Statement of Competency C:

C. Recognize the social, cultural and economic dimensions of information use

One of the key principles put forth by the American Library Association (ALA) is equal access to information. However, different users make use of information in different ways, depending on their cultural background and socio-economic status, which often determines what kind of information people place value on, based on their cultural values or economic need.

When selecting resources for their collections, public libraries seek to place the needs of their communities first. This is often more easily done in branch libraries that serve neighborhoods with distinct cultural and ethnic compositions. Libraries often have resource centers that are dedicated to various members of the population based on their needs, such as centers for people seeking information about furthering their education. Cultural resources include materials in languages other than English, or materials that are of interest to ethnic minorities and members of the GLBT community. Collections of resources, known as pathfinders are often displayed on library websites or printed up on flyers and placed in the various resource centers of libraries.

Libraries often have resource centers devoted to jobs and careers that are set apart from the general collection, for those who are looking for work, either due to unemployment or a wish to change their vocation. The presence of Internet access in libraries allows users who are without homes or who do not have access to computers through any other means, the means to have access to email and other Internet-based resources. This provides users who might otherwise be socially isolated due to their economic status with a means by which they can find information about potential employment opportunities as well as contact potential employers.
As a resource for education, libraries offer services such as literacy programs and programs for immigrants who wish to become United States citizens. Access to meeting rooms at libraries are also provide an opportunity for groups of diverse cultures and backgrounds to present programs that are relevant to their cultural experiences.

Many users who are homeless also depend on public libraries as places of refuge, as they are free, and open to all who may wish to use them, regardless of socio-economic status. However, use of the libraries by homeless persons generates their own sets of management issues for librarians and other members of the library staff. The unfortunate truth is that many homeless patrons who rely on libraries as a place of refuge from inclement weather or the streets often suffer from mental illnesses that can cause them to be disruptive to other patrons who are using the library. One question that public libraries must face is what is their role in dealing with the situations that homeless patrons bring into the library? Often, libraries do not have the resource to address the needs of homeless patrons that often tend to social needs. Many libraries have tried to address the situation of these patrons by providing information about local social services through which they might be able to find assistance that libraries do not have the means to offer.

Evidence and Criteria for Selection


I am submitting a paper that was written as a group project with Shelly Ann Buchanan, Melissa Mallen and a classmate who wishes to remain anonymous for LIBR 204-01: Information Organizations and Management. It examines situations in which the principles of equal access to
information are challenged by the presence of "patrons with problems", who oftentimes are homeless individuals, and some of whom have mental illnesses that can cause them to be disruptive to other patrons making use of the services of the San Francisco Public Library (SFPL). It discusses how the library goes about maintaining an open space for all users, regardless of economic status, and the challenges that occur. It also discusses ways in which libraries can potential be of service to these users and other underserved populations. Our sources included professional journal and newspaper reporting on issues around homelessness in libraries, a position paper put forth by the ALA, interviews with library personnel at SFPL and Maricopa County, AZ, and the assigned text for LIBR 204-01. We also examined the historical responses of homeless advocacy groups in San Francisco to the situation of homeless patrons in SFPL.

This evidence demonstrates my competency in this area through recognition that public libraries play a role in the community that extends far beyond providing information, and that they are often faced with the need to address social concerns that may not at first glance have anything to do with the provision of access to information. My role in this paper was in researching information about homeless in San Francisco, as well as information about alternative responses to homeless patrons at library systems outside of San Francisco.

*Note:* I requested and received permission from three of the group members to identify them by name. As the fourth member did not reply to my request, I am rendering that person anonymous. I requested and received permission from Marshall Shore Phoenix and Maricopa County (Ariz.) libraries with whom I spoke to identify him by name.

This was a group project in which we were given an assignment to develop a reference resources pathfinder on a certain topic. Our group chose to do one bases on unemployment and careers, as it was topical due to economic circumstances at the time this paper was written. The goal of this pathfinder is to provide a person who is either unemployed or seeking to make a career or other vocational change with a set of resources by which such a user could find either short-term employment, guides to careers, job-hunting techniques, unemployment insurance, educational opportunities, and counseling for those who are unemployed. The pathfinder includes reference books and links to websites from various state, federal, private and non-profit entities that have information about career and employment opportunities. My role in the project was to schedule group meetings via Elluminate and Skype, as well as research psychological resources for unemployed persons.

I feel that this piece of evidence demonstrates my competency in this area, by demonstrating how public libraries can provide informational resources to members of the public who are suffering from adverse economic conditions through unemployment, or who seek to improve their economic standing through better career and educational opportunities.

*Note:* I requested and received permission from all the members of the group to identify them by name for the purposes of this e-Portfolio submission.
3. LIBR 234 – Intellectual Freedom Seminar – Librarian Interview

In this interview for the Intellectual Freedom Seminar, the librarian stated that meeting the needs of the community comes first in selecting resources for the library’s collection. The librarian also states that the library has a broad range of works in languages other than English. In addition, it was stated that language barriers and economic circumstances need to be taken into account as such circumstances may hinder a user’s ability to access information. A user may not be able to communicate with a librarian who does not speak their language, or else a user from an underserved community who relies on a library for Internet access may find their ability to search the Internet restricted by the use of filters, which would render such access un-equitable as a user with Internet access at home may not be hindered by such restrictions. In addition, how materials are labeled in a library should be taken into consideration when attempting to classify materials on shelves.

I feel this evidence demonstrates my competency in this area by demonstrating how public libraries take community, cultural and economic needs into account when selecting and arranging materials in their collections, as well as making sure that access is equitable for all members of the community.

*Note:* While I did obtain permission from the librarian to identify him or her by name and exact location of employment, I was not able to obtain permission to do so for the purposes of this e-Portfolio, so I have removed any identifying pieces of information from the evidence.
Conclusion

Public libraries are not only repositories for information. They are also immersed in the communities that they serve, and perform a civic function within those communities. People recognize that public libraries are open to all who wish to enter, and so the needs of the community are brought directly in through the library’s front doors. Libraries have responded to these needs by providing information in a variety of ways, from materials in non-English languages, to identifying resources that may be of interest to individual ethnic or social groups, to assisting impoverished and homeless patrons with finding resources that will improve their lives. It reflects well on libraries that they do not restrict themselves to only providing information in the form of collections, but that they also develop those collections with the needs of the community in mind, and that they do not shrink from addressing the needs of users who may not seek to use the library in what may termed a traditional way, but who use it for a place of refuge.