

LuEsther T. Mertz Library Needs Assessment

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Introduction

The LuEsther T. Mertz Library, which serves the New York Botanical Gardens, is a world renowned special library. It was founded in 1899, and has evolved into one of the largest, most comprehensive botanical and plant libraries in the world (nybg.org). The LuEsther T Mertz Library is particularly unique in that while it is a special library serving a specific population, it is also open to the community and the public. As a result, the library's service community is exceptional, and the library must work to meet the needs of both experts in the field of horticulture, landscape design, botany, and gardening, as well as meet the needs of the casual user.

The forthcoming document takes an in-depth look at the populations the library serves, as well as explores the possibilities for future collaborations and connections which could result in further evolving the Mertz library service community. This document also assesses the needs of the library, and provides conclusions and recommendations to improve the library's existing collection development plan.

Community Analysis

The library is located in The Bronx, New York, which has a population of nearly 1.4 million. The local population is very diverse including 25.5% persons under the age of 18, 11.2% persons over 65, 45.5% white (alone) persons, 43.5% black or African American (alone) persons, 4.4% Asian (alone) persons, 54.8% Hispanic or Latino persons, and 33.7% foreign born persons (census.gov).

In addition to the general population of the surrounding area, the library serves the more than 300,000 yearly visitors to the New York Botanical Gardens which come to attend hands on curriculum based programming (nybg.org). 90,000 of those visitors are children from underserved neighboring communities (nybg.org). Each year the gardens get over 3000 teacher visitors from New York City Public School System, who participate in professional development programs (nybg.org). The LuEsther T. Mertz Library also serves garden staff, students, professionals, and the general public in all aspects of plant studies (NCCRS).

There are three colleges with at least one related program within a 10 mile radius of the garden library, including NYBG: CUNY Bronx Community College, Lehman College, and Fordham University. The botanical gardens and library also serve the School of Professional Horticulture and is a nationally and internationally recognized research center (nybg.org).

The New York Botanical Gardens and the LuEsther T. Mertz Library offer several opportunities for academic research and adult education. The Humanities Institute is a division within the LuEsther T. Mertz Library that was formed to encourage cross-disciplinary research among students, scholars, and professionals doing work in the field of plant studies. The Institute sponsors year-long Mellon fellowships for pre- and post-doctoral researchers from around the world, as well as a Visiting Scholars Program that offers short-term residencies for established scholars seeking to advance their research in new directions. The Botanical

Gardens offers Certificate Programs in botanical art and illustration, landscape design, horticulture, floral design, botany, gardening, and horticulture therapy. Additionally, the School of Professional Horticulture is part of the NYBG, and it offers a two-year, full-time training program for students who wish to become horticulturists (nybg.org).

The NYBG has several educational programs for children, families, and teachers. The Edible Academy provides education, hands-on activities, and interactive programs to teach children, teachers, and families about growing and preparing fruits, vegetables, and herbs. The Children's Gardening Program offers hands-on gardening instruction for ages 3-12 in the spring, summer, and fall. The High School Explainer Program is a competitive internship for ages 14-17 where students work as volunteer educators in the Everett Children's Adventure Garden. The NYBG runs Adventure Camps, which are seasonally themed camps for grades K-5 that take place during winter, spring, and summer breaks. Professional development opportunities for teachers include six-day Professional Development Institutes and half- or full-day customizable workshops. The NYBG also offers the opportunity for class trip workshops and programs for grades pre-K-8 (nybg.org).

Community Survey

The LuEsther T. Mertz Library special library, while open to the public, serves a very particular population of students, teachers, garden staff, researchers, and plant and horticulture professionals. The most applicable means of conducting a community survey would be a focus group. The focus group should consist of professionals in the field that can help to provide additional information that meets the specific needs of a special library. The focus group will also allow professionals to help library understand what gaps might exist in the collection or services to better meet the needs of the users.

Potential participants in the focus group could include department heads and the neighboring collegiate institutions, including CUNY Bronx Community College Earth Systems and Environmental Science, Department Chairperson, Professor Martin Fein; Lehman College Department of Earth, Environmental, and Geospacial Sciences, Department Chair, Dr. Yuri Gorokhovich; and Fordham University Environmental Science, Program Directors, Mark Botton & Craig L. Frank. Other potential participants could include NYBG School of Professional Horticulture Staff Member Jamie Boyer (Stavros Niarchos Foundation Vice President for Children's Education) and NYBG School of Professional Horticulture Advisory Board Member Barbara Corcoran (Vice President for Continuing and Public Education), both of whom could make recommendations for the library which would create connections with existing programming at the botanical garden. Another excellent potential participant is Bronx Library Center (Branch of NYPL System) Chief Librarian Michael Alvarez, who could make suggestions to enhance the library's current service to the Bronx population. Lastly, local school principals, whose students attending programming, might be able to provide insight into the success of that programming, and what might bring the children back to the library.

