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Latino Students' Perceptions of the Academic Library

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Abstract

Library use is strongly linked with student persistence in higher education, and Latino students have lower rates of academic library use and proficiency than other racial/ethnic groups of students. This study explores Latino undergraduate students' perceptions of the academic library and library staff and identifies the conditions which impede or facilitate the students' use of the library. Using a multiple case study design, this study describes the experiences and perceptions of undergraduate students who identify as Latino and attend a four-year public research-intensive university in the Midwest. The findings suggest that Latino students use the library through the influence of peers, interpret the library as a space for cultural support based on their experiences with public libraries, and do not fully understand the range of resources and support available.

Background

My father used to take my sister and I to the public library when we were kids. He gave us books and told us that reading was the way out. There were storytellers speaking Spanish, other people I knew from our neighborhood, lots of books in Spanish. It was a good place to go as a kid. I look around at this library here, and I don't see myself in anything here. (Carolina)

Going to college is a way to make something better for yourself. My grandfather owns a Mexican restaurant. My mom works in it. This is a way to be more stable, you know. Coming to college. This was all pretty new to me, but I learned about studying and how to work harder in class. But I guess I don't know very much about [the library.] (Alberto)

Latino/s are one of the fastest growing populations in the United States. They comprised more than 50.5 million persons (16.3%) of the 308.7 million people counted in the 2010 U.S. census, with a growth rate of 43% since the previous U.S. census in 2000.¹ Latinos have the highest birth rates in the country and represent the largest immigrant group. The U.S. Census Bureau defines persons of Hispanic or Latino origin as people originating in Cuba, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Central America, and South America.² While the terms "Hispanic" and "Latino"

are often used interchangeably, “Latino” refers more exclusively to persons of Latin American origin rather than encompassing all Spanish-speaking peoples of the world.³ Because this study focuses on a student population who identifies predominantly with Latin American origins, the term “Latino” will be used here. “Latino” is also intended in this study to include female students as well as male students.

The enrollment of Latino students in higher education represents the highest growth rate of all racial and ethnic groups attending a four-year college or university. Santiago, Lopez, and Skoloda report that an estimated 7% of students attending a four-year college or university are Latino, and the proportion of Latino students will grow to 22% by 2025.⁴ They are the fastest growing racial or ethnic group in higher education, but they are also at the highest risk for dropping out once enrolled, especially during the first-year of college.⁵

Solis and Dabbour describe the persistence plight of Latino students enrolled in the California State University system, where more than a third of the undergraduate student body is Latino – “only 2.7% of [Latino] first-year and transfer students graduate in four years or less and only 28% graduate in six years or less.”⁶ Solis and Dabbour suggest that the reality of persistence is contrary to the students’ perceptions – nearly all first-year Latino students expect to graduate within six years. Lozano, Watt, and Huerta’s study of Latino 10th and 12th grade students enrolled in Texas public school districts concluded that Latino students’ aspirations to study at the tertiary level are very high and subsequently suggest that larger proportions of Latino students will be entering higher education within the next several years.⁷ Clearly, then, a great number of Latino college students will most likely not persist unless barriers to their success are identified and educational support systems are tailored to help Latino students overcome barriers to earning baccalaureate degrees.

A number of studies in library literature propose that student persistence in higher education is linked to library usage, and, in turn, greater sophistication in information literacy and research skills.⁸ Students who use the library frequently, seek assistance from librarians, and demonstrate higher competency levels of information literacy are more likely to earn baccalaureate degrees in four to six years than their counterparts who do not use the library.⁹ Solis and Dabbour's and Whitmire's studies of students of color indicate that Latino students use the library less frequently, ask for assistance from librarians less often, and demonstrate lower levels of information literacy than their white counterparts. These findings correlate with Gonyea's and Haras, Lopez, and Ferry's findings that Latino students persist in higher education at significantly lower rates than their white counterparts. If library usage is linked to successful persistence among college students, one can assume that the academic library is a crucial environment that could foster greater academic success for Latino college students and therefore persistence. The most important question here is "Why, then, do Latino students use the library less frequently?"

