



# Library Profile

## **C. E. WELDON AND MCWHERTER PUBLIC LIBRARIES**

WEAKLEY COUNTY, TENNESSEE

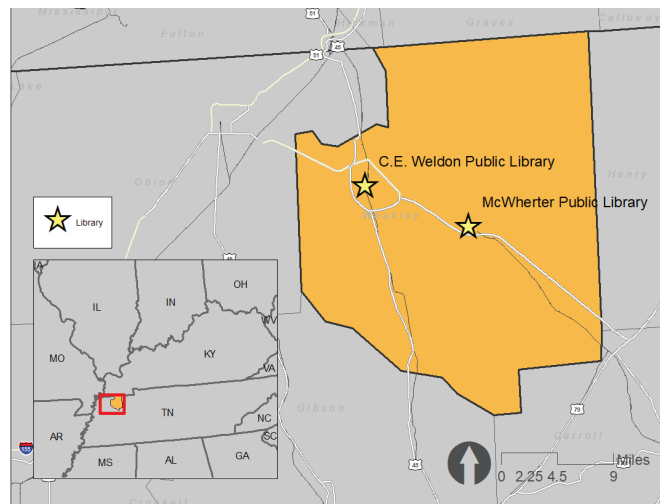
# Library Profile: C. E. Weldon and McWherter Public Libraries



## WEAKLEY COUNTY, TENNESSEE

The C. E. Weldon and McWherter Public Libraries are located in the cities of Martin and Dresden, the largest cities in Weakley County, Tennessee. C. E. Weldon, the larger of the two libraries, has an annual budget near \$300,000 and six full-time staff, while McWherter has three full-time librarians. Both libraries are independently funded and operated by their respective cities and are part of the Obion River Regional Library network. The network is part of a statewide governance structure and provides administrative support and resources like training and professional development to individual network members.

Both libraries promote residents' wellbeing through responsive activities and programs that reflect the needs and desires of patrons in Weakley County. The C. E. Weldon Public Library's mission statement reflects these goals: "Enriching lives by providing quality materials and services which fulfill educational, informational, cultural, and recreational needs in a friendly, respectful, and businesslike atmosphere."



## WEAKLEY COUNTY

Weakley County is home to just more than 34,000 residents. Martin and Dresden, where the C. E. Weldon and McWherter Public Libraries are located, are both small rural communities with a population of 10,721 and 2,957 respectively. Martin is also home to the University of Tennessee Martin (UTM), part of the five-campus University of Tennessee system. Weakley County

is relatively low income, with a median income of \$38,040 compared to \$55,322 nationwide. Weakley County's population has declined nearly 3 percent over the last five years, while statewide population has grown by nearly 4 percent over the same period. Residents are predominantly White (87 percent), and the poverty rate hovers just above the national average at 12.3 percent.

|                | Population  | % Change in Population (2000–2016) | % White | % Black | % Hispanic | % Asian | % Other | Median Household Income | % Families in Poverty |
|----------------|-------------|------------------------------------|---------|---------|------------|---------|---------|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| United States  | 318,558,162 | 13.2                               | 62.0    | 12.3    | 17.3       | 5.2     | 3.3     | \$55,322                | 11.0                  |
| Weakley County | 34,024      | -2.5                               | 87.2    | 8.9     | 2.2        | 0.1     | 2       | \$38,040                | 12.3                  |

Compared to other rural counties across the country, Weakley County's K–12 students perform well across a range of publicly available measures of success. Weakley County fell in the top quartile of the School Effectiveness Index.<sup>1</sup>

The largest industries are Education Services, Manufacturing, Health Care & Social Assistance, and Finance & Insurance, which collectively employ 54 percent of county workers.

|                | Total Labor Force | % Education Services | % Manufacturing | % Health Care & Social Assistance | % Finance & Insurance |
|----------------|-------------------|----------------------|-----------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|
| United States* | 131,362,978       | 9.2                  | 9.3             | 14.5                              | 4.4                   |
| Weakley County | 11,075            | 17.0                 | 17.0            | 11.0                              | 9.0                   |

Data Sources: 2012–16 American Community Survey five-year estimates; U.S. Census Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (LEHD), 2017.

\*Continental figures for total labor force include the 48 lower states and Washington, DC.

<sup>1</sup> Data elements included in the School Effectiveness Index, along with measures for Weakley County, can be found at the beginning of Appendix II.

