provided above. I have asked all the questions I have at this time. I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

_________________________________________  _________________
Your signature if you agree to be in the study       Date

_________________________________________  
Printed name if you agree to be in the study

Title of Study:  Young Adults and Public Libraries
Principal Investigator:  Kathleen Pierce
Please answer the following questions, based on the instructions given. Feel free to use as much of this paper, including the back, for more comments. All surveys responses will be kept confidential.

1. Do you ever go to your local public library? Circle one:
   
   Yes
   Yes
   No
   No

2. If you don’t go to the public library, why not? Please give at least 2 reasons.
   
   1. 
   2. 

3. If you do go to the public library, how often do you go? Circle the closest one:
   
   More than once a week
   Once a week
   Once or twice a month
   Once or twice a year
   Once or twice a year

4. If you do go to the public library, why do you go? Please give at least 2 reasons.
   
   1. 
   2. 

5a. Please think for a moment about public libraries in general, and your local public library in particular, if you have been to one. If you could assign a color to the public library, what color would you give it?
   
   Color: ______________________________________

5b. Why do you think that color represents a public library?
Imagine that you are designing a brand new space for teens at the public library, with total control over the project. You are the designer and the architect, and you must make some decisions about what your Teen Space will look like. Please tell me how you would design this new space.

6a. What would the physical layout look like? Sketch your layout on the back of this page, label its components, and give a brief explanation of why you chose this layout.

6b. What kinds of things would you include in your space for teens to use?

6c. Name two ideas for library programs, events, or activities that teens would like.
   1.
   2.

6d. As in question 5, what color would you assign this NEW public library, designed by you?
   Color: ________________________________

6e. Why does that color represent your new library design?
   _______________________________________

-- End of Survey --

Thank you very much for filling out this survey.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to email me at ____________, or call me at _________. You may also contact my faculty advisor, Dr. Brian Sturm, at ____________, or ________. If you would like a copy of my final report, please feel free to contact me to request one.