

The Function of Libraries for Latino College Students

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Considered a great tool of democracy, libraries are open to all who choose to use them, regardless of race, gender, or creed. Therein lies both the greatest strength and weakness of libraries: because libraries provide resources chosen by librarians for patron use, libraries unwittingly “deny access to their resources to certain social classes.” In diverse communities, libraries are often limited as to the extent to which they are able to deal with varied, and sometimes unknown, information needs. All of this leads to the questions of who is well served by libraries and who is left behind.

Latinos are one of the fastest growing populations in the United States, but the desperately small number of Latino librarians cannot provide cultural reinforcement for the large number of Latino patrons. To best serve this population, libraries must seek out Latinos’ feedback on the services libraries provide. **Two questions are explored in this project: How do Latinos perceive libraries as an institution? How does library philosophy influence Latinos’ perceptions?**

Libraries and Philosophy

- Cultural Hegemony
 - creation and maintenance of a dominant culture by the ruling class that is accepted, either consciously or unconsciously, by the subordinate and/or oppressed classes through complicity and coercion

Library policies and guidelines are produced in order to help provide uniform service to all patrons. To understand what drives these practices and policies, it is important to understand the concepts of cultural hegemony and discursive formations and how they relate to the profession. Cultural hegemony is the creation and maintenance of a dominant culture by the ruling class that is accepted, either consciously or unconsciously, by the subordinate and/or oppressed classes through complicity and coercion. It is the method for providing accepted standards and policies in society based on one group's idea of right and wrong.

Libraries and Philosophy

- Discursive Formations
 - Discourse is where everything that relates to power and knowledge...is buried
 - provide a power base for the ruling class through the teaching of values and norms

Discursive formations, as defined by Michel Foucault, provide a power base for the ruling class through the teaching of values and norms. This power base “controls individuals and their knowledge,” shaping their actions and directing their interactions with others. This manifests itself in the discourse and discursive practices in many public institutions, such as libraries. Discursive formations provide the foundation for both individual and community values, as well as how each will view society and people within it.

Libraries and Philosophy

- Libraries
 - Repositories of culture
 - Preservation and access to information
- Librarians
 - Mediators
 - Gatekeepers

Libraries are not only public institutions; they are often also considered repositories of culture, preserving and providing access to that information deemed culturally appropriate. Librarians act as the mediator between the patron and the information and hence, interpret the information needed to fit within the parameters of the library. Librarians select what is included in the collection, which in turn, influences what patrons are able to access and use. Ironically, many librarians do not perceive selection, preservation or mediation as anything other than an impartial and unbiased process intended to assist individuals to find the 'best' resources for their information needs.

Method

- 7 Latino undergraduates
 - 1 Freshman, 1 Sophomore, 3 Juniors, 1 Senior, 1 Recent Graduate
 - 6 female, 1 male
 - 6 traditional, 1 nontraditional
- Semi-structured interviews
 - Library experiences
 - Attitudes toward reading

Seven Latino college students were interviewed in 2002 at a large university in the southwestern United States. Students' library perceptions and attitudes were revealed in their comments. While students' primary point of discussion was the university library system, they also discussed public libraries and school libraries. Questions were semi-structured and open-ended, allowing the students to describe experiences that were important to them.

The seven Latino college students interviewed had high career aspirations, and viewed education as the necessary path to achieving those aspirations. For the most part, they also viewed reading as a positive and beneficial activity. Though all students were fluent in English, they were not all fluent in Spanish.

Findings

- Students' attitudes toward libraries relate to their **comfort levels** within those libraries.
- Students' comfort levels depend on whether they had been initiated into the discursive formations of the library, as manifest by their ease of library **navigation** and their perceptions of library-appropriate **behavior**.

Analysis of the students' responses suggested that Latino students' attitudes toward the library were directly related to their comfort level within that library. Students who were comfortable about the library had positive attitudes about library services and librarians. By contrast, those who were uncomfortable in the library were more judgmental about library services and provisions. When asked directly, most students used positive examples to illustrate library services. In their conversation, though, some of these same students described their library interactions in negative terms.

This dissonance suggests that these students were not comfortable sharing their negative perceptions with the interviewer, who ostensibly represented the library. Students' comfort level depended on two factors, 1) how easily they were able to navigate the library and library services, and 2) their perceptions of library-appropriate behaviors.

Library Navigation

Felicita: “We actually went on a library scavenger hunt.... It wasn’t thorough, but it was good enough to get through. ... Obviously I’m a senior now, so it’s not as intimidating as if I were a freshman again.”

Daniela: “I hate the university library. I try to use it, but it’s just so confusing. You have no idea where anything is, you know, there’s too much information ... but I don’t know how to use it, so I prefer not to.”

The students viewed the library as a source of information, but some were frustrated by their inability to access that information. Four students had received formal instruction about library use, while three had not. On the whole, **students who had been through library orientation programs were comfortable using the academic library**, and spoke more positively about it than students who had not.