## SITE VISIT PARTICIPANTS AND DATA COLLECTION

In fall 2019, the study team conducted interviews with 12 current library staff and representatives from seven different partner organizations. Site visit interviews conducted with staff and partners focused on understanding the libraries' programming and partnerships that support education in Weakley County as well as the libraries' institutional approaches to assessment and sustainability.

In addition, the libraries provided the following data to create the network map included in this profile:

- 2016 Tennessee Public Library Survey
- 2016 Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) Public Libraries Survey responses for the C. E. Weldon and McWherter Public Libraries
- Program descriptions for several library programs, including a list of partner organizations
- Interview notes and related materials collected by the case study team

This site profile includes the following:

- A summary of key programs and partnerships that support formal and informal education within the libraries' local communities
- An overview of the libraries' connections to their local communities
- Descriptive network maps that illustrate the scope and variety of connections the libraries maintain with local partners throughout the county and beyond

## PROMOTING EDUCATIONAL WELLBEING IN WEAKLEY COUNTY TAKES INDIVIDUAL INITIATIVE AND INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Partnerships play an important role in the programming to support education in Weakley County. With relatively few full-time staff between the two libraries, many of the libraries' programs rely on external partners for additional capacity or to recruit participants. In some library systems, these kinds of partnerships would require substantial planning, administrative approval, and possibly a formal agreement between the library and external partners. Programming in the Weakley County libraries tends to be less formal, relying more often on social connections and shared goals, rather than legal relationships like contracts or Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs).

For example, one of the McWherter Public Library's biggest events is the county's Big Read, which brings together book clubs from across Weakley County to read the same novel and engage in a facilitated discussion of the

book's themes. Each year, two external partners organize the program: a local patron who lives across the street from the McWherter Public Library and serves on the library's board and a retired UTM literature professor. These patrons have organized the event for years without a formal agreement with the library.

In other cases, partnerships serve as a way to reach community members who have less access to the resources in the libraries themselves. The C. E. Weldon Public Library's partnership with a local senior center, for example, brings the library's art programming to a new location, reaching a population with limited mobility and limited access to the library's downtown location. The library works with the director of the senior center to schedule classes, but there is no formal arrangement or guarantee that the program will continue from one year to the next.

### **Partnership Example: Martin Housing Authority and the Growing Readers Program**

Nearly three years ago, the head children’s librarian from the C. E. Weldon Public Library approached the director of the Martin Housing Authority’s (MHA’s) educational program about applying for a grant to support a new science enrichment program for students. Although the library is located in the center of town, not all children have access to the facility or feel comfortable going into a public library. MHA provides a number of enrichment programs for resident families, including an after-school and childcare program, which serves approximately 65 children a day. MHA saw the partnership as an opportunity to build greater collaboration with the library.

Under the original grant, the library created special backpacks filled with books and science experiments for children to take home and explore with their families. The backpacks and take-home activities were supplemented by a module of science-related lessons and in-class activities that a children’s librarian delivered on-site at MHA. The program had a built-in evaluation component to measure how much children were learning through pre- and post-assessments. When the grant expired, neither the C. E. Weldon Public Library nor MHA had funding available to continue the program, but the organizations saw value in continuing to work together. Today, the partnership has evolved into a summer reading program, where a children’s librarian comes to MHA each week to deliver reading lessons to children.

## **AN INCLUSIVE ORIENTATION REMOVES BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION**

One of the characteristics of the libraries’ educational programs that sets them apart from the other institutions in the area is their orientation toward inclusivity. The C. E. Weldon Public Library, for example, offers a weekly Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) Club organized by the children’s librarian. Children meet each week in the library and perform science experiments that are similar to the kinds of activities children would participate in if they were part of a school

district’s gifted and talented science program. Unlike the school district program, however, the library’s program is open to any student who chooses to attend. Library programming is intentionally designed for patrons to be able to drop in and out, while educational programming in other institutions often require longer-term commitments. This commitment to inclusive programming is grounded in the libraries’ strong ties to individual residents and organizations in their small towns.

