Library Observation: On-Site Interview and Analysis of the Cherry Hill Public Library and the Drexel University Hagerty Library

James Gross, Drexel University

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James Gross
INFO 650, Drexel University
Professor Galbraith
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Public libraries serve as a gateway of information, providing informational resources and services to all patrons regardless of the patron’s educational level, socio-economic status, or physical location. This gateway of information, permits the public unobstructed access to educational opportunity as well as information on any topic desired. In general, the public library is seen by the public as being a safe and inviting location for the access of information. Most importantly, it is also a place where patrons can meet and interact in a comfortable environment. Another type of library is the academic library. The academic library is a repository which offers support for endeavors of higher education. It primarily caters to students and faculty. It is geared towards both educational as well as academic research needs. Both of these institutions offer a number of specific reference items which can be of educational use. In this paper, we will examine an academic university library in Pennsylvania, as well as a local public library in New Jersey. We will use various points of observation to analyze the environments of how institutions. In this library observation paper, we will seek to identify how these two libraries, public and academic, seek to achieve their mission goals by providing library services to their respective patron community.

This paper consists of five sections. The sections include: (1a) Library description, (1b) Library interview, (2) Scene observations, (3) Topic identification (4) Topic observations, and (5) library recommendations. For this paper, two libraries were selected. The first library to be examined was a public funded township library, the Cherry Hill Public Library, located in Cherry Hill, NJ. The second library to be examined was a privately funded academic library, Drexel University’s Hagerty library, which is located in Philadelphia, Pa. On-site observations as well as staff interviews were conducted at both libraries.

1a. Public library description

The Cherry Hill Public Library is located in Cherry Hill, NJ. It receives its funding from the
towship of Cherry Hill. The new Cherry Hill Public library is rather new, having opened up in December 2004 (Cherry Hill, 2009a, para.1). At 72,000 square feet, the library is considered to be one of the largest municipal libraries in Southern New Jersey (Cherry Hill, 2009a, para.1). It sits on the site of the former Richman’s Ice Cream site. The original library building was built by Malcolm Wells back in 1966 (Cherry Hill, 2009a, para. 2). By the late 1990’s, due to a surge in township population, the old library was deemed to be too small for the townships needs (Cherry Hill, 2009a, para. 2).

As part of the on-site library analysis, the physical layout of the library was examined. My first impression of the new Cherry Hill Public Library was its sheer size. It is quite expansive. The library is housed in a large 3-story modern building. Prior to entering the building, one cannot help to see and reflect on the lifelike sculpture entitled “Sunday Morning,” by J Seward Johnson Jr. (Cherry Hill, 2009b, para. 5). The sculpture, which rests on the lawn near the front entrance, depicts a young couple on the grass, each relaxing with a newspaper. The library’s concern with shape and form is evident based on the attention paid to outside landscaping and the artistic statues. This is clearly a nonverbal statement that this library was designed with the objective of making the patron feel welcomed.

The entrance doorway has security sensors for the detection of stolen items. This library does not require ID scanning upon entrance. Thus, there was no need or requirement to provide identification during my visit. When you enter the library, one is struck by the sheer size of the facility. Due to the high ceilings and amount of open light, the actual size of the building is apparently misleading. One could almost appear to get the feeling of being overwhelmed by the size of the building.

Upon entering the library entrance, one sees a semi-circular welcome table with a security guard, in the middle ground. On this table are several library resource materials as well as a
library event schedule. In the background there are rows of low shelves with books. To the right is the circulation desk. The circulation desk consists of is a large semicircle of computers, checkout scanners, and appeared to be constantly manned by helpful library staff. If you walk to the right side, you will come to the video section and the entrance to the administrative offices.

Next, we will retrace our steps and walk to the left of the welcome desk. There one will see a small café in the background. We will also see a staircase to the right of the café. If we go down the staircase, we will come upon the community rooms, the computer rooms, as well as the small art gallery. If we go up the stairs we will see the young adults as well as Children’s reading room.

