The Information Community of Latinos/Hispanic Library Users

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DAVILA: Examining Latinos/Hispanic Library Users

Abstract
This research paper examines the community of Latino and Hispanic users (referred to as Spanish-speaking by information professionals) of libraries within their localities. It discusses the background and diversity within the community, focusing on varying age groups and library types including public, school and academic. The paper describes the characteristics of this information group, while also focusing on its behaviors, tendencies and/or attitudes towards the library with regards to need, uses and services available. It concludes with reflections and analysis on how information professionals could improve or assist these needs and services, including any unmet services the community would benefit from.
Introduction

The passing of time has an incredible effect on the development of a culture and its people. United States citizens have especially seen a growing trend of diversity within their own population, with increasing numbers of different minority groups due to a combination of increased immigration and native births. In turn, their presence in society and culture is more noticeable and integrated, making them essential communities to prepare services for by information professionals.

In talking about growing minority populations, Latinos, Hispanics and those who identify with Spanish-speaking descent make up the largest minority group within the country after years of gradual yet incredible increases. According to the Pew Research Center’s Anna Brown (2014), the Latino/Hispanic/Spanish-speaking population reached a milestone of over 53 million people in 2012, which indicates a 50% increase since the year 2000. This also measures out to a population of Latinos/Hispanics that is “six times the population of 1970” (Brown, 2014). To compare, Brown also found that the overall increase in population for the United States was a mere 12% during the same period of time, 2000 to 2012.

Considering the large increase of the Latino/Hispanic population and the impact on their local communities, services and demands must be adequately prepared in order to satisfy the needs and demands of this group. In addition, considering the variety of demographics within this information community, the necessity to tailor services is understandable. Gustavo Lopez and Aileen Patten of the Pew Research Center (2015) also found that despite the population
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growth, Latinos and Hispanics are still behind in many facets of society. In 2013, 25% of Hispanics were in poverty, while only 27% of Hispanics had obtained a high school diploma, with 14% of Hispanics having gone further for a college degree. These statistics are saddening for a group that constitutes the largest minority group in the country, seeing the largest increase over time. Library services and their professionals have the capabilities to improve these statistics and improve quality of life.

Noting that information professionals are some of the most equipped professionals to handle the increased population and the needs that come with it, I intend to analyze noted services and attempts to assist the Latino/Hispanic community. To look further into this, I will be focusing upon such services and attempts by librarians and their library systems, referring to public, school and academic libraries alike. This will include a look into the needs of the Latino/Hispanic population along with their behavior and attitudes towards the library environment, the approaches to working with the Latino/Hispanic population by librarians and the attitudes and traits that information professionals who work with the population seem to possess.

Literature Review

Information professionals have contributed a significant amount of research when it comes to the Latino/Hispanic population’s reliance and usage of the library environment, along with recognizing the major needs of the population. The plethora of writings and articles used for this paper thoroughly cover the themes referred to in the introduction but with a strong focus
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upon professional experience that is layered with a history of interaction with Latinos and Hispanics.

Most of the sources recovered for this research were professionally driven, published and researched by established information professionals that have worked in the field. Denice Adkins, who researched Arizona libraries through the American Library Association’s support, conducted thorough work to track ten years, from 1999 to 2009, of developing library services to Latinos. The research determined that while the programs and services were expanded upon within the decade, the number is skewed. The number of libraries offering some Latino/Hispanic focused programming or service is truly what improved, whereas the amount of services hardly grew in general amongst the libraries surveyed. Coupled with that comes the revelation that the amount of trained, Spanish-speaking employees hardly improved at all in the decade (43% to 47% of surveyed libraries), furthering Adkins’ point that these libraries must continue to improve funding and focus toward this particular community. The major seeming improvement came from the increase in Spanish language catalog settings being made available, from 23% to 65%, and in cultural education for library staff from 24% to 56%.

Her research is instrumental to beginning the discussion of how libraries treat Latinos and prepare services for them. Much of the literature published related to Latino services in libraries does relate to actual studies regarding how services are geared toward them and how to improve those services. Annabel K. Stephens of the University of Alabama is another example of the numerous publications by actual information professionals and/or librarians. Her work *Twenty-First Century Public Library Adult Services* (2006) found that libraries should always
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prepare their services in accordance to their community, stating, “The selection of service responses should be firmly rooted in an awareness of what the people of the community served want and need. (Stephens, 2006). Her article, much like Adkins, Naidoo, Cuesta and Gonzalez, is rooted strongly in direct poll data of either employees or Latino patrons that visit their local library and the services. Their research is in regards to the programming that libraries have in relation to Latinos/Hispanics.