## **PLANNING FOR SUSTAINABILITY AS THE LIBRARIES TAKE ON A MORE PROMINENT ROLE**

The libraries' respective city budgets support the libraries in Weakley County, and while these budgets are modest, financial considerations are rarely the primary constraint on programming. Most library programs are small, serving 10 to 15 participants, and while they may carry material costs, it is common for librarians to contribute "sweat equity" to make the program's ends meet (e.g., sewing their own theatre costumes or delivering books to patrons in their own vehicles). Staff time and facility space tend to be the largest constraints on facilitating new and expanded programs.

In fall 2019, the C. E. Weldon Public Library was preparing to begin construction on a new facility, located across the street from its historic home at the end of the city's main street. The new facility, which will greatly expand the library's size and capacity, was funded by local donations and city funds. The new library facility

will offer an opportunity to host more and larger programming; new technical capacities like audiovisual recording equipment; and larger, more flexible meeting spaces that can be subdivided or expanded to fit the needs of the groups using them.

While the library staff were excited for their new home, interview participants raised questions about the additional capacity and funding needed to sustain the new facility. The new facility will likely require additional staff and carry higher operating costs than the library's existing facility. City staff were confident that the city would come up with any additional funding needed to support the new expanded facility. In the words of one department head, the new library was an investment in the city's future, a signal to current and future residents that the town was a thriving and growing place.

## **CLOSE-TO-THE-GROUND LIBRARIES RESPOND QUICKLY TO LOCAL NEEDS AND OPPORTUNITIES**

Unlike larger library systems, the libraries' approach to programming is not intentionally guided by an overarching strategic plan. While larger library networks develop lengthy strategic plans with specific program targets and programmatic goals, both Weakley County libraries approach programming in a more entrepreneurial fashion that responds to the immediate needs that librarians identify from their patrons. For example, a conversation between a librarian and a parent in the supermarket about a struggling math class in the local middle school inspired a children's librarian to create an after-school math tutoring program.

Similarly, when a librarian in the C. E. Weldon Public Library learned that senior residents in the community struggled to travel to the library, she

began distributing books and movies to places where seniors were likely to congregate: doctor's and dentist's offices, intensive care units, the local senior center, and even directly to people's homes.

The libraries in Weakley County tend to operate as conveners, providing a platform to share community resources and capacity. The local libraries provide some of the best meeting space in the county, and many local organizations hold their meetings in a library, where they organize their own events, services, and programming for the community. For example, when a local bank was looking for a site to host community classes on financial literacy for seniors and teens, the libraries were a natural partner—offering a comfortable and inviting space where

participants feel welcome and a place that reaches both populations, with the audiovisual and technological capacity needed to support the program.

The libraries also provide a platform for individuals to share their skills and talents with others. When a former English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher moved with her family to the area, a C. E. Weldon librarian recruited her to teach a Spanish-language class in the library. The weekly Spanish classes have become a resource to the burgeoning homeschool community in Weakley County. In the same way, the library's countywide Big Read offers a platform for a retired literature professor to continue helping others understand and appreciate literature. The

libraries' ability to identify community needs and quickly develop programs to address them reflect the strong social connections between the libraries' staffs and their communities.