The next room to visit is the reference room. It is located on the main floor, past an open door to the left of the café. Upon entering this room, the sheer size of the library is again apparent. In the foreground are the copy machines. To the left are two computers for quick access. The signs state 15 minutes maximum on these computers. There is also a small manned reference desk which is occasionally manned by library staff. This is a recent addition as I did not see this on prior visits.

In the middle of the room, towards the left, is a large rectangular reference area. Two to three librarians typically man reference computer terminals. To the right are rows and rows of desktop computers on long tables. Each computer has headphone capability and on a typical day one can see teens nodding away to rock music as they type away. Behind the patron computers are rows and rows of bookshelves. The reference books are located close to the reference desk. Towards the left of the reference area are small glass-sealed rooms for private patron use. Beyond the reference books are staff offices.
1a. Archival library description

The Hagerty library is one of four libraries servicing the Drexel community. The other libraries include a law library and two medical libraries. The Hagerty library is a city library, located at 33rd and Market street. It is accessible by subway, a nearby parking garage, and street parking. Street parking can be an issue due to limited metered spaces during the day. The library is a semi-restricted library as a Drexel ID card or other ID is required for entry. Though members of the public can enter with a drivers license, it was my observation that students are the primary users of the library. Drexel staff and alumni are also permitted access to the facility.

The library dates back to 1983 and there are periodic renovations being made to it (Hagerty, 2008a, para. 1). When entering the main floor of the library you are met by a security guard and must present an ID card. Upon entry, you are in a large room. Directly to the left is a large circular desk area where circulation requests and book checkouts are conducted. On the far left is a café where students can purchase food while chatting with friends or while reading.

Directly in the middle ground and background are computer terminals, arranged in round, partitioned kiosks. On the far right of the computer kiosks, are facilities for copying and scanning books. Patrons can also, in a standing mode, access several computers, for quick access to the library’s catalog. To the far right is the staircase. It leads to the basement and upper floors.

The bottom floor houses a computer room, a few computer kiosks, shelved periodicals, and the Drexel archives. There are a large number of conference tables, several conference rooms, as well as desks for student study. The second floor houses books and other reference material. The third floor houses the law library.
1b. Library interview-Cherry Hill Public Library

For the Cherry Hill library, I chose to interviewed staff in two departments: reference services and circulation. I chose Mrs. C. as she is the library’s head of reference services. Mrs. B. was selected as she is the library’s interlibrary loan services specialist. My first interview was with Mrs. C. Mrs. C. explained to me how the Cherry Hill library had gone from existing in a small building, outgrown it, and was now fortunate to have a large facility to help service the needs of the community’s patrons (Mrs. C., personal communication, April 27, 2009).

Per Mrs. C., and the library’s webpage, I learned about the diverse range of services offered by the library. The library has a small café, more than 100 computers, a computer lab, Mac music stations, an online book club, community meeting rooms, an art gallery, electronic databases, and the availability of wireless internet throughout the building. Mrs. C. explained how she saw the library and its services as fostering a convenient location which could be used by the community as a gathering place (Mrs. C., personal communication, April 25, 2009). She described this as a growing trend among libraries (Mrs. C., personal communication, April 25, 2009).

I then interviewed Mrs. B., who is the interlibrary loan services specialist. She has an interesting perspective as she previously worked in the smaller Cherry Hill library. She explained to me how the larger library building has resulted in a drastic increase in the number of patron requests for loaned materials (Mrs. B., personal communication, April 27, 2009). She attributed this to the larger daily patron volume as well as increased patron needs (Mrs. B., personal communication, April 27, 2009). Mrs. B. explained to me that the library was forced to change their policy from a no-loan fee to a 50-cent patron loan fee due to patron usage (Mrs. B., personal communication, April 27, 2009). In her opinion, the institution of this small fee has resulted in a drop in frivolous interlibrary loans.
In fact, she disclosed that some libraries actually charge patrons a fee if they do not pick up their interlibrary loan (Mrs. B., personal communication, April 27, 2009). Surprisingly, she sometimes has to deal with patrons who either lose the interlibrary loaned item, or simply choose not to return it (Mrs. B., personal communication, April 27, 2009).

