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Martin Blasco
Washington County Cooperative Library Services

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Outreaching to New Immigrants: A Two Way Path

by Martín Blasco
*Outreach Librarian for Latino
and Multicultural Services,
Washington County Cooperative
Library Services*
martinb@wccls.org



A native of Argentina, Martín Blasco has worked with underserved communities for many years. Before becoming a librarian, he carried out ethnographic and social research among drug users in New York City. He pursued his studies in librarianship at Long Island University, New York. Upon receiving his MLS, he began working in Peekskill, New York where his outreach work began not as an official title, but by necessity to serve new immigrants, especially the undocumented. He is working now as an Outreach Librarian for Latino and Multicultural Services at Washington County Cooperative Library Services.

Martín sees outreach as a very important civic responsibility of promoting libraries in order to introduce these communities to the vast resources and programs these institutions have to offer.

Traditionally, the goal of outreach librarians is to reach out beyond the physical library building, and promote and make library services accessible and relevant to all. Demographics, which constantly change, are the best place to start our outreach work. New immigrants are more and more an integral part of our society. Many new immigrants, coming from developing countries that don't have public libraries, don't realize that public libraries are available to them in this country and that the services are free. This is something that has to be constantly reinforced. As outreach librarians we do our best to know the library's community: learning about different cultures; connecting with formal and informal community leaders, organizations and agencies to create partnerships; and promoting our services and programs, including those catering to new immigrants regardless of their socioeconomic, age, ability and gender backgrounds.

But what happens when these populations cross the doors of our physical and virtual spaces? The library should be a welcoming, safe place for everybody to enjoy.

There are several points to consider in attracting new patrons to our physical buildings, that is, not only getting people in the door but really developing a sense of inclusion.

Is it better to hire library staff who reflect the culture of the community? Bilingual and/or bicultural librarians are always a great asset. Libraries should look for the best people who can work in a changing environment—not only technologically but culturally. They should especially look for those who are adept at customer services practices, including cultural competence. This practice is not limited to reference. It should also include the circulation desk and, of course, technical services. However, it's not enough to have minorities in our libraries if they are still underrepresented in leadership. New immigrants should be encouraged to be connected with the decision-making structure.

A second consideration is library resources. A good collection would include world language books, DVDs, CDs, journals, newspapers, and programs that include the customs, traditions, values and interests of a diverse community. Good



and prominent signage is also going to help attract those who have not experienced the library culture.

Is this enough to serve a diverse community? The library staff has to be culturally competent. They must interact effectively; listening, being patient, and making the best effort to connect with all people. Cultural competency requires humility, that is, the belief that no culture is superior to others. Cultures are different.


As is the case with many libraries already, communication can be facilitated by using cards with translations of basic words and phrases, even with pictures to work with new immigrant patrons. Culturally competent library staff also concentrate on learning the names of their culturally diverse constituency. Displays, panels, flags, signage, flyers, and publicity should include words and pictures which reflect the diversity of the community.

Remember the importance of partnership. It's crucial that we form partnerships that result in advocacy for our programs and services.

True partnerships are the ones on which we can rely to make long lasting relationships with the community, especially with new immigrants.

In regards to community organizations, partnerships work two ways. Libraries are very good at promoting other organizations' services and programs and bringing library services and users together outside of the building, but the opposite must also be true. Our partners, community organizations, must also promote libraries and bring to them new ideas for services and events that are needed for their constituencies. For instance, a patron can take advantage of a series of citizenship classes with a community organization, but this organization, in turn, should refer patrons to the library as a place to obtain practice books for their citizenship exams or information to help them navigate the bureaucratic red tape involved in gaining naturalization.

Our directors, boards, government officials, library staff and the general public need to be brought on board regarding the importance of including new immigrants in the life of the library. The children of these new communities can be impacted by early literacy programs and will eventually contribute to our society. The success of new immigrant children will affect the community.

As outreach librarians we have to be sure that our libraries embrace a spirit of community for all, and always, always remember that outreach is a two way path: Going out to the community and getting the community into our libraries. 

NOTE: *Responsibility for the views set out in this article lies entirely with the author.*