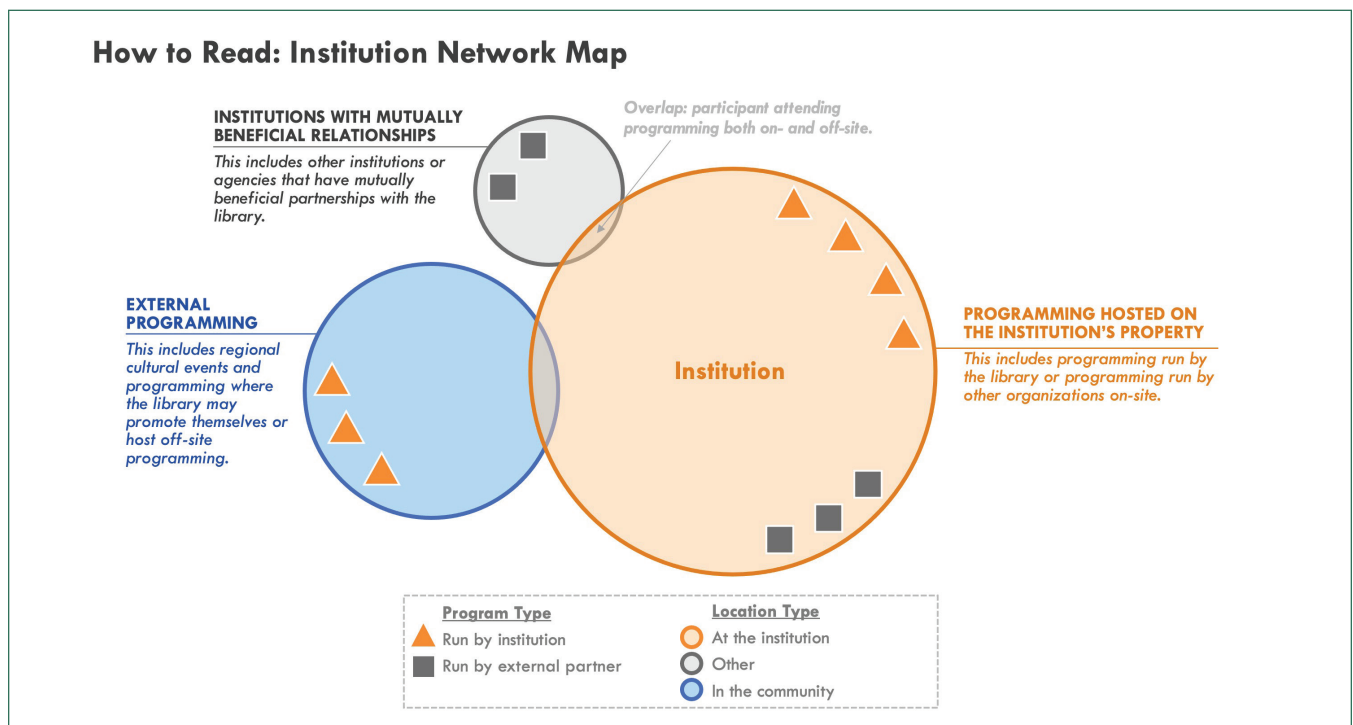
Time and again, the libraries' staffs and partners in the community cited the importance of personal relationships in making connections between people, organizations, and other institutions to meet the needs of local residents and their families. In their small towns, the libraries are critical meeting places that facilitate a series of personal and organizational connections that make it possible for so many residents to meet their needs and enjoy the different opportunities their towns have to offer.

## C. E. WELDON AND MCWHERTER PUBLIC LIBRARIES NETWORK MAPS

Using data provided by the C. E. Weldon and McWherter Public Libraries, the study team developed descriptive network maps to highlight the different types of connections the libraries maintain with other institutions in the local community. The maps illustrate the relationships between the C. E. Weldon and McWherter Public Libraries and those entities

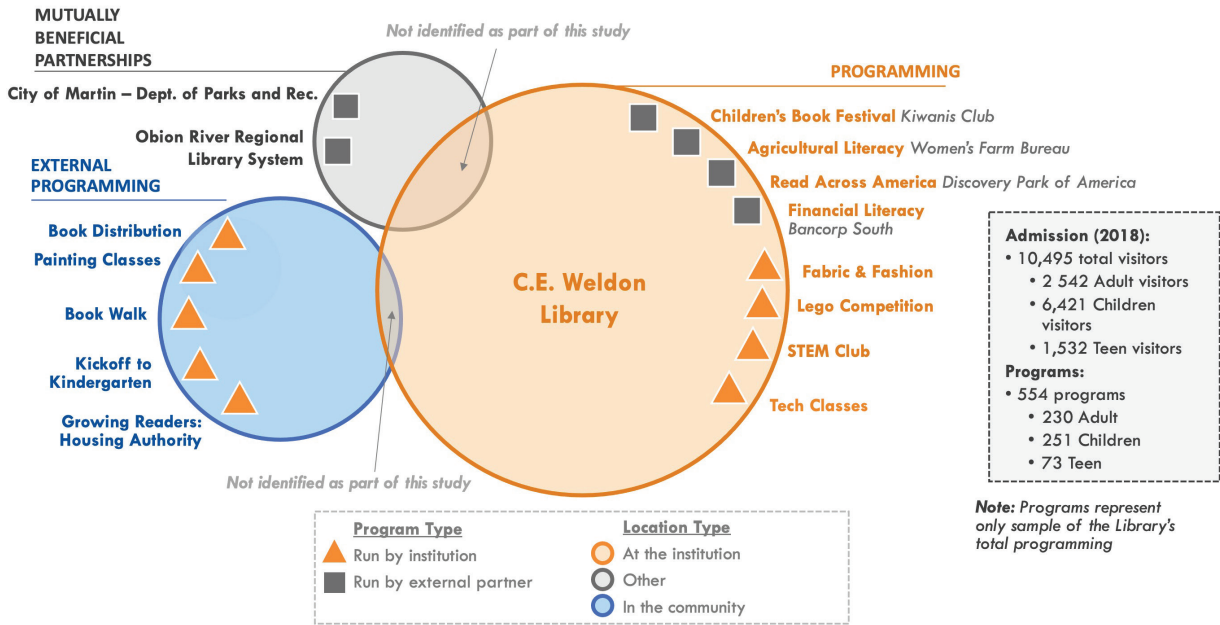
that offer programming at the libraries and those that support cross-marketing efforts or have reciprocal relationships with the libraries, and they include examples of off-site, library-led programming. The maps do not provide an exhaustive list of the libraries' programs but attempt to illustrate a subset of the relationships that the libraries maintain.