I interviewed three librarians, Tim Siftar, Ann Kennedy, and Ellie Goldberg at the Hagerty Library, located on the center city campus of Drexel University in Philadelphia, PA. The Hagerty Library is an archival library, serving the Drexel academic community. Tim Siftar is the senior information services librarian with responsibilities for the library’s IT services. On the administrative level, Mr. Siftar is also responsible for coordination with other Drexel University IT departments. Mr. Siftar has a MSLIS degree and has been with Drexel for five years. In my discussion with Mr. Siftar, he explained to me how the library provides resources and services to fulfill the academic needs of Drexel’s undergraduate, graduate, and teaching staff (Siftar, personal communication, April 20, 2009).

With regard to patron services, Mr. Siftar explained that the breakdown in patron services roughly broke down into 30% for faculty requests, 30% for students requests, and 40% for Drexel staff requests (Siftar, personal communication, April 20, 2009). Mr. Siftar also explained how the Drexel library budget was at a par with the previous yearly budget. (Siftar, personal communication, April 20, 2009). In order to make up for the rise in inflation, Mr. Siftar had eliminated a few redundant electronic subscription database subscriptions (Siftar, personal communication, April 20, 2009).

My next interview was with Ann Kennedy. Ms. Kennedy is a general reference librarian and has been with Drexel about five years. She holds a MLS degree in Library Science along with a
bachelor degree in architecture. Ms. Kennedy explained to me that since her arrival at Drexel, she has seen a gradual increase in library usage (Kennedy, personal communication, April 20, 2009). She attributed this to the rise in student enrollment at Drexel (Kennedy, personal communication, April 20, 2009). Ms. Kennedy told me that she could use more staff and more space to help accomplish her mission of serving Drexel’s academic community (Kennedy, personal communication, April 20, 2009).

One of Ms. Kennedy’s assistants is a graduate student, Ellie Goldberg. It is apparent from looking at the staff directory that the Hagerty library makes extensive use of part time graduate students. It was explained to me that this helps in providing training to graduate library science students as well as defray some salary costs for the library. I confirmed this by speaking to Ellie Goldberg. Goldberg, a library science graduate student, explained to me how she was gaining experience by working as a Career Services library assistant (Goldberg, personal communication, April 20, 2009). In other words, besides being an academic library, it also serves as a teaching library as well.

2. Scene observations-Cherry Hill Public Library

This library has a number of potential areas for observation. I spent time observing patron interaction in the various parts of the library. The average patron age appeared to range from high school to adult. The reference section of the library appeared to be the most popular area of the library. This is probably due to the comfortable seating and computer access. A number of patrons, had their own laptop computers with them. On a typical weekday evening, I saw quite a number of people relaxing at the café as well as looking at their computers.
The Cherry Hill Public library, due to its large open window spaces, appeared to give off a very pleasant and inviting aura. During my visit I noticed a number of patrons engrossed in their laptop reading and typing. The large number of chairs and lounging areas appeared to be designed to give patrons a sense of comfort and security. And, the consumer friendly materials, such as the Chilton reference for automobile repair information, meant that people could research hobbies of their choice. It appeared that the patrons were happy with the available resources.

2. Scene observations-Hagerty Library

I visited the library on two occasions. One visit was in the early evening and one was during the day. On both visits, I encountered a majority of students lounging with their laptops and interacting with other students. It appeared that the majority of this interaction was geared toward class assignments. The lower level appeared to provide more space for the students to congregate in small groups. I noticed several tables filled with students who appeared to be discussing class issues.