While the research methods are effective and, I believe, necessary for the argument of improving services, there is a seeming lack of research in regards to the services to Latinos in areas where Latinos are not a major population group. North Carolina has a growing population of Latinos/Hispanics that is acknowledged by Plummer Alston Jones Jr in her article. Arizona is another state that is referenced in research in this paper, which obviously has a large population of Latinos. Studies for other states with smaller groups should review the services, if any, that are geared toward Latinos there and gauge their effectiveness, along with Latino trust and confidence in library services. Another gap that can be addressed is research on a focus of Latino students in LIS programs, rather than mere diversity. Many articles I found addressed diversity in library science programs but not specifically the representation of Latinos in the programs. Such findings could help understand how to better recruitment of Latinos specifically and therefore how to promote more Latinos to join the profession.

Methodology

In order to develop a concentrated focus when studying the Latino/Hispanic community within the scope of library usage, I began my research with an examination of the Encyclopedia
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of Library and Information Sciences, which led me to discovering the Latinos and U.S. Libraries: History section. Through my evaluation of this text, I was able to familiarize myself with background knowledge on the information community and its history with the industry, noting the considerable progress developed since the Civil Rights era.

I applied general search terms to the LIS databases, to see how often such terms as “Latino”, “Hispanic” or “Spanish-speaking” yielded appropriate results considering the differentiating nature of how this information community is classified. Being of Latino/Hispanic descent, and identifying myself as “Latino”, I understood the risk that came with researching a topic possibly categorized by several different keywords. It was enlightening to find that the term “Latino” seemed to yield more results related to the varying library environments referenced in terms of evaluations of needs and programming provided to this community. “Latino”, based on the research, was an effective term, although “Hispanic” was not far behind, seemingly used as an alternative almost as much, or conjoined with the term “Latino” in the fashion presented in this paper.

Coupling the search terms to identify the community, I varied results with “public”, “academic” or “school” within the LIS databases as well to see the variety of sources that yielded, pinning the frequency of hits to each. The former outweighed the latter two by far, but “academic” and “school” matched in frequency. To understand how the same community responded to its needs and to services in differing environments, all three types of library terms remained in the research. This helped thoroughly understand the impact that librarians have or can have on the community.
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After finding the most accurate search terms and judging all three library terms adequate for research, findings with the LIS databases focused upon services rendered to Latinos/Hispanics, including findings that detailed programming, programming structure, collection development and management, along with strategies for outreach. Pairing the above search terms with these keywords used within the library profession yielded swift and concentrated results related to the analysis this paper intended.

Assisting my research more than any factor was personal experience, however. Being Latino, having worked in libraries as a professional, and working within a heavily populated Latino area locally allowed me to, directly and very early on, focus my intended scope of research to the services and needs of Latinos in relation to the preparation and qualifications of library and library staff. My firsthand experience also illuminated what were common behaviors of the community and staff including common needs by the community and staff in relation to each other, and, allowing for not only adequate research but also reflection upon the research.

Discussion

Needs of Latinos/Hispanics

The primary component to engaging with the Latino/Hispanic community and welcoming them into the library environment is through an understanding of their needs. Via early research conducted in 1980 by Michael Gonzalez, Bill Greeley, and Stephen Whitney, it was determined that in their study within the San Bernardino area, Latinos were very unfamiliar with the library and its function. Approximately “65% had never used anything but a school library” and “42% were unaware the library’s services included books” (Gonzalez, 1980). This unfamiliarity
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underscores the fact that Latinos are avid readers and education seekers, as Gonzalez also found, but lacked the experience with such facilities as it is a lacking tradition in Latino culture based on their origin country’s approach to libraries. They commonly preferred to work in environments where Spanish was prevalent to feel comfortable, noting, “65 percent with borrower’s cards lived near a branch library where bilingual service was available” (Gonzalez, 1980). Their lack of participation was deeply rooted in the difference in languages and lacking a sense of community, as many “demonstrated to have a need for cultural reinforcement, and the survey results further indicated this need is not a transient one.”

Yolanda J. Cuesta (1990), who was Chief of Library Development Services at California State Library, Sacramento, once observed “a great many of their [Latinos] needs are survival related (information on food and housing, medical services, jobs, transportation, legal matters)”. Latinos use the library as a bridge to the gap of their disadvantage, for research and educational advancement including English proficiency. But fascinatingly, the Latino interest in reading and usage of the library expands beyond mere necessity and into interest, says Cuesta:

This is an active, sophisticated reading community that keeps current on what is being published in the United States as well as in Latin America. They keep up with book reviews in Spanish-language magazines; they listen to and request titles discussed on Spanish-language radio talk shows. They wish to be current on the latest publications by popular Latin American authors (1990).

Latino interest in materials at the library is strong, indicating a needed focus in investing toward the collection. Concern has arisen, with rising focus on collections even since the turn of
the century, around when the population spike was booming. Teresa Mlawer (2006) found that in 2001, it was reported that only 44% of public libraries across the nation possessed a Spanish-language collection. While collections were limited, they still were considered the “best channels of distribution for Spanish-language books” (Mlawer, 2006). Mlawer and Cuesta both prove that while needs are indicated strongly in Latino library use, their recreational use of it factors into their use of the library extremely. Again, the library is seemingly challenged in some way in relation to Latinos, but is considered a strong hub for their interests, revealing a disconnect between the need and how it is being provided.

In a revealing study of academic libraries, Dallas Long (2011) found that Latino students seemingly held a hesitant view toward their library. They hardly used it, noting a “marked difference in library usage might stem out of a confusion between the role and purpose of the academic library as separate and distinct from the public or school library because of the academic library's lack of familiar resources and expressions of cultural inclusion” (Long, 2011). The participants in his study noted a sense of community in their public libraries at home, reflecting the neighboring areas they grew up in and a sense of community. The academic library seemed to present a less inclusive environment, indicating that a welcoming tone is necessary from staff.

Adding on to an interpreted lack of a welcoming environment is the seeming lack of resources and services that would be specified towards them. One service that directly improves a patron’s usage of the library and their reliance on materials is the advancement of eBook capabilities. Spanish language eBooks, however, are a scarce resource and a disadvantage to
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Latinos and Hispanics. Andrea Paganelli, in a *School Libraries Worldwide* study, found that eBooks are a limited commodity for Spanish language students, a place where eBooks would be extremely helpful. According to the study, “only one to three percent of eBook titles in vendor’s collections available in Spanish”, which is an incredibly low amount for the largest minority group in the nation at 17% of the population, and consistently growing (Paganelli, 2013).

Outreach for Latino Youth

As demonstrated by the needs found, libraries must tailor specific programming and services for Latinos, generating not only bilingual services for Spanish-speakers and their English-speaking children, but services that develop a sense of cultural relevance and community, while appealing to the interests of their patrons. My research has found several stunning examples that indicate a breath of fresh air into the approach of serving Latinos and displaying to them a strong desire to appease their interests and get them into the library.

Marcela Villagrán, the Spanish Outreach Specialist for Multnomah County at the time, developed the LIBROS Program, standing for Library Outreach in Spanish Program. Her program created a *Día de los Niños* bilingual program to celebrate childhood bilingual literacy and championed volunteerism and invitations to local artists and writers to develop a program that centered around Spanish culture (Villagrán, 2001). She continued on to work toward expanding LIBROS to add more volunteers, to adopt Spanish publication materials and focus more programming on family-oriented culture activities. All of this expansion could work toward unifying the community around the Multnomah County Library, increasing visitation, participation and the pride in the library. Hennepin County Library, in Minnesota, made a similar
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approach to their community by hosting a “El día de los niños/El día de los libros (Children’s Day/Book Day)” (Kuglin, 2009). Powered by the Association for Library Service to Children, Kuglin describes a national initiative, spotlighted in Multnomah, that provides a template of planning to develop a strong program that fosters literacy, familial pride and community engagement, while supporting the library to foster trust.

Developing an appeal to youth is challenging, as disinterest and lack of experience will wear patience thin with this age group. Through personal experience hosting a local young adult writer’s workshop, I have found only a certain few individuals stuck with the program, with the rest not in attendance after merely their first visit. Naidoo and Vargas’ research considers similar factors of altering a library’s approach to be specific to its intended audience to better engage and comfort that group. Naidoo and Vargas found that library systems, exemplified by Yuma County Public Library and Phoenix Public Library, successfully altered their approaches to engage Latino/Hispanic youth by shifting the focus of the programming to attract “non-library users” with programs that are considered popular by their age group and provide no “traditional literacy tie-ins” (Naidoo, 2011). Doing this provides a less formal introduction to the library, a more welcoming notion for teens to get their foot in the door, which provides a chance for librarians to work from there and garner the appreciation of the teens through exposure to various other services.

Outreach for Adult Latinos

The need to serve the older community of Latinos/Hispanics also requires a sense of specialized or focused programming that is aimed to foster trust and establish camaraderie
between the Latinos who visit the library and between Latinos and librarians. In addition to building trust, however, adult Latinos face a more common issue in handling library services: the language barrier. Younger Latinos are more inclined to learn the English language, growing up in the United States and/or learning it in school. To appeal toward adult Latinos and get them in the library, librarians need programming that can attack the language gap and appeal to the people. As Joanna Bolick (2015) and Patricia Montiel Overall (2014) both allude to in their research, bridging the language and culture barrier can be effectively approached with either “readers’ advisory” as Bolick emphasized, or through storytelling and sharing of similar experience culturally as Overall states. Bolick demonstrates that outreach through readers’ advisory can develop rapport and encouragement in patrons to learn English and feel comfortable. Overall focused on the works of Latino writer Rene Colato Lainez, whose works share bilingual experiences within US and El Salvadorian culture and their crossovers, which his students appreciated greatly. Focusing on sharing experience can encourage patrons to feel at home, appreciated and comfortable, inspiring a future reliance on libraries and that strong rapport.