*NOTE: The network maps are purely descriptive. The connections represented on the maps do not necessarily, and are not intended to, provide estimates of the duration, durability, intensity, or broader economic impact of the relationships between the C. E. Weldon and McWherter Public Libraries and any single entity, or the broader network itself. The goal of the network maps is to represent the range and diversity of different types of institutions that connect to the libraries in different ways.*

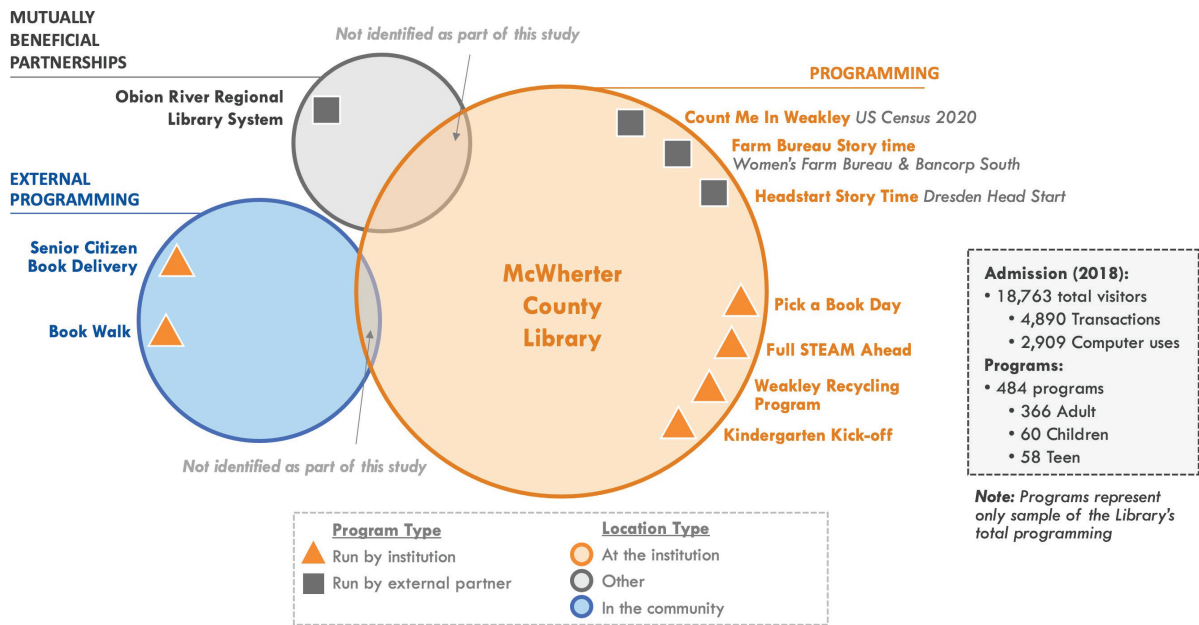




## C.E. Weldon Library Network Map



## McWherter County Library Network Map



The figures above illustrate a *sample* of the connections of the C.E Weldon and McWherter Public Libraries. Within the orange circles is a sample of programs conducted on the physical property of the libraries—both programs produced by the libraries and those produced by others. Within the blue circles is a sample of programs produced by the libraries and offered off-site in the community. The gray circles represent a sample of organizations that have reciprocal relationships with the libraries.