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Access PA

There are only two types of people in the world: those who take full advantage of their library card, and those who have yet to discover its magic. Those in the first camp, they understand what power their library card holds. They know that they can request *almost* any book (DVD/game/cake pan/you-name-it), and their library will find a way to get it into their hands. Does that library have it on their shelves? Maybe not. Does that stop the patron from having access? Usually not. Those in the second camp, those who have yet to experience the wonder of the library, they still share something in common with veteran library patrons. One very large question. *Where do our books come from?* They come from near, far, and everywhere in between. They are powered by an intricate system known as Access Pennsylvania.

Access Pennsylvania (Access PA) is a service provided through POWER Library. Those who have read previous articles from this series may already be familiar with this pantheon of services. Access PA is a service available only to libraries so that they may borrow and lend materials amongst themselves, thus increasing the available materials for all libraries and patrons, no matter where they live in PA. An elementary school library in State College can request a book from a public library in Pittsburgh. That same public library can request to borrow an item from a university in Philadelphia. Cost for the patron? None.

This intricate system serves multiple functions, on both sides of the circulation desk. First, it holds monetary value as it helps libraries with limited funding provide additional resources for their community that they could not provide on their own. Even for larger libraries, academic libraries for instance, the value of being able to rely on public libraries to share their fiction and leisure reading collection is vital. While these larger libraries may have a more robust collection budget, one can still not purchase everything. There is not enough shelf space in all the world.

Which brings us to the second value of Access PA – shelf space! Any library will tell you that shelf space is a commodity, and there is never enough. Therefore libraries, to the horror of bibliophiles everywhere, are constantly weeding their collections to make room for new titles. This service allows a library to provide titles that it either cannot afford or are not central to the needs/wants of the community without overcrowding shelves.

Being able to borrow and lend with other libraries not only saves money and space but is essentially providing citizens with a statewide library card. As stated earlier, Access PA serves all kinds of libraries: academic, public, school, and special. This platform, at no cost to the patron, does come with a price for participating libraries. Both Access PA and the Interlibrary Delivery Service (a nonprofit delivery service created for libraries) are subsidized by the State, as “State Aid to Public Libraries.” In turn, libraries pay membership fees on a sliding scale to both platforms for access and service. Often, it is

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the overarching support system for libraries in a geographical location or institution (e.g., Westmoreland Library Network) that pays for these costs.

As with most things in the world, nothing free is ever actually free. A free service for a patron or community is a cost for the library. So why do we pay it? Why do we offer the service? Because we are here to serve, defend the notion of freedom of information, and to ensure an educated community – whether it is in aerodynamics, car repair, or knock-knock jokes. There is a very real cost, and labor, that goes into making the library magical. Access PA itself, though, is library magic incarnate.

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