The need to bring cultural familiarity is confirmed by Plummer Alston Jones Jr. of East Carolina University (2015), whose survey of adult education for immigrants in North Carolina found that library services that focus upon cultural-related activities and the language gap are instrumental in not only boosting trust amongst the Latino patrons but in increasing their education levels, which are already some of the lowest in the nation.
Another key to growing the usability of Latinos/Hispanics in the library is via professional development. By shifting what is a dominantly white profession to be more representative of Latinos and by training professionals to engage with Latinos, the visitation, reliance and trust that Latinos have in libraries will grow. Andreas Vårheim, who conducted a thorough research of libraries throughout the world and their approaches, studied “trust among first-generation Mexican immigrants who participated in English as a second language (ESL) classes.” He found that when programs are structured for Latinos, providing for an encouraging environment, inspired professionals, and a lack of “competition” with any outside services for adult education, Latinos tend to gravitate toward the library more. In interviews, various participants also admitted that they did not trust the library before and saw it as a place only for educated individuals. They grew to appreciate it once they realized that the library does not “dictate what you learn like the school, in the library you are free to learn what you want” (Vårheim, 2014). Through recruitment strategies via immigration support groups and direct outreach to the community, the Mexican immigrants were able to trust the librarians and build that camaraderie.

Encouragement and trust all relates to the building of professional mindsets. Linda W. Braun, a past president of ALA YA Library Services Association, states that librarians have a job that is “evolving constantly” and must be forward in their approach to service in general. As furthers her point by saying:

In libraries, it can be common to plan a big initiative over the course of months or years. But if we wait for everyone to agree and make sure every piece is in place, the world will
have moved on and what gets implemented may not resonate with the community anymore (2015).

The primary method of improving the approach to serving underserved groups, like Latinos, however, is to change the representation and approach of the professionals directly. This can be done by focusing on the students that go through library and information science programs in college. As Patricia Montiel Overall (2010) found in a separate study, and Kim Kyung-Sun (2006) in her own, direction for LIS programs can shape the thinking and approach of LIS professionals. Kyung-Sun found that increasing diversity within the student body is a key for students to further feel comfortable. Seeing students like themselves is a confidence boost, and her study found strong suggestions including increasing alumni involvement in school studies and focusing on financial aid (2006). The study also suggests that there be a focus on multiculturalism and diversity as a class, to prepare individuals for their professional endeavors. Overall suggested similarly in her studies, finding that placing LIS students in situations that will expose them to working with diverse people will dramatically improve their preparation for work (2010).

Via direct instruction to LIS professionals going through their schooling, students will immediately gain the knowledge they need to engage with Latinos. Like the program at San Jose State University, which I hope to complete in the next couple of years, instructors can also encourage their students to investigate their own research topics related to the class, much like the INFO 200: Information Communities course at SJSU.

Conclusion
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Latinos, whether in public or academic libraries, wish to feel welcomed through the programming, materials provided and the staff’s interactions in assistance with services provided. It is crucial that libraries demonstrate a sense of outreach to foster that sense of community and relationship. The primary factor in creating that trust, community and friendship, however, is through the effort of information professionals and librarians to take the step of educating themselves on diversity and issues with Latinos to prepare a way to communicate and to relate to patrons easier, thus developing a welcoming environment. If Latinos see that librarians and such truly care about their issues and their education, they will flock to the library.

This focus must also begin in graduate school for information science professionals. Exposing them to situations frequently in their studies, whether through firsthand experience or through studies in class will allow them a chance to be prepared for most situations related to Latinos. Also increasing the diversity of the student body will then provide a trickledown effect that will diversify the profession and make Latinos further comfortable, when seeing more fellow Latinos working behind the desk.

In addition, developing the Latino faith in libraries and their use of it should be the focus of any library. As the ALA published through studies by REFORMA, their *Guidelines for Library Services to Spanish-Speaking Library Users* (2007), a set structure for approaching programming and services to Latinos is key. More libraries around the country should adopt the ALA’s guidelines as a strategic plan for their approach to Latinos. This would, more broadly, change the scope of library focus, rather than allowing libraries to run off of previous policies or approaches that may not have engaged Latinos enough.
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