We can see on this slide the disparity of student attitudes between those who have been initiated into the “library world” and those who have not. Felicita is a “member” of the library discourse; she can use her knowledge of expectations to find her way around the library. Felicita underwent a scavenger hunt, getting hands-on experience with library resources. This formal introduction to library resources made her “comfortable” using the online public access catalog, using books, and speaking to library staff. Daniela, a sophomore, had never been introduced to the library discourse, and found the process confusing.

Libraries versus Computers

Graciela: “The [university’s] main library is so big, you could get lost in there, you know, with all those books.”

Felicita: “When I was a kid growing up, we had to do, you know, looking through the card catalog for things. Now everything’s on computer, which is a lot easier.”

Students are familiar with computers, how to use them, and what their uses are. Students are not so familiar with libraries. Hence the students used negative language to describe information seeking in the library, but positive language to describe information seeking with computers.

Students’ reactions supported the idea that **computers increased the information capacity of the library, as well as increasing the social nature of the library**. Several students made a connection between computers and information. To these students, computers and books were both familiar, but computers were surrounded by a mystique: computers made information easy.

The social aspect of the new computer-oriented remodeling was noted by several students. While the idea of a library suggested solitude and quiet study, the presence of computers suggested a common area for noisier interaction. Negative comments about the new computer lab focused on the increased noise level. Three students said their use of the library as a quiet study place was compromised by the addition of the computer lab. Negative comments also suggested a discontinuity between students’ perceptions of library space and computer lab space.

Library Behavior

Carlos: “When I go into libraries, there are people who are always talking, but they don’t always understand, you know, you have to be quiet because other people are trying to do work.”

Carlos, a junior, manifests the idea of libraries as places for study. **Latino students approach the academic library from a study-centered orientation.** This respect for education is common in Latino cultures. Most of the students had very definite ideas about appropriate library behavior and the appropriate uses of the university library building. Students were troubled by the idea of other students using the academic library for socialization. The **public library was regarded as more socially oriented.**

Academic and Public

Felicita: “I haven’t gone and gotten things just for personal use. I guess to me it seems like [the university library is] just for the classes. It’s not, like, something you would just kind of go to.”

Elena: “I usually go to the [public] library for my own benefit, like I usually check out books for pleasure reading ... and I found that at [the public] library, they have book clubs, so I get involved with those.

Felicita points out the idea that the university library is not a commons area for socialization. Her academic library indoctrination has taught her to see the academic library as a source of information.

A smaller building, with a smaller collection, made the public library less daunting than the large university library, with its collection spread throughout several buildings, each comprising several floors. Building size influenced students’ perceptions of navigability. In general, **the larger the library, the less comfortable the students felt in that library**. While larger libraries seemed more daunting than smaller ones, they were also seen as containing more information. Students used the size of the library as an indicator of the amount of information it could provide: **more books suggested more information**.

The public library was more frequently viewed as a source of entertainment, cultural reinforcement, and personal reading.

Reading and Libraries

Elena: “Right now I’m reading something for class, but I wouldn’t consider that *reading*.”

Daniela: “Now it’s still that idea of reading: it’s for school, it’s annoying, you have to write a paper, you can’t read for fun.”

Reading, an ostensibly enjoyable act, has been transformed by the academic process into a painful one. Elena suggests that reading for pleasure is different from reading for information. **The academic library was not seen as supporting such interests as personal reading, entertainment, or cultural reinforcement.** Further, the students viewed reading for pleasure and reading for information as separate acts. When they discussed libraries providing cultural reinforcement, students acknowledged the public and school libraries, not the academic library.

Nonetheless, **most students said that they enjoyed reading and considered themselves readers.** They were able to name books and periodicals they read daily. However, the sentiment was that there was limited opportunity for reading during the school year. Some students suggested that past a certain age, reading becomes a burden. **Reading done for information influenced their willingness to read for pleasure.**

In conclusion...

- Influence of cultural hegemony
- Recognition of discursive formations
- The diversity of information needs

Cultural differences between Latinos and the dominant white culture can be seen in the students' attitudes toward the library. Students' information needs are mitigated by their library perceptions: the academic library is primarily used to support coursework, while the public library is used for cultural support. However, their information needs were shaped both by their educational goals and by their culture.

Students were comfortable when they knew how to use the library and when they were aware of expected behaviors. This reflects an acceptance, conscious or unconscious, of the prevailing hegemony. Those who had received training understood the accepted uses of the library and worked within these parameters. Yet, they did recognize a deficit of personally and culturally relevant information. Smaller settings, such as school and public libraries, were more conducive to personal interaction than the larger, more information intensive academic libraries. More information represented more confusion and less relevance. School and public libraries are often able to reflect the community to some degree. Academic libraries, however, must deal with a wide variety of influences and political forces, which results in a stronger representation of the dominant cultural hegemony.

As the Latino population grows, the focus of libraries must change to meet their diverse information needs. Libraries should reflect the discursive formations of the community, not of the library staff. The discursive formations of the academic library do not reflect those of the students. The students were able to information for classes, but could not recognize how to access personally or culturally relevant information. The library limited the students by providing training that was narrowly focused on how the user fit within the context of the library and how the library fit within the context of the University. There was no acknowledgement of how the library fit within the context of the users' education and life.