

LatinXs Finding InformaXion in Boston (LatinXs buscando InformaXion en Boston)

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ABSTRACT

Studies assert that Latinx are less likely to use libraries, yet the causes for this remain desperately unexplored. This work will identify the information needs of the Latinx community living in Boston in order to improve services to this community. Findings illustrate a complex relationship among multiple factors rooted in social class.

TOPICS

information needs, social justice, public libraries, archives

The information needs and library services to Latinx¹ communities in the United States have been studied in terms of legal information, health information, and English/Spanish literacy (Peterson, 2014). The anti-immigrant sentiment toward Latinxs fomented under the current presidential administration suggests that their information needs are actually more complex, and as such require that librarians and archivists perform highly specialized forms of literacy with records (Ceja Alcalá, Colón-Aguirre and Alaniz, 2018). In many cases, however, the information needs of these populations are not being addressed in libraries and archives, but instead by personal acquaintances and other gatekeepers at places such as corner stores and houses of worship (Adkins, Sandy and Depic, 2017).

This study documents and identifies some of the information needs of the Latinx immigrant community in Boston, Massachusetts. The data presented here reflect some preliminary findings from a qualitative study involving interviews with 13 participants, all Spanish-speaking Latinxs. In terms of demographics the majority of participants were female

¹ This work favors the inclusive term “Latinx” over the official U.S. Census verbiage of “Hispanic” in order to refer to those individuals who are “...of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race.” (United States Census Bureau, 2018a).

and their countries of origin included: Puerto Rico, Colombia, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico and Chile. The participants' average age was 47 and had lived in the Boston area for approximately 14 years.

A 2015 report by the PEW Research Center, found that Latinxs are less likely than other groups to know about the services offered by their public libraries. The root cause of this issue remains mostly unexplored. Possible causes are likely to be related to language, but access barriers and lack of cultural awareness regarding the services libraries and archives offer could also be linked to the findings. This situation makes it imperative for library and information science (LIS) professionals to explore the information needs of Latinx communities throughout the United States as they make up a large portion of the population and remain significantly underserved.

In the history of the United States, mobility and immigration from Latin American countries has been extensively studied, with estimates of hundreds of thousands of immigrants coming from various nations only in the early part of the 20th century (Massey, 1995). Today, Latinxs are a significant portion of the United States population. As of 2017 Latinx populations constituted 18.1 percent of the nation's total, with 58.9 million inhabitants; which makes it the largest ethnic or racial minority currently living in the United States. (United States Census Bureau, 2018b). In the city of Boston, the Latinx population is estimated to be around 122,317.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

It is important to frame the initial findings of this study by first noting that Latinx populations are not monolithic. They encompass various races, nationalities, and countries of origin, with each one influenced by their own histories and cultures, which go on to affect their lived experiences in the United States. For instance, migration flows originating in Latin America to the United States can be linked directly to the latter's foreign policy during the Cold War. The current migration crisis of Central American populations to the United States is an example of how such political interventions have an adverse effect on the livelihoods of working class and poor people who must leave their countries of origin for survival. It is not surprising, then, that some of the preliminary findings of this study indicate that one of the most salient features linked to the use of libraries and other information centers in Boston is related to social class. Two important and related manifestations of social class identified in our study included educational attainment and language.

Educational Attainment and Language

Participants with higher levels of education mentioned using library collections and facilities in Boston the most and at different points throughout their life. Those with lower levels of education mentioned library use mostly as a way to seek services for their children, but not for themselves. We also found among the study's participants that the majority of those in the lower educational attainment group indicated that Spanish is the only language they use to

communicate. Whereas the higher educational attainment group described both Spanish and English as the languages in which they communicate in their day to day lives.

Based on these initial findings, LIS professionals would need to reconsider the services and materials they offer patrons. This begins with educating future professionals by preparing them with the knowledge and skills to foster cultural competence and encourage non-English language acquisition. The situation is imperative, considering that Latinx populations living in the United States are estimated to steadily grow to 111.2 million individuals by the year 2060, which will be over a quarter of the United States population! At the same time, Latinx communities are less likely to learn English than other migrant groups mainly due to ethnic enclaves in cities around the United States (Massey, 1995).

Community engagement efforts are also essential to the future of LIS education if it is to respond to the needs of Latinxs and bridge linguistic differences. As pointed out by Montiel-Overall (2009), culturally competent librarians do not necessarily need to speak the languages of the members of the communities they serve. They do, however, need to engage various groups in their communities and find community members who can become advocates for libraries. These members, in turn, can become interpreters and translators. Other options for outreach focused on language would be to create bilingual catalogs (Berger in Cooke, 2017 p. 57). Although the optimal solution would be to hire more diverse librarians, those who have roots and connections to these communities, are familiar with their values, perceptions and needs and are also fluent in their native languages.

CONCLUSION

Our study suggests that awareness of social class which affect people's access to education is a major variable to address when preparing LIS students to be culturally competent in developing services for one of the largest underserved populations in this country. This begins with understanding that Latinx communities in the United States are a large, multicultural and multiracial group with unique histories and who are facing a variety of barriers to social mobility.

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