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Access to Public Library Services for Spanish-Speakers

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Discovering the American library system has enriched me greatly since I came to the United States. The libraries' doors are open for people from all walks of life, speaking different languages, having different cultural and educational backgrounds, as well as different political interests and economic levels. This diverse population has produced challenges for libraries as they strive to meet their goal to provide access for everyone. Though libraries have existed for centuries, I have learned and experienced how they have reinvented their services and opened their doors to all; however, providing twenty-first century quality access has not always been the case. Aiming to understand and perform best practices on access for Spanish-speakers, I observed my local library system, analyzed the meaning of access, researched the work done by other professionals in the field, and I reaffirm that twenty-first century best practices include a collaborative effort to provide access to library services for Spanish-speakers.

In the library system where I work, I conducted an exploratory case study. Choosing a systematic approach for the analysis allowed comparison of my results with those of other professionals. I learned about the services and approaches implemented to provide access to Spanish-speakers nationally, statewide, and in a library system. Library directors that participated in the study agreed that libraries need to provide access to all members of the community. They believed they should provide books and programs that help members of the community expand their knowledge and explore the world, have the opportunity to learn and advance themselves, stay informed, enrich their education, and experience fun and entertainment. Furthermore, they acknowledged that libraries are a community meeting place or "gathering place," as one participant stated. All great, I thought, but what about access for Spanish-speakers?

Access

The definition of access in the online *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* is: "a way of being able to use or get something"; "a fit of intense feeling" (Access,

n.d.). This definition uses two concepts: being able and being fit. In my case study, I found that participants are trying to provide services, but not all are enabling Spanish-speaking patrons to use and participate in these services for one simple reason: staff may not be aware of programs and services that fit the needs of the patrons.

Resources

There are many resources that can guide librarians and library staff to provide Spanish-speaking patrons with access. The Core Values of the American Library Association (ALA) as well as its Policy Manual state that services should be equally offered for all, and should reflect the diversity of their population (American Library Association, 2006). The Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) and the National Association to Promote Library and Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish-Speaking (REFORMA) established guidelines for library services to the Spanish-speaking population. These are especially beneficial for libraries that are beginning to see the need to start offering services to this population in their community (America Library Association, 2007a, 2007b). Their focus is on:

- Collection and selection of materials: the relevance of the materials for the population, language, bibliographic access, formats, selection, and relevancy, as well as promoting, supporting, and evaluating the Spanish language collection.

- Programs, Services, and Community Relations: the diversity of the culture, programming, outreach services, intercultural understanding, bibliographic instruction, and electronic resources.

- Personnel: the staff recruitment, compensation, and development.

- Facilities: the building as a whole from the outside to the inside, signage, collection placement, and physical access. (ALA, 2007a; RUSA 2007b)

Furthermore, ALA addresses the needs of other languages besides English through its wiki (ALA, n.d.). In the same manner, the Oregon Library Association (OLA) through the Public Library Division marks the standards that help in planning for those services (Standards for Oregon Public Libraries, 2015). Their goal addresses the concerns of my focus group.

Other literature concerning providing services and access to Spanish-speakers reinforces the values and guidelines of ALA, RUSA, and REFORMA. The strategies proposed are:

Knowing and Understanding the Community
To understand Spanish-speakers, it is necessary to know them. There are various approaches to getting to know the diversity of the population such as looking at local, state, and national census demographics, and Pew Research Center Reports, as well as looking at the population's history and future social development. Knowing the laws and regulations affecting the population is crucial. Asking the school districts for their demographics and information about the population's interests and needs is also a good way to find the information. Other resources are: turning to counterpart organizations to see what services they are providing, carrying out surveys, performing focus groups, and hiring consultants to study the populations. A must in best practices is keeping

channels open for casual and respectful communication with Spanish-speakers. Another is remaining aware of the barriers they face. Baumann (2011) expresses the importance of not making assumptions regarding knowing and understanding the Spanish-speaking population. The significance of population for each library varies but not the interest in knowing the needs and sources to create equitable libraries services.

Advocacy
Knowing the population and community is imperative when speaking for them with authorities, library boards, Friends of the Library, library staff, local nonprofit organizations, and the rest of the library community. For example, determining whether culture and traditions, educational needs and levels, or basic survival needs and health issues are their major concerns, can support the points to advocate for them. Theorists like Baumann and Byrd suggest that when implementing comprehensive services to the target population, funding should come from library budgets and other sources such as government grants, Friends of the Library, the library foundation, and benefactors (Baumann, 2011; Byrd, 2005).

Simultaneously, advocacy for the library has to happen within the Spanish-speaking community. For example, letting the population know how the library can serve them and communicating a welcoming message will enhance the community's view of the library as a valuable institution. Hence, address the population on the library's mission, vision, and plan. Who, why, and how are key questions that will help incorporate Spanish-speakers into the guidelines, goals, and aspirations of your institution. Conjointly, library staff are major advocates for the library and for library patrons; hence the importance of customer service, personable skills, awareness of cultural characteristics and their relevance when providing services. Making an effort to learn the language or even using minimal skills in the language provides great results; likewise, understanding the importance of equality in services.

Services and Programs
When planning programs, it is important to consider the different characteristics within the Spanish-speaking population. Knowing and understanding them will facilitate setting priorities to empower library services and goals. Many Spanish-speakers are bilingual or have minimal skills in understanding English. Offering Spanish language throughout the library including signage, bulletin boards, information access points, the library catalog, materials, staff, websites, publicity, and self-service machines would serve a double function: providing both access and a welcoming environment. The location of Spanish-language materials and physical displays and the placement of them among their counterpart English-language items are important considerations to take into account in order to produce a welcoming atmosphere. As Byrd suggests, the creation of comfortable, easy to navigate space states clearly and loudly, "The library belongs to everyone" (2005, p. 46).