Cultural Constructs

Given the cultural context of this study, it is worth examining the academic library through a cultural lens. All libraries preserve information, resources, and artifacts deemed important to a region's history, language, art, and people. Public libraries serve the recreational, cultural, and informational needs of the people living within their community. Academic libraries are focused almost exclusively on the research needs of the students and faculty who comprise the larger college and university. Despite the differences in mission, all libraries are an intrinsic element of the social fabric. Harris argues that all types of libraries are essentially communal spaces, and therefore they reflect cultural hegemony. Harris describes the concept of

cultural hegemony as the “creation and maintenance of a dominant culture that is accepted, either consciously or unconsciously, by the subordinate class.”¹⁰ Essentially, cultural hegemony is the accepted standards and policies of society. Adkins and Hussey state that cultural hegemony is as simple for libraries as “setting business hours or...a hiring process.”¹¹ However libraries demonstrate cultural hegemony in many dimensions – the languages of the signage, catalogs, databases, and especially of the book collections; the level of noise that is tolerated by the library staff and other students; the types of activities that are encouraged and facilitated by the library staff, such as study, exploration, and group work; and the demeanor of library staff.

Librarians themselves are complicit in the cultural hegemony of libraries (albeit unwittingly since many libraries strive to make libraries useful and welcoming for diverse constituents.) Librarians select the books, journals, and other artifacts that compose the library collections. Librarians are also the gatekeepers between the library's users and information; they mediate the relationship between people and the library's collections by interpreting the user's needs and referring users to the best resources available in the library. Given that 97, 827 (88.9%) of librarians employed in academic libraries self-identified as white or Caucasian and only 2, 137 (1.9%) self-identified as Latino or Hispanic in a survey distributed to members of the American Library Association, it is difficult to dispute that most academic libraries in the U.S. reflect white or Caucasian cultural values and systems more strongly than Latino cultural values and systems.¹² As such, it is possible that the academic library is difficult to navigate for Latino college students for a multitude of reasons and, at worst, is a chilling environment for their educational aspirations.

Literature Review

Latinos and Public Library Use

Previous studies suggest that Latino users distrust the library as an institution. Luevano-Molina surveyed immigrant Mexican residents of public library districts in southern California about their attitudes towards public libraries and concluded that Mexican users are “insecure interacting with library staff” and “deliberately choose to patronize libraries in which they feel culturally validated.”¹³ Luevano-Molina’s study complements the findings of Ayala and Ayala’s study of 394 U.S.-born Latino users of 104 public libraries in California. Ayala and Ayala concluded that Latinos’ use of public libraries was insignificant compared to their white counterparts and their use of public libraries were often for ephemeral reasons, such as registering to vote or making use of the services of notaries public.¹⁴ Ayala and Ayala’s survey respondents indicated that public libraries needed to provide “more Spanish-language periodicals, bilingual forms and signs, bilingual staff and professionals, and cultural and educational programming.”¹⁵

Subsequent library literature highlights the attempts of public and school libraries to remedy the lack of resources identified by Ayala and Ayala. Bailey describes a quantitative measure towards analyzing a library collection for prominent Spanish-language authors, artists, and other works of cultural relevancy.¹⁶ Alire and Archibeque explain steps for librarians to create outreach services and successfully market the public library’s services to Latino community members.¹⁷ Walter adapts Alire and Archibeque’s work to the university environment through “targeted programming” and partnering with multicultural student services to encourage more library use by students of color generally.¹⁸ Very few of the aforementioned literature, however, describes how Latino students perceive and experience the academic library.

Latino Students and Academic Libraries

Library literature that examines the library use of Latino college students specifically is not exhaustive. Whitmire examined the experiences of students of color generally with their universities' academic libraries. She surveyed 9,327 undergraduate students, of whom 3.6% identified as Latino, on their frequency of use of their academic library and of asking librarians for assistance. Whitmire concluded that frequency of library use is significantly lower among minority groups of students compared to white students.¹⁹ Additionally, Whitmire speculated that motivations for using the academic library differ between racial or ethnic groups, but this speculation remained unexplored.²⁰

Adkins and Hussey's study examined the experiences of seven Latino students at a college in the southwestern United States through 60-minute interviews on the students' perceptions of their academic library. The participants in the study were a mix of undergraduate and graduate students, and none of the participants were born or reared outside of the United States. All the participants spoke English fluently, and their fluency in Spanish ranged from less fluently than English to no knowledge of Spanish at all. Adkins and Hussey concluded that the participants experienced some degree of alienation from the academic library at their college and that "students' feelings...were ambiguous and complex."²¹ However Adkins and Hussey were unable to articulate the reasons for the students' attitudes. They conceded that the participants were not well representative of Latino students, and all the students were available for interviews because of their participation in an advanced summer study program. Additionally Adkins and Hussey did not ascertain the students' experiences with libraries prior to entering college, the students' cultural identities, or the role that education played in their families and in their upbringing.

