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The El Cerrito Library and the Gardner Main Stacks (UC Berkeley):

Library Information Center Report

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***Introduction***

 For this report I visited two very different types of information centers, a community public library part of a larger county library system and an academic university library. Both libraries have very different missions and serve unique and diverse populations, and these differences are reflected in the operations, staff, services, location, and even physical structures of each center. Due to budget restrictions and the many duties of staff at each location, I was unable to interview staff personally, but I did not let that deter me from personally visiting and observing each of these information centers with the critical eye of a Library and Information Science student.

***The El Cerrito Library***

The first information center I visited, the El Cerrito Library, is a public library part of the larger Contra Costa County Library system which includes over 23 libraries and community services that serve the many diverse cities located within the county. I visited this library on a Saturday afternoon where I observed the collection, services, clientele and staff of the library along with applying for a library card to observe the process from the perspective of a new patron. Being a tech-dependent Millennial, I first visited the library website to check on open hours. The library is open 5 days a week, Monday-Tuesday and Thursday-Saturday, with varying open hours for each day. It is interesting to note that the library stays open until 8pm two days a week. These extended hours give patrons who work or have other daytime responsibilities an opportunity to visit the library on weekdays. Despite this advantage, the inconsistency of hours from day to day is confusing to keep track of and could be seen as a deterrent to potential users. The library building looks dated and old-fashioned with 60s era architecture, definitely in need of an update to the 21st century.

*Mission and Clientele*

The El Cerrito Library is a small public library built in 1949 and serves a community of approximately 23,000. El Cerrito is situated between the cities of Albany, Kensington, and Richmond and the close proximity of these cities allow community members from each to use this library. The mission of the El Cerrito Library and the Contra Costa County Library System is, “bringing people and ideas together.” The El Cerrito Library, classified as a small library, has collections that reflect the materials of interest to the population of users of this library. When I visited the library I observed a diverse population of individuals using the library, varying in age, gender, and ethnicity. The main thing I noticed was lack of was children at the library. Though half of the building houses a Children’s collection, I did not see any during my visit. The collections of the library include a Children’s collection, adult collection, periodicals and newspapers, a small reference collection, collections in Spanish, Chinese and Japanese and media collections of audiobooks, DVDs, and VHS.

*Staffing*

The El Cerrito Library has separate Circulation and Information desks along with a service desk located in the Children’s section. During my visit, I observed only three staff members, and though staffing level was low, it was appropriate for the amount of patrons during my visit. I was able to self-apply for a library card from an OPAC in the library and then was able to get my physical card from the Circulation desk without a wait and with the great efficiency. The ability to apply for a card without having to initially approach the staff is a great resource for shy patrons who may normally be deterred by the presence of the official looking circulation desk.

*Electronic Resources*

Working at a branch library myself, I could not help but compare my own library to the resources of the El Cerrito Library. Physically, my library is smaller than the El Cerrito Library, yet I was shocked to see that it had the same number of OPACs and public internet computers as my own. Even more shocking was seeing that only one of the computers was in use during my visit. The library has four OPACs where users can access the catalog, their library accounts, apply for a library card, and reserve computers, along with four public access computers with access to the internet and word processing software. The layout and locations of computer terminals is strange and because all computer terminals look identical it is hard to distinguish OPACs from public access computers. The library also offers free Wi-Fi to the public, but a problem I noticed for users of this service is the small number of available electrical outlets for users to plug in their own computers, compared to the overall free space of the library. The age of the building is probably the main factor for these issues.

*Community Involvement and Outreach*

 Despite its small size this library bursts with personality and its community involvement shines. Displays, event signage, service signage, and bulletin boards populate almost every available space at the library. One such area that really illustrates its community involvement is a display area in the Children’s area. Every summer the library hosts a reading game for children, and at this library every child who completes the game has their name posted on the main wall of the Children’s area. What a great way to show the level of involvement of one of the great resources available at the library and a great way for children to feel pride about their accomplishment by fostering an environment for confident life-long readers. There are many services offered at this library for its users- computer classes, ESL classes, homework help, and community bulletin boards illustrate how the library exists to serve its users and the community at large.

