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Books, Hot Coffee, and a Comfortable Chair

Coffee, coffee, everywhere, and people seem to like it that way. The idea of coffee shops in libraries is not a new concept. Oxford University opened a coffeehouse in 1650. (1) While the idea has not been common since then, it has reemerged in the last ten years or so.

With the ever-increasing popularity of the Internet, library planners have been taking lessons from Internet cafés and large bookstore chains, which have realized that coffee and books really do go together. With a Starbucks or Tully's on every corner (sometimes literally), coffee shops seem to be the new places to meet and exchange ideas. Students use coffee shops as places to study, hold discussions, and feed their need for caffeine. Meanwhile, libraries become emptier, largely because of the Internet's bringing information to people's desktops at home and at work. Why go to the library when it's all on the 'Net? Academic as well as public libraries are planning new construction and remodels with patrons' comfort in mind, and they're trying a number of strategies to woo patrons back into library buildings. Many include comfortable reading/study areas, and some even include such amenities as used bookstores, wi-fi service and live music. Coffee shops are one of the more visible and challenging of the options that a library could consider. Coffee shops often include an outside vendor, hours that may vary from the library's, and norms of behavior that libraries may perceive as foreign.

In her article "Café Service in Public Libraries" (2), Reese lists four levels of coffee service: cart service, coffee bars, cafés, and coffeehouses. Which level a library chooses depends on how elaborate the library planners want to get. What these coffee shops have in common is a place where library patrons can gather, relax, exchange ideas, and yes—drink coffee. This doesn't always mean, however, that rules prohibiting eating and drinking in the library are relaxed. At the University of Missouri in Kansas City, Southern Oregon University, Berry College in Georgia, and the University of Washington, only closed water/beverage containers with lids are allowed throughout the libraries, except in coffee shop areas, where food and open beverages may be consumed. At Radford University in Virginia, no food or drinks of any kind are allowed throughout the library except in "The Stacks" (the potentially confusing name of their coffee shop).

Opening a new business is a risky proposition, as approximately 80 percent of new businesses fail within their first year of operation. Out of thirteen libraries Reese surveyed, three of them discontinued coffee service within one year. That percentage is better than



Everett's coffee shop has its own entrance, so is open longer hours than the library. **Top:** View from the main entrance lobby of the library. Internal coffee shop entry is through the doorway to the left of the browsing patron. This door is closed when the library is. Coffee shop's outdoor entrance is just visible as a small rectangle of light to the right of the patron's head. The main library entrance is at the left edge of the photo. **Bottom:** View from the other side of the coffee shop, near the outdoor entrance. The barista works in the windowed bay at center right. The shop seats forty-four.



the general small business average, but why would libraries consider the risk of adding coffee service when so many are doomed to failure? The prospect of added revenue is one reason. Coffee chains may pay rent, donate food or beverages to the library, or contribute a percentage of profits to the library. Coffee shops also may help entice people into the library, where they might use other library services. It works in bookstores, so why not in libraries? Are students hanging out and studying at the local Starbucks? Maybe the library can provide a similar service. Having a coffee shop, where food and drinks are permitted, makes it easier to enforce a food and drink policy in the rest of the library. And many library leaders have always tried to anticipate what their patrons will want next. For whatever reason, some libraries feel that the time has come for library coffee shops.

Some large universities, such as the University of Washington and the University of Oregon, have coffee shops or cafés in the buildings, but smaller universities are slower to catch up to the coffee wave. The coffee leaders in the Northwest seem to be the public libraries. In 1997 Starbucks opened an espresso bar inside the Multnomah County Library's Central Library in downtown Portland. Starbucks sent coupons for free beverages to patrons owing fines, and

Mary Wise is catalog librarian at Central Washington University Library. Photos by Cameron Johnson.

redeemed the coupons when the fines were paid. The stand lost money, however, and closed in 2003 after six years of operation. (3) John Cabrera, operations administrator at Multnomah, gave several reasons for the shop's closing:

- The coffee bar opened when the library did (9:00 or 10:00 A.M.), so did not sell coffee during the early morning, when 70 percent of coffee is sold.
- The coffee bar sold most of its coffee to staff members, who received discount prices.
- The coffee bar was small and its managers inexperienced.

Cabrera said the library knew the operation was doomed when Starbucks opened a store only a block away. He said the library considered asking the library's Friends group to run the coffee operation. After looking closely at its options, the library decided that if Starbucks couldn't make it pay, neither could the library. Cabrera said he would like to see the library consider opening a coffee service again, but with different assumptions.


One success story in Washington state is that of the Everett Public Library's Espresso Americano coffee shop, which opened in January 2004. The 1,350 sq. ft. coffee shop is set in what long ago was the library's reading room but which served only as an alternate public entrance after the newly renovated library re-opened in 1991. A \$175,000 anonymous donation two years ago covered the cost of renovation, including distinctive Arts and Crafts furniture. (4) The coffee shop has its own entrance, so it can open earlier and close later than the library does. This is Espresso Americano's first venture in the United States (they operate primarily in Japan and South

America). The shop serves not only espresso drinks, but also light lunches and desserts. After library hours on Friday and Saturday evenings, the coffee shop hosts no-cover live music. Everything from jazz and blues to classical guitar are served up, and packed houses are typical. The coffee shop also provides wi-fi service (unavailable in the library). Library employees report an increase in gate count and circulation since the coffee shop opened. The library receives rent from Espresso Americano in the amount of 9 percent of gross receipts, which feeds about \$800 per month into the Everett Public Library fund of the Greater Everett Community Foundation. The library permits people to bring covered drinks into the library proper, but not food.

Seattle Public Library's Central Library hosts a coffee cart staffed by FareStart, a job-training organization that provides training in food service jobs for homeless or disenfranchised people. Central Library Services Director Jill Jean said the organization bid on and won the contract to operate the coffee cart. (5) FareStart owns the cart and pays the library \$500 per month or 10 percent of its revenues, whichever is greater. Jean said the FareStart organization shares with the library the goal of getting street kids into a "productive mode." She said the baristas, mostly young adults, get extensive training and do a great job. The program allows the kids to get training, provides the library a small revenue stream, and provides a convenient place for library patrons to buy a reasonably priced cup of coffee or espresso. As in Everett, the library permits covered beverages—but not food—outside the cart's seating area.

Whether library coffee places are called Java City, Espresso Americano, Starbucks, Café Libro, Bookmark Café, The Stacks, The Blend, The Daily Grind, or anything else imaginable, and whether they take the form of a coffee cart or a night café venue for jazz, look to libraries to provide more than food for thought.

Resources

1. Asheim Group, University of South Carolina CLIS 701. "Good to the Last Drop: Dimensions and Cultural Implications of Coffee Service in Libraries." <<http://www.nvcc.edu/home/bweixler/coffee/>> (1 February 2005)
2. Reese, Noreen. "Café Service in Public Libraries." *Public Libraries* 38 (3) (1999): 176-78.
3. John Cabrera, telephone conversation with editor, 7 February 2005.
4. Mark Nesse, personal communication with editor, 4 February 2005.
5. Jill Jean, telephone conversation with editor, 7 February 2005. 



Three bird's-eye views of Seattle Public Library's Central Library coffee cart and its seating area. Photos were taken shortly after the building opened. The group in the photo at far right was touring the library.