Language and Library Use

Haras, Lopez, and Ferry concluded that language is a barrier for Latino students in the development of information literacy and research skills. They focused on the difference in library use between Latino students who spoke English as their first language and those who spoke Spanish as their first language. They surveyed 105 first-year undergraduate students at California State University – Los Angeles who self-identified as Latino. More than 80% of the participants were U.S.-born. Thirty percent of the participants spoke only English, 60% of the participants reported speaking Spanish as their first language, and 10% reported speaking each language comparably. The students were surveyed about the frequency of their library use and were tested to determine the sophistication of their information literacy skills. Haras, Lopez, and Ferry concluded that a significant difference existed in information literacy and research skills between Latino students who spoke English as their first language and those who did not and “...students who spoke only English at home were more likely to report having learned research skills prior to high school than Spanish-dominant or Spanish-and-English home speakers.”²²

Haras, Lopez, and Ferry's finding suggest that Latino students who do not speak English as their first language are at a significant educational disadvantage prior to entering college. Their finding strengthens the idea that libraries are institutions that illustrate cultural hegemony. Ayala and Ayala concluded that public library use is lower among Latinos than among whites, and Luevano-Molina suggested that Latinos experience a chilling or intimidating factor that inhibits their use of public libraries. Adkins and Hussey's study reveals Latino college students' ambiguity and discomfort with academic libraries. Bailey and Alire and Archibeque discuss strategies for closing the gap in the frequency of library use by making Latino culture and literature visible in the library's collections. They do not, however, address other factors that

might chill the environment of the library for Latino students. The unexplored areas of research in the aforementioned studies led the author of this study to consider the following questions: What do Latino college students know about the academic library at their institution? How do Latino students perceive the staff employed in libraries? How do library staff respond to Latino students? What unintended messages are Latino students receiving about the library through its collections, signage, etc? What role do Latino students expect academic libraries to play in their lives other than merely a place for research and quiet study?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the attitudes of Latino undergraduate students in regards to their use of the academic library and its librarians and to identify the conditions which impede their or facilitate their use of the library. Using a multiple case study design, this study describes the experiences and perceptions of undergraduate students who identify as Latino or Hispanic and attend a four-year public research-intensive university in the Midwest. A few of the questions guiding this study are found, too, in Adkins and Hussey's study; their inclusion is purposeful and intended to determine if undergraduate Latino students –and those attending a very different type of institution in a different region of the country – will produce similar results.

The study provides academic librarians and other educators with a framework for how Latino students perceive and experience the academic library as mediated by culture. It also identifies cultural barriers that create a disparity between Latino undergraduate students and their majority culture peers. The study's implications will provide academic librarians and other educators with a cultural framework for remedying the disparity and with insight into making

outreach programs, multicultural competencies for library staff, and collaborations with multicultural student centers more effective for working with Latino college students.

Methodology and Procedures

Research Design

A qualitative study is appropriate to investigate the research questions because qualitative studies allow researchers to thoroughly and richly explore the meaning of individual participants' experiences, perceptions, and backgrounds. A survey methodology is not appropriate for this study because surveys limit the potential for the varied and rich responses the research questions require. Field observation is a difficult methodology to employ in this study, as there is no guarantee that Latino students would be using the college library at any given time and no guarantee that the researcher could readily identify students who self-identify as Latino.

None of the aforementioned methodologies will sufficiently reveal the personal stories and opportunities for self-reflection that would be necessary to plumb for the meaning of these students' perceptions and experiences. Semi-structured interviews, however, will facilitate a rich, lengthy discussion and a corresponding depth of analysis. Soy explains, "Case study research generally answers one or more questions that begin with 'how' or 'why,' and the questions are targeted to a limited number of events or conditions and their inter-relationships."²³ Because this study explores conditions and perceptions, a case study design for data collection and analysis is employed.