*Library Website*

 The El Cerrito Library itself does not have its own website, rather it is a part of the larger Contra Costa County Library site (<http://ccclib.org/>). Because of this there is a plethora of information available, reflective of the size of the overall system. There is dedicated page on the site for the El Cerrito Library, but it doesn’t reflect the individual and unique nature of this community library. The main page of the website offers links to practically anything you want to know about the library system, along with a sidebar with upcoming events and news, and a search box at the top to access the library catalog.

***David P. Gardner Library Main Stacks (Doe Library, UC Berkeley)***

 For my second information center visit, I traveled to the Gardner Main Stacks located in the Doe Library building situated in the heart of the UC Berkeley campus. I completed my undergraduate studies at UC Berkeley but admittedly I didn’t spend much time in this library and it was interesting to come back and explore this library with the eyes of a LIS student. The first thing that struck me was the size and stature of the library building- its beautiful classical architecture and clean white building make it stand out. The lobby that you enter through to get to Main Stacks is a sleek modern rotunda with a skylight overhead that gives heft and class to its entrance. The hours of the library are catered to its student users; it is open until 2am, 5 days a week. Space for growth is limited on the Berkeley campus, so the Main Stacks are unique in their physical structure that is built three floors underground.

*Mission, Clientele, and Community Involvement*

The Main Stacks is a space for “students, faculty, and independent scholars.” When

full the library shelves can hold 3 million volumes and the library performs over 1 million circulation transactions per year. I was surprised to learn that any member of the general public can apply for a library card for the fee of $100 for a year, and that alumni, community college and CSU students are also eligible for discounted cards. I was able to apply and immediately receive a card for $25, good for the semester. Despite this openness to the public, it was clear from my observations that this library is primarily a place for students to study. Throughout the library there are many areas for silent study, tables equipped with plugs, and 17 group study rooms. I saw many signs throughout the library stating, “Gardner Stacks, a clean, quiet, study space.” I was shocked by the quiet atmosphere of the library, yet almost every available table and chair was filled with students studying on laptops and reading books. The Main Stacks are beautiful in their uniformity of concrete walls, towering movable bookshelves, and that permeating yet indescribable old book smell; yet in that uniformity lacks any real personality of the community in which it exists. There are no signs about student groups, no postings about events; all signage pertains to the library itself.

*Staffing*

During my visit I only encountered support staff and I did not physically see any librarians or information professionals. Most of the support staff looked to be students and generally manned the circulation desk and the entrance where they check for library cards and student IDs.

*Electronic Resources*

The library offers many catalog computers throughout, I counted 34 in total. On each of

these computers the UC Berkeley catalog, OskiCat and the UC-wide catalog, MELVYL, are available. Materials available include both the physical collection and a large electronic collection available through electronic databases and digital subscriptions. Additionally, internet-access on catalogs computers is available, though long-term internet use isn’t ideal because these are mostly standing stations. Most students bring in their own laptop computers and utilize the UC Berkeley Wi-Fi system, AirBears. In my staffing observations I noted that I did not see any librarians, but the catalogs do offer links to real-time chat with librarians about research related questions. Unlike the El Cerrito Library, there are ample electronic plug in stations available at every table in the library, so users are not limited to working in any one spot.

*Library Website*

The library website, <http://lib.berkeley.edu/>, is beautifully and clearly structured, much like the library itself. It’s academic focus is reflected in the information provided, offering not only access to the library catalogs but also links to resources such as research help, electronic resources, tutorials, guides, and library workshops. Links to ask librarians questions via chat, e-mail and phone are also available on the main page of the website, giving many options for help for students, faculty, and researchers when needed.

***Conclusion***

The missions of the El Cerrito Library and the Gardner Main Stacks are very different in their values and nature. These diverse values are reflected throughout each library in the many aspects that make up each library as a whole. The El Cerrito Library is a public library concerned with serving the diverse needs of its users; and the services and walls of this library reflect this commitment. The Gardner Main Stacks, an academic university library, is concerned with serving the students, faculty and community researchers of the UC Berkeley community. Its purpose is illustrated by the availability of copious amounts of materials and by its dedication to fostering a physical environment concerned with study and research.