

THE FUNCTION OF LIBRARIES FOR LATINO COLLEGE STUDENTS

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Considered a great tool of democracy,¹ 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.”² 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.³ 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 look at and think about libraries? What uses do they make of libraries? This project attempts to answer those questions through a qualitative methodology, asking representatives of the population for their input.

LIBRARY PHILOSOPHY

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.⁴ It is the method for providing accepted standards and policies in society based on one group's idea of right and wrong. This simplified explanation provides a starting point to examine the impacts and implications within libraries as public institutions.

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.⁵ 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 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. Yet, who decides what is 'best'? Generally, it is the same person who decides what materials are the 'best' for the library and what resources are the 'best' for the community: the librarian.⁶ Nonetheless, librarians are influenced by their values and

backgrounds, the discursive formation from which each one builds their world view, and the dominant cultural hegemony. All these influence how a librarian will deal with each patron and how the library will present itself to the community.

METHOD

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.

Participants included one freshman, one sophomore, three juniors, one senior, and one recent graduate. All but one student was female, and all but one were "traditional" students who began post-secondary education immediately after completing high school. At the time of the interviews, Alicia was a freshman taking her very first course, through a program designed to help minority and underprivileged students make an effective transition from high school to college. Berta was a junior, majoring in psychology. Like Berta, Carlos was a junior in psychology. Daniela was a sophomore intending to transfer into the physiology department. Elena was a junior with a double major in ethnic studies and political science. Felicita was a senior, majoring in elementary education. Graciela had just graduated from her undergraduate program, and was planning to pursue graduate studies in public health in the fall.⁷

FINDINGS

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.

Navigating the Library

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. 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. By contrast, Graciela's library skills training had been limited to seeing librarians model online search strategies in class. Consequently, she was confident in her abilities to find information online, but ambivalent toward the physical library building.

Daniela, on the other hand, had no library skills training and consistently used negative language to describe library interactions. She said that the university library “scared” her, and called it “overwhelming.” Daniela preferred to use the public library, focusing her explanation of this on the public library’s size and organizational features. 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. Daniela’s increased comfort level at the public library was not unique. Many of the students had more positive attitudes toward the smaller public library than they did to the large university library. 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.** Students also regarded computers and the Internet as prime information sources. At the time of the interviews, the university had recently opened a very large computer lab which was attached to the library. Students’ reactions supported the idea that **computers increased the information capacity of the library, as well as increasing the social nature of the library.** The size of the computer lab did not seem to have the same negative effect on students as the size of the rest of the university library. A large library was confusing, but a large computer lab was empowering. Several students made a connection between computers and easy 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-Appropriate Behavior and Activities

Latino students approach the academic library from a study-centered orientation. 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.** Students had positive attitudes toward social activity at the public library. Some had been involved in social reading activities through their public libraries, which seemed to promote the general sentiment that public and academic libraries seemed to have different purposes for these students. The academic library existed to facilitate schoolwork, while the public library was a community resource much like a park or a museum.

Public libraries were used to seek out personal reading, entertainment, and cultural reinforcement. The academic library was not seen as supporting these interests. Further, the students viewed reading for pleasure and reading for information as separate acts. Said one student, "Right now I'm reading something for class, but I wouldn't consider that *reading*."

When they discussed libraries providing cultural reinforcement, students acknowledged the public and school libraries, not the academic library. Regardless of their attitudes toward libraries, **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.**

Summary of Results

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, necessary to the educational process and frequently a source of pleasure in its own right. Though all students were fluent in English, they were not all fluent in Spanish. This may be a sign of linguistic assimilation; in the United States, immigrants' bilingual skills are typically lost within three generations.⁸

Despite their linguistic similarity to the dominant culture, cultural differences between Latinos and the dominant white culture persist. Some of these cultural differences 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. Their information needs were shaped both by their educational goals and by their culture. The students were very interested in materials reflecting

their cultural heritage, and sought out these materials for recreational reading. They also maintained a broad worldview, reading a wide variety of periodicals.

There were mixed perceptions as to what the academic library had to offer, what they should be offering, and what students could obtain. The library was universally viewed as a location for study, but there was conflict as to what form that study should take. Some students appreciate the inclusion of computers into the academic library, seeing them as a tool to facilitate group study; others see them as detrimental to quiet study. Those who knew how to use them saw print sources as helpful, while those who did not were intimidated by them. Students were almost universally intimidated by the size of the academic library.

CONCLUSION

The significance of this research is twofold. First, this study augments the body of research focusing on libraries as evoking feelings and reactions. These students had reasonably consistent reactions to the thought of “the library” and ideas about what people ought to be doing at and with libraries. 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 limitation or an absence of personally and culturally relevant information. The dominant cultural hegemony influences practices at all levels, but there was an identifiable difference. 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.

While these results are interesting, it is important to also recognize that the students do not represent the entire Latino population or a typical Latino educational experience. In 2002, only 8.1% of Latinos aged 25 and over held Bachelor's degrees, compared to 17.7% of the total United States population.⁹ Hence, these students have developed a different discursive formation from the majority of Latinos. Their world view, while still influenced by their ethnic background, also incorporates the concepts and ideals of the educated minority.

Secondly, this study also provides information about a non-traditional user group, Latinos, and their attitudes toward libraries. 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. As this study suggests, the discursive formations of the academic library do not reflect those of the students. Despite the fact that outreach was provided to several of the students, it was limited. The students felt more comfortable in the library and found 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. This paper provides this group of non-traditional users a voice in the library audience.

¹ Sidney H. Ditzion, *Arsenals of a Democratic Culture: A Social History of the American Public Library Movement in New England and the Middle States from 1850 to 1900* (Chicago, IL: American Library Association, 1947).

² Michael H. Harris, "State, Class, and Cultural Reproduction: Towards a Theory of Library Service in the United States," in *Advances in Librarianship*, ed. Wesley Simonton (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986): 241.

³ Denice Adkins and Isabel Espinal, "The Diversity Mandate," *Library Journal* 129, no. 7 (April 15, 2004): 52-54.

⁴ T.J. Jackson Lears, "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities," *The American Historical Review* 90(3), June 1985, 574.

⁵ David Hynes, *Michel Foucault's Archeology of Knowledge*. [Online]; Available from <http://www.mun.ca/phil/codgito/vol4/v4doc1.html>

⁶ Alison M. Scott, "Romance in the Stacks; or, Popular Fiction Imperiled," in *Scorned Literature: Essays on the History and Criticism of Popular Mass-Produced Fiction in America*, edited by Lydia Cushman Schurman and Diedre Johnson (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 213-225.

⁷ All students names have been changed to preserve confidentiality.

⁸ Siobban Nicolau and Rafael Valdivieso, "Spanish Language Shift: Educational Implications," in *Language Loyalties: A Source Book on the Official English Controversy*, edited by James Crawford (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 319.

⁹ U. S. Census Bureau, "Educational Attainment by Selected Characteristic," *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2003*, 123rd edition (Washington, D.C.: Government Publication Office, 2003), p. 154. Available from <http://www.census.gov/prod/2004pubs/03statab/educ.pdf>. Accessed August 12, 2004.