A multiple case study collects data from several sources and allows the researcher to explore themes occurring across the multiple cases. The subsequent interpretation is more compelling than interpretation collected from a single source.

Participants

The target population of this study is undergraduate students who self-identify as Latino. The sample population of this study represents convenience sampling because of the ease of access to participants who meet the criteria of inclusion in the study. The sample population investigated in this study is undergraduate students who self-identify as Latino and are enrolled at a large Midwestern public university. The university is classified by the Carnegie Foundation as a residential Research I institution. The undergraduate student enrollment at the university is 31, 252. According to the university's fact book, 8% of the undergraduate students are counted as Latino or Hispanic. The university is located in an predominantly agricultural county approximately two hours from a major metropolitan area. The U. S. Census counted 2.9% of the county's population as Latino or Hispanic.

Participants were recruited through a recruitment e-mail given to the program coordinator of the Latino Cultural Center (LCC), a program managed by the university and intended to support the cultural, educational, and recreational needs of Latino students. The program coordinator circulated the recruitment e-mail among students who participated regularly in the LCC-sponsored activities. There were no incentives for the participants to participate in the study.

Students interested in participating in the study contacted the principal investigator, and interviews were arranged at dates and times convenient to the students' schedules. Nine participants were interviewed. (A tenth participant withdrew from the study after the interview.) All nine participants viewed higher education as the means to achieving a more prosperous and stable way of life than their parents' lives. All the students were first-generation college students who did not find their secondary education particularly challenging. Although all of them grew

up in predominantly Latino or significantly racially mixed neighborhoods of Chicago, none of them are fluent in Spanish but claim some familiarity with the language. All described their secondary schools as inadequate and unable to offer the opportunities they believe their peers from more affluent communities had. The participants are described in greater detail below:

- Alberto, 19, is a sophomore who has not yet selected a major. He is considering the nursing profession, as he is thinking about careers that contribute to the welfare of the community and offer job security. He is the child of a single mother. He and his mother are employed in his grandfather's Mexican restaurant, although he is not employed during the semesters. He receives a Monetary Award Program (MAP) grant to attend college and resides in the residence halls. His grandparents are Mexican, but he and his parents were born and reared in Chicago. He spoke Spanish at home until he began elementary school, and his mother subsequently encouraged him to speak English at home.
- Matt, 21, is a senior who describes himself as not very motivated. He is not greatly interested in his academic work but views college as a better alternative than the military. He recently decided to major in Theater because he is interested in film. Although he is approaching graduation, he has not thought about career plans. He works 12 hours a week at a packaging company and lives in an apartment off-campus. He is the oldest child of a single mother employed as a bookbinder and receives a MAP grant to attend college. His grandparents are Mexican, but he and his parents were born and reared in Chicago. He speaks only a "little" Spanish, although his family celebrates Mexican holidays and traditions.

- Carolina, 23, is a senior who describes herself as very motivated and the only one of her large immediate family to attend college. She is majoring in Criminal Justice and aspires to become a lawyer specializing in family advocacy. She has studied Chinese and spent her junior year studying in China. She lives in an apartment off-campus with her older sister, who works at a fast food restaurant and moved with Carolina to “help out” while Carolina is focused on her studies. Carolina works at approximately 15-20 hours week at the same fast food restaurant as her sister. Her parents are laborers. Carolina is the only person in her family born in the U. S., but she visits her mother’s family in Mexico often. She is more comfortable speaking English than Spanish. She notes that she speaks each language with a noticeable accent and feels neither fully American nor fully Mexican.
- Lita, 22, is a senior who describes herself as very motivated and the first in her family to attend college. She was born in Puerto Rico and attended high school in Wisconsin, where her parents sent her and her younger brother to live with an aunt in the hopes they would receive a better education than they would have in Puerto Rico. Lita is studying math education with the intention of becoming a math teacher. Lita is the only participant who said that she is not as confident speaking English as she is with Spanish.
- Gabriela, 20, is a junior studying animal sciences. She hopes to remain at the university for a graduate degree in veterinary medicine. She works as a resident assistant in the residence halls and says the free room and board is the only way she affords her tuition. She was born in Guatemala but moved to the Chicago area with her family when she was an infant. Her parents are laborers. She is the oldest child among five, and her parents were unhappy with her decision to attend college when her help was needed at home to care for her younger siblings. Gabriela said she struggles with feelings of guilt for her

decision to attend college away from home, but she describes herself as highly motivated and does not want to “squander” the opportunity given to her.