The focus group would be a meeting where all participants could interact and speak freely. While there are seven specific questions which will guide the conversation and provide much needed answers, this will also provide an opportunity for participants to learn more about the library, and build connections with their own institution.

Focus Group Questions:

1. What are ways in which you've witnessed the Mertz library contributing to the public good, and what can it do to do more?
2. What sorts of partnerships and collaborations exists for us to reach a broader scope of users?
3. In what new ways can the Mertz library serve as a space for community engagement?
4. What changes have you or your agency/organization noticed in the demographics of the community?
5. What changes would you suggest to respond to these changes?

6. Do you have any suggestions to increase our online presence?
7. What gaps do you see in the services provided by the library?

Conclusions and Recommendations

The LuEsther T. Mertz Library's website includes information about their current collection development practices. The library holds over 1600 active subscriptions to journals around the world and adds hundreds of monographic items each year in dozens of languages. The Acquisitions Department performs an annual analysis of acquisitions patterns by comparing the library catalog against published bibliographies and by reviewing the use statistics for accessing library resources. The library continues to grow in its acquisitions of electronic resources. The library also has an exchange program where it offers participating organizations and institutions around the world New York Botanical Garden (NYBG) publications in exchange for publications from their home institutions ("What We Have").

Recommendations are that the Mertz Library continue the current collection development practices, especially the annual analysis of the catalog. Annual analysis is vital to maintain the library's status as one of the most comprehensive botanical and horticultural libraries in the world, and to ensure that the library always offers the most up-to-date resources.

Both the Mertz Library and the NYBG place a large emphasis on research, especially at academic and professional levels. The library serves the School of Professional Horticulture, the Humanities Institute within the library, and the adult education classes offered by the NYBG. Additionally, both the NYBG and Mertz Library express their commitment to botanical and environmental research in their mission statements. Therefore, the library's collection should have resources that not only span the breadth of all manner of plant studies, but they should also cover the depth of information on those topics. If students and scholars are coming specifically to the Mertz Library to expand and enhance their research, then the library needs to

have the resources covering virtually all the topics that they could possibly want to study. While partnerships with other libraries can certainly be an added benefit, we recommend reviewing materials that have previously been requested and adding them to the Mertz library collection. This will reduce the the time it takes for library staff to determine logistics of borrowed materials, as well as the time students and patrons spend waiting to receive them.

Another way to make more connections within the community would be to form partnerships with the surrounding post secondary institutions. There are three colleges within a 10 mile radius of the Mertz Library which have programs related to botany and environmental sciences. These institutions contain an untapped market of potential users and patrons. Our focus group will bring together department chairs and professors from each of these universities to build relationships and attempt to connect with the unserved market.

One category, in particular, which could be improved are the services and materials available for children and teens. The NYBG offers several programs for grade school level students, and it places significant emphasis on youth education and outreach. However the library does not include a collection for younger patrons. We acknowledge that full-blown kids' section like those in public libraries is not necessary; the library is after all primarily intended for academic and professional research. However, because the public has access to, and is welcome to use many of the resources in the library's collection, a collection of materials directed toward youth could fill a currently existing gap.

With so many youth programs and so many children and teens coming to the NYBG to learn about gardening and plant sciences, it makes sense to supplement the education they receive with a library of resources geared towards their age groups. By promoting the Mertz library as one children can return to, outside of school related programs, it will encourage return visitors, and thus, increased circulation. One way to do this would be to create a youth library

“annex” that is close to where the youth programs are held, perhaps in the new Edible Academy complex.

A final suggestion for the Mertz Library is to build connections with local public libraries. The focus group included the chief librarian of the nearest branch of New York Public Library. While the Mertz Library has established many partnerships and connections both nationally and internationally, a gap exists in local partnerships. Building bridges and connections with the public library gives the Mertz Library an opportunity to serve as an extension of the public libraries' science section, thus increasing the number of visitors the library receives, as well as potential increases in circulation.

This will also allow the Mertz Library to serve as a space of community engagement. The Mertz Library has the advantage of being located within a public, outdoor garden space, which could provide a beautiful backdrop for public library programming and events. By participating or hosting public library events, the Mertz Library can attract members of the community as new users.

The current collection development practices for the LuEsther T. Mertz Library ensure that the library offers one of the most comprehensive, up-to-date collections of plant science resources in the world. By making the changes we have suggested regarding analysis of InterLibrary loans, development of youth resources, and cultivation of partnerships with local public libraries and educational institutions, the Mertz Library will reach more researchers, students, teachers, and community members and will continue to enrich the field of plant science, as well as further the mission of the New York Botanical Gardens to be an advocate for the plant kingdom.

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