The circulation desk appeared to be in constant activity with students checking out books, or requesting other assistance. The reference desk did not appear to be too busy, but perhaps because it was the evening that it wasn’t too busy. During a separate daytime visit, I saw a constant stream of students. They were making use of library materials or speaking to their friends. Some were checking the electronic catalog and some were just relaxing with their laptops. Based on my vantage point, it appeared that many of the students, who were resting or reading, were using the library as an alternative to their dormitory rooms.

3. Topic identification

During the course of my library visits and interviews, I identified five topics which were determined to be of importance to both libraries. These topics included: membership criteria, resource
concentration, library funding, popular user services, and environmental observations. Admission criteria refers to the patron having the ability to gain access to the library and its resources. Resource concentration refers to the type of resources held by the library. Library funding refers to the source of the library’s yearly budget. This was deemed to be of importance as not all patrons drive. Popular user services refers to those library services which are most often requested by the library patron. Environmental observations referred to how the library was perceived by its patrons with regard to a user friendly atmosphere.

4. Topic observations

Per my on-site library visits and interviews, I noticed distinct differences between both library’s in regard to their membership criteria, resource concentration, library location, physical environment, as well as popular user services. There were some similarities observed with regard to most requested user services. But, generally speaking, both of these institutions appeared to cater to two different patron groups, with different needs.

The primary explanation for the difference in patron groups is probably due to the fact that these two libraries appear to have different mission objectives, and therefore attract a different category of library patron. For example, the Hagerty library, as an academic library, seeks to serve the academic community. Its mission statement is: “… a continually evolving innovative organization dedicated to the provision of services, collections, technology, and facilities to meet the information needs of the Drexel community”(Drexel, 2006, p. 5).

In contrast, the Cherry Hill Public Library’s mission statement is:”…dedicated to providing a variety of library materials and services, and a wide-range of programs to meet the informational, educational, and cultural interests of the community (Cherry Hill, 2008a, para. 1). Thus, this library
asserts itself as being community oriented.

The first area to be examined was membership criteria. When examining each library’s access or membership criteria, it becomes quite obvious that this is directly related to the mission objectives of these two libraries. Library access is usually required to use a library’s resources. The Cherry Hill Public Library per its mission statement, offers free admission to the library for all members of the public. Library privileges, which includes access to the library’s electronic databases, is gained via use of the library card barcode. A library card can be obtained by a member of the public upon showing proof of residence in the Cherry Hill Township.

In contrast with the Cherry Hill Public Library, Drexel’s Hagerty library offers library access privileges, but they are limited to current and former students, as well as to current and former faculty and staff. Library access privileges typically allow a patron to log into the computers and access Drexel’s databases. The library itself can be entered by anyone with the use of identification. Based on conversation with Mr. Siftar, I learned that statistical data shows a very low number of non-Drexel affiliated requests for library entrance (Siftar, personal communication, April 20, 2009).

The second area of interest was resource concentration. Again, per the mission statements of these two libraries, it is apparent that both of these libraries are geared towards different resource priorities. Per the Cherry Hill library’s website, it is apparent that this institution seeks to offer a wide range of resources to meet the diverse cultural, educational, as well as social needs of its community (Cherry Hill, 2008b). This is evident in the conference rooms, the art gallery, the employment support center, as well as the many other community social services offered by the library.

In addition, the Cherry Hill Public Library provides a variety of outreach resources for its patrons. These include a service called “Next-Reads” in which e-mails are sent to for its patrons
with a list of new and upcoming books in various genres (Cherry Hill, 2008a). They also have a book club, a teen club, a writer’s roundtable, computer classes, as well other clubs and groups. Scheduling for these services are supported via a robust and up-to-date website.

In contrast, the Hagerty library, as an academic institution, concentrates the majority of its funds and library staff efforts to maintain, and support, the use of academic resources. Such resources include printed publications as well as subscriptions to electronic databases. During my interview with Mr. Siftar, I was told how the Drexel library staff make a concerted effort to ensure that the library contains all the resources needed for use by students and faculty in their respective areas of study (Siftar, personal communication, April 20, 2009).

An example of the differences in library priorities manifests itself in terms of some of the specific databases offered by each library. For example, the Cherry Hill Public library offers its patrons on-site access to Ancestry.com, a genealogy database. Based on my interview with Mrs C., I understand that the paid databases, such as Ancestry.com, are the result of feedback from library patrons, who find genealogy databases to be helpful for family tree research. In contrast, the Hagerty library, as an academic library, offers access to various academic resources, such as Wilsonweb, Web of Science, Lexis-Nexis, as well as ProQuest. The Hagerty library also offers access to WorldCat, which is a very useful database for searching for books and other publications.

The third area of difference was library funding. The Cherry Hill Public Library is funded by the municipality of Cherry Hill. In addition, per my interview with Mrs. C., the township takes care of all library IT needs. Now the reader may not be aware of the current fiscal crisis, but many libraries are being forced to either maintain existing services and/or reduce services as a result of the current international economic crisis. In light of this situation, it is of enormous benefit for a public library to be able to count on a consistent budget. The township of Cherry Hill is an affluent township and was
thus able to support the funding and construction of one of the largest library buildings in New Jersey, at a cost of $22 million dollars (NJLA, 2008).

In contrast, the Hagerty library is funded by Drexel University, a privately funded university. According to Mr. Siftar, the annual Hagerty library budget has been flat for two years. But, as he pointed out, this does not take inflation into consideration. Still, according to Siftar, per a 2004 research report, Drexel was found to be on par with similar universities in regard to spending per full time student (Siftar, personal communication, April 20, 2009).

The fourth topical area of difference between both libraries dealt with popular user services. The most often requested user services differed slightly at both libraries. User services at the Cherry Hill Public Library were concentrated in the areas of checked out items, internet use, and reference requests. This is per a 2009 Cherry Hill Public Library Survey Report which tracked activities per patron count (Cherry Hill, 2009 February). In contrast, per Mr. Siftar, Hagerty Library’s requested user services have been mainly concentrated in the areas of online database access and on-site reference requests (Siftar, personal communication, April 20, 2009). I would attribute this difference due to the different needs of both library patron groups. Many of the academic library patrons are off-campus students who are looking for reference material for class.

Environmental observations

In comparing the two environments, I would say that, generally speaking, both facilities appear to offer patrons the opportunity to obtain information via both in-person as well as online interaction with reference librarians. The academic library, which deals with a much larger number of long distance patrons, i.e. distance education students, receives more online requests.
Both library environments appeared to be warm and conducive to patron needs. However, due to differences in mission objectives, the academic library is geared towards servicing the educational needs of the Drexel academic community while the public library is geared towards servicing the broad needs of its patrons.

The physical environment of a library is important. The Cherry Hill Public library, with its recent construction, seems to have taken the concept of natural light and large spaces to heart. My on-site library observation confirmed this as I saw a large number of patrons, ranging in all ages, engaged in various activities at the library. They appeared to be enthusiastic and happy. In contrast, the Hagerty library is older. Per my interview with Mr. Siftar, and a posted library sign, the library is in the midst of a multi-year project to upgrade ceiling tiles, air conditioning, carpeting, and student spaces (Siftar, personal communication, April 20, 2009).

With regard to membership, membership limits are placed on the academic library resources. These limits appear to be designed to allow Drexel students and faculty the opportunity to access required online course material without hindrance due to system overload. In contrast, the public library offered access to anyone who could show proof of township residence. The proof of residential residence is required as library membership is limited to residents of Cherry Hill township.

My review of the library collections show that each library appears to be cognizant of the services required for its patrons. The academic library, per its mission statement of supporting the Drexel academic community, offers academic databases in such fields as science, medical, and literature for its student body. The academic library is geared towards academic information and its services reflect this emphasis. An example of the emphasis on academic services would
be the Hagerty Library’s online article service. This service, called EZ-borrow, permits students to borrow books from other cooperating academic libraries (Hagerty, 2008b). This is a resource which students can request articles not available in Drexel’s databases.

In contrast, the Cherry Hill Public Library’s library collection appears to be a reflection of its commitment to provide a broader range of cultural, educational and self help resources to meet the needs of its patrons. This is evident based on its mission statement. Databases such as Ancestry helps meet the requests of library patrons for genealogy databases. Another example of their varied resources would be the library’s monthly calendar with information on computer classes. And, there is also the library’s book club as well as its health reference center database.

Both libraries have librarians who appear to passively respond to patron walk-up request. I did not see any evidence of librarians engaging in proactive activities, such as walking around the library to assist patrons. If I were to open up a new public library, I would probably retain the open air quality of the Cherry Hill Public Library as well as many of their databases. The opening of a library requires decisions regarding cost of membership and library objectives. I think one would probably need to first conduct a survey to determine the preferred specialty of the library collection by the patron base.

In terms of the perfect or ideal library, my ideal library would provide a concentration of databases, periodicals, and books dealing with genealogy. It would be a specialty library and would cater to on-site as well as off-site patrons. An example of such a library is the Godfrey Library in Middletown, Ct. They previously offered a database called Proquest until the agreement was terminated (Eastman, 2006). It has been my observation that in many cases, newspaper databases with regional content are only available from libraries in their respective region. Thus, a library in Silver Spring, MD could choose to offer a database for a local newspaper such as the Baltimore Sun. In other words, the
decision and selection of some databases by libraries appears to have a correlation to the geographic location of the particular library and the patron’s needs.

I also feel the ideal library should also have librarians with positive body language and the ability to smile at an incoming patron. I found little evidence of this positive body language at either library. Per my interviews, the general opinion was that most signage at libraries was ignored by patrons. I was told that, in general, people simply do not read signs.

5. Library recommendations

I am cognizant that library services cost money. After all, it costs money to pay for salaries, publications, computers, and databases. Bearing this in mind, per my library interviews, I found librarians at both libraries to be cognizant of library costs as well as expenses. Mrs. C., Mrs. B., and Mr. Siftar appear to be examples of library staff who are aware of library costs. Patron statistics, such as those used by these librarians, is an important element in the decision regarding the allocation of library resources. I think usage of patron statistics by library staff is imperative. It is important for libraries to be proactively engaged in the intelligent analysis of patron usage so that they can effectively allocate limited library funds.

I would heartily agree with the argument for an open and pleasant environment for library patrons. Regardless of patron needs, it is important that the library ensure the availability of a comfortable quite area. These quiet areas should be equipped with sufficient light, comfortable chairs, and proper air circulation. In addition, power ports for laptops or mp3 players should be available.

I also feel it is extremely important for libraries to examine their online catalogs to ensure accuracy and usability. For those engaged in research, it is extremely convenient to check an online catalog for a particular resource prior to visiting a library. Unfortunately, due to outdated catalog information or
nonfunctioning software, this is not always a fruitful experience. Patrons need accurate online catalogs.

In conclusion, I will close with a library membership suggestion. As we know, many patrons make use of library databases. As an avid user of these library services, I would suggest that management consider initiating a membership sales promotion on their respective websites. In my experience, extensive website searching is often necessary in order to locate any reference to “out-of-town” library membership. In my opinion, out of town membership could be a way for libraries to derive additional revenue. The reality is that the current economy is affecting many libraries with regard to freezes or declines in annual budgets. And, based on today’s depressed economy, with its possible negative implications on library budgets, I feel libraries may need to consider some creative funding ideas.
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