- Jazmin, 22, is a senior studying Communication. She is employed in the residence halls as a desk clerk and at a clothing store near the campus. Her parents are engineers who fled Nicaragua in the 1980s. She was born in the U. S. Although she is not visibly Latina, Jazmin says she is proud of her culture and respects the hardships her parents faced leaving their country of origin. She considers English to be her first language and speaks Spanish less fluently. She says that she suffers guilt that she does not speak Spanish as well as her extended family in Nicaragua, whom she visits occasionally.
- Eddie, 24, is a junior studying Criminal Justice. He transferred to the university last year after completing an associate's degree at a community college in the Chicago area. He worked full time in a variety of manual and unskilled positions while he pursued his associate's degree. He considered remaining in the Chicago area but decided that he wanted to finish his degree soon and enter the law enforcement profession quickly.
- Martin, 22, is a senior studying Construction Management. He is the only participant in the study who came to the university from another region of the country; he grew up in a Hispano community in the southwest U.S. and was recruited to the university by an admissions officer. Martin said he had never considered himself a racial or ethnic minority until he came to the Midwest to study, and he relies significantly on the LCC for support and a “sense of the familiar.” Shortly after starting at the university, he adopted his English-sounding middle name and stopped using his Spanish given name. He works part time in the campus recreation center and is proud to be a student in the campus honors programs.

- Angela, 19, is a sophomore and has not selected a field of study. She is thinking about Education because she enjoys teaching her younger brothers and sisters and children in her Chicago neighborhood. Angela was born in Chicago to Mexican parents who are employed in custodial positions at a hospital. She said that her family spoke Spanish exclusively until a teacher encouraged her parents to speak English at home when her older siblings struggled with learning English at school. Angela's parents scolded her if she spoke Spanish with her siblings at home.

Arguably, the participants are not wholly representative of Latino undergraduate students. Because of their involvement with the LCC, the participants identify with their Latino background. Not all Latino undergraduate students will participate in university-sponsored programs designed to support Latino students. It is possible that the sample population represents students who are more engaged and better perceive the connection between cultural constructs of identity and educational systems more than other students who share their cultural identity. Additionally, the university is classified as a Research I university, indicating a competitive admissions process for undergraduate students. All the participants are enrolled as full-time students and are employed 10-20 hours per week at the university. The sample population might include students who are more motivated academically and better prepared for the college environment than other Latino undergraduate students.

Ethical Issues and Data Collection

Participants were given informed consent letters, which explained the purpose of the study. Participants signed and returned the letters. Participation in the study was voluntary, and participants understood that they could discontinue their participation at any time and were not required to respond to any and all questions during the interview. Pseudonyms are used to

describe the participants in this study, and no identifying information of the university is revealed.

The principal investigator interviewed each participant in a meeting room at the LCC. The LCC program coordinator recommended the location for convenience and because the space was familiar and comfortable to the participants. Adkins and Hussey suggest that research studies which explore the concept of cultural identity are potentially threatening to minority participants when the interviewer does not share the participants' cultural identity.²⁴ The program coordinator was present in the meeting room for each interview at the principal investigator's request, but did not participate in the interview itself.

Each participant was provided with a copy of the interview protocol in advance so they might reflect on their experiences. The interview protocol was semi-structured and open-ended so the principal investigator could ask additional questions to probe specific responses more deeply. The interviews were recorded with a digital voice recorder for transcription purposes, and each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes.

Validity and Reliability

The interview protocol was tested for content validity. Three academic librarians reviewed the interview protocol to ensure that the interview questions were pertinent to the research questions. A pilot test of the interview protocol was performed with three undergraduate students who self-identified as Latino. They were neither participants in the study nor students enrolled at the university where the participants were recruited. The purpose of the test interviews was to ensure that the interview questions were written in natural language and easily understood by undergraduate students and to ensure the interview questions were

appropriate for the study. The literature review, which guided the design of the study, was assessed by peers associated with higher education.

The study was tested for internal validity by returning the data and tentative interpretations to the participants and soliciting their feedback. Eight participants affirmed the transcriptions of the interviews and the principal investigator's tentative interpretations. The ninth participant did not respond to requests to review the accuracy of the transcriptions. Additionally, peers in higher education reviewed the data and tentative interpretations, which they judged to be plausible.