Outreach and Publicity
Libraries should transmit the messages that the target population is welcome, and specific services and resources are available to them. Conduct outreach activities at schools at parent conferences, open houses, and social, cultural and sports events; Engage in

outreach efforts through religious groups and socio-cultural community events. Use networking, word of mouth, partnerships, flyers, displays, social media, traditional media, and promotional gifts. Most important is ensuring that all outreach and publicity reflects the language, culture, and values of the Spanish-speaking population.

Establishing Partnerships
Partnerships can be with other organizations like immersion schools, or include those organizations outside of the community that provide relevant services. Moreover, partnerships can be established with a strategic person or a leader within the community. The types of partnerships can be varied; nonetheless, all of them need to be sustained and reciprocally fed.

Evaluation for Success and Maintenance of Services
The success and resources for services offered to the Spanish-speaking population should be evaluated. Among the resources to be considered are materials, equipment, staff, physical space, and budget. Evaluating the results of services involves looking at circulation, library visits, program attendance, enjoyment or satisfaction of attendees, questions asked and answered satisfactorily, and even the in-house use of the collection. The correlation of resources, commitment, persistence, and results leads to the success of services for Spanish-speakers. Create and sustain the trustworthiness of the services. This credibility affects how the library is perceived, not only by patrons but by other organizations. Consequently, the assessment of resources both within the library and outside of it will provide a clear view of what the current resources are and what needs to be done to fulfill the mission, vision, and goals of the library.

Awards
The Association for Library Services for Children (ALSC), a division of ALA, is a national organization that is involved in services for Spanish-speakers with an emphasis on youth. ALSC works in partnership with National REFORMA in presenting the Pura Belpré Award. This award recognizes exceptional literature for youth that features Latino culture. Naidoo (2012) emphasizes the importance of this award, especially the Latino heritage literature for teens and tweens. Furthermore, he expresses the importance of this literature reaching even those who are not Latino by raising their awareness about diversity in American society. Thus, it is pertinent to serve and provide programs in Spanish for those who speak Spanish as a second language and to the library community as a whole.

Literature addressing the services for Latino teens and tweens indicates the importance of those services in the lives of that population. Naidoo and Vargas (2011) present an argument that many teens and tweens not only feel that they do not fit in with the broader society, but also they do not identify with their family and cultural heritage. They present a vast array of examples of libraries around the nation that are reaching out and creating successful programming for this segment of the population.

Addressing Accessibility
In the libraries of my case study, the presence and growth of the Spanish-speaking population are creating different demands throughout the library system. Some of the libraries have

been battling to maintain even the basic services outlined by the ALA guidelines, so they have generally not had many opportunities to extend the access and equity of their services to the Spanish-speaking population. Despite the fact that libraries have been purchasing materials in Spanish, have made an effort to implement programs such as Spanish-language Storytime and Intercambio (a language exchange program see: www.intercambio.org), and a few others have even been proactive by having a Spanish-speaking staff member in the library, the situation has not been favorable for all.

Oregon's libraries, with more secure and substantial budgetary resources, are approaching access to library services at a fundamental level. They have hired consultants who have provided studies to help them understand the needs of the Spanish-speaking community and develop ways to meet those needs. An example is Multnomah County Library, which hired Cuesta Multicultural Consulting. In its study, *Reaching Spanish-language Speakers Outside of the Library* (2012), Cuesta brings to the twenty-first century outreach and access for Spanish-speakers, basing their study on the use of technology by the target population. Although the study was requested by Multnomah County Library, the participants were members of various counties in the state which increases the value of the study by making it relevant for other libraries.

Though a well-funded library system is a great resource, there are other means to provide awareness, support, and expertise for librarians serving Spanish-speakers. In Oregon, librarians providing services statewide gathered their concerns and formed the REFORMA Oregon chapter. Since the chapter was formed in fall 2014, it has served as a source of information for any library in Oregon. It has raised its voice and become part of the Oregon Library Association as a round table in the fall of 2015. It also has formed a partnership with the Children's Services Division (CSD), hosting a Pura Belpré Mock award. REFORMA Oregon is committed to granting support for librarians who are striving to provide access to the services in their communities.

An important point for the future of libraries and future librarians is the fact that the Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE) is addressing the needs of LIS students who will go into the field and encounter the Spanish-speaking population in their library's community. In her study, "The Effect of Service Learning on LIS Students' Understanding of Diversity Issues Related to Equity of Access," P. M. Overall explores the technique of service-learning as a way of teaching students in LIS programs key concepts such as equity of access and other diversity concerns. Besides its value to ALISE and LIS education, this study has value for the profession by providing a method to develop future professionals serving Spanish-speakers.

Accessibility Outcomes

How best to provide services to Spanish-speakers is a subject that many libraries are interested in understanding. Implementing best practices in access for Spanish-speakers would have a positive impact on the target population and create far-reaching positive outcomes in their lives. For instance, libraries can create and support system-wide or county-wide library committees that focus on services for the Spanish-speaking population. The formation of these committees would result in greater awareness of Spanish-speaking library users and their need for access to library services that are designed to enable them, which in turn would lead to more library outreach to their community. Thus, the Spanish-speaking population would take advantage of the materials and programs that are offered. A well-designed action plan would

be particularly powerful if it includes system or county-wide library committees that engage other institutions and organizations with the goal of improving access for their respective populations. With committees in place to look after the needs and access for Spanish-speakers, access to public libraries would achieve a level appropriate to the twenty-first century.

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