Including Latinx Communities in Libraries: A Theoretical Approach to Information Access

Andrew Wakelee[1] and Kim M. Thompson[2]

[1]MLIS Student, University of South Carolina, USA; AWAKELEE@email.sc.edu

[2]Professor of Information Science, University of South Carolina, USA; KTHOMPSO@mailbox.sc.edu

Even as the Latinx community has emerged as the largest ethnic minority group in the United States (18% of the population, Noe-Bustamante et al., 2020), this demographicfaces multiple barriers to information access and equity. The digital divide, while shrinking, is still pronounced within the Latinx community and without addressing it, a lack of information access will persist (Goldberg et al., 2019). Access to technology and other forms of physical information alone are not enough to achieve information equity. Particularly among recent migrant and older Latinx populations, a lack of English language and technology literacy, small information worlds (Peterson, 2014), and a lack of trust in governmental institutions may discourage accessing information and library services, even when physical access is available (Ruhlman, 2014).

A three-pronged model of information access theory (Thompson & Afzal, 2011) that examines the physical, intellectual, and socio-cultural aspects of information access provides a compelling framework for understanding and approaching information equity in this context. Physical information access and inclusion examines the roles of library policies, infrastructure, universal design, and usability analysis on information equity. Intellectual information access and inclusion assesses the roles of language, technology, and information literacy on information and education equity. Finally, socio-cultural information access and inclusion explores the roles that culture, formal and informal information channels, and internal and external social networks have in information equity and social inclusion.

This paper uses this holistic theoretical approach to examine libraries serving Latinx communities in the United States, specifically at academic libraries at universities defined as Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs). HSIs are institutions with 25% or more enrollment of Latinx students, which enroll a majority (67%) of Latinx students nationwide (Excelencia in Education, 2021). Latinx students, especially those who are the first to attend college in their family, face challenges to thriving in higher education due to language barriers, financial issues, and uncertainty of how to interact with academic libraries (Bladeck, 2014). HSIs were formally created by the federal government in 1992 to help remedy social and economic inequalities and promote the enrollment and graduation of Latinx students by providing Title III and V grant funding to eligible institutions.

HSIs have the potential to not only promote academic success among a diverse population, but also to become institutions where educational equity and justice exist (Garcia et al., 2019) with respect to physical, intellectual, and socio-cultural information access and inclusion. Academic libraries, commonly known as the heart of the university, are uniquely positioned to help their universities become truly inclusive and equitable for their Latinx communities, regardless of the institution's HSI status. This discussion of information access theory and Latinx-serving libraries will provide a framework for developing policies, programs, and systems that best serve the complex information needs of hard to reach, multilingual, and multigenerational Latinx communities in various library and geographic contexts.

References

Bladek, M. (2019). Latino students and the academic library: A primer for action. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, *45*(1), 50–57. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2018.12.001

Excelencia in Education. (2021). Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs). *Excelencia in Education*. https://www.edexcelencia.org/research/hispanic-serving-institutions-hsis

Garcia, G. A., Núñez, A.-M., &Sansone, V. A. (2019). Toward a multidimensional conceptual framework for understanding "servingness" in Hispanic-Serving Institutions: A synthesis of the research. *Review of Educational Research*, *89*(5), 745–784. https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654319864591

Goldberg, R., Robinson, A., & Carlson, E. (2019). Digital divide is shrinking for America's hispanic population, NTIA data show. *National Telecommunications and Information Administration*. https://www.ntia.doc.gov/blog/2019/digital-divide-shrinking-america-s-hispanic-population-ntia-data-show

Noe-Bustamante, L., Lopez, M. H., &Krogstad, J. M. (2020). US Hispanic population surpassed 60 million in 2019, but growth has slowed. *Pew Research Center*. https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/07/07/u-s-hispanic-population-surpassed-60-million-in-2019-but-growth-has-slowed

Peterson, K. J. (2014). Including the culturally excluded and socially forgotten: Information services for Spanish migrant workers in the United States. *The Library Quarterly*, *84*(3), 390–401. https://doi.org/10.1086/676496

Ruhlmann, E. (2014). Connecting Latinos with libraries. *American Libraries Magazine*.https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2014/05/19/connecting-latinos-with-libraries/

Thompson, K. M. & Afzal, W. (2011). A look at information access through physical, intellectual, and socio-cultural lenses. *OMNES: The Journal of Multicultural Society, 2*(2), 22-42. https://researchoutput.csu.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/8824030/PID33331postpub.pdf