The principal investigator coded the participants' responses using a series of colors to represent emerging themes common throughout the individual responses. A family of themes emerged from the collection of responses. The data analysis was reviewed by peers in the field of higher education to ensure the findings were reasonable and pertinent.

Results

What do Latino students know about the academic library at their institution?

All of the students explored the academic library rather late in their undergraduate education. Despite participating in library orientation sessions as part of their general education curricula, none of the students actively sought out the library's resources or visited the library until at least late in their freshman year. Alberto said he did not visit the library of his own volition until the start of his sophomore year after he had received weaker grades during his freshman year than he had expected. Matt did not visit the library until he was encouraged to do so by peers working on a group assignment either late in his freshman year or at the start of his sophomore (he could not recall exactly when).

Carolina visited the library early in the fall semester of her freshman year but felt intimidated by its size, the relative lack of books and familiarity to the public library in her hometown, and was confused by the number of different libraries available to her on the campus. Rather than seek the library staff for assistance or make efforts to orient herself to the library, she left soon after arriving and did not return until near the end of her spring semester when peers decided to meet at the library to work together on a group assignment. Carolina attributed her initial sense of overwhelm to the fact that her high school library was only a small room with few book stacks and a solitary staff person.

The size and complexity of the college library was surprising to Matt too, although he did not express intimidation. He noted the lack of collections and services that were familiar to him through his public library, such as music and DVD collections. Contradictorily, Alberto was disappointed by the size of the library and felt that libraries were the heart of universities. He observed that he was proud to attend a university with a significant reputation, and he felt that the library should be a grander structure and impress visitors and prospective students.

Few of the participants had used the library's collections or had sought the assistance of librarians for help with their academic work. Most of the participants' only encounters with librarians were the instruction sessions taught by librarians as part of the general education curriculum. Angela reported that on her visit to the library, she attempted to search for journal articles by browsing the current periodicals section and thumbing through numerous issues, searching for articles that appeared relevant to her assignment. Exasperated, she gave up after more than an hour of fruitless browsing. Rather than seek assistance, she left and did not use the library again until friends in her residence hall showed her how to search for online journals using the library's electronic databases. When asked why she did not seek out the assistance of

librarians or library staff, Angela replied that she did not exactly understand that library staff were there to provide to assistance or their role in the library at all.

Martin explained that his lack of knowledge of the library's purpose and his late usage of the library were consequences of educational inequities:

You see white students in the library all the time. They know right away the library is the place where you go to study, there are resources there, there are people there to help you find the right stuff you need for your papers... They just know, because they grew up with better libraries, better schools, and parents who help them navigate education for all of their lives. When they call home because they're upset with their first bad grade in college, their parents tell them 'go to the library to study, did you talk to a librarian?'

When we [Latino students] call home because we're upset with our first bad grade, our parents don't have any helpful advice because this is way of what they know. They just act worried. Sometimes they tell us to just come home. [Martin]

How do Latino students perceive the staff employed in libraries?

It was difficult to determine the students' perceptions of the people employed in their academic libraries. Three of the participants acknowledged a sustained, if casual, interaction or acquaintanceship with people employed in the academic libraries. None of the students were able to distinguish between librarians and other staff employed in the libraries, and none of the students had approached a librarian for assistance. They understood that library staff seated at reference desks were available but only vaguely understood when to request assistance or how such assistance could strengthen the quality of their schoolwork. They suggested that information they could find freely available on the Internet was "good enough" for completing their assignments and for receiving acceptable grades. The students intimated that they were

more likely to approach or develop a rapport with library staff whom they perceived as sharing their cultural identity:

There is someone here on Mondays whom I always talk with. He works behind the desk... he's friendly and asks me about my classes... I guess he's Hispanic too. I'm not really sure, we've never talked about it...so maybe it's just safety in numbers, you know? It's good to know who the other people are who are like you, even if it is just to say hello to. [Matt]

How do Latino students perceive library staff's interactions with them?

Because the students reported rather limited interactions with the people employed in academic libraries, it was difficult to determine how students' perceived the library staff's reactions. None of the students reported seeking assistance from librarians, although Matt acknowledged that the theater librarian had approached him after she learned that he had newly registered as a theater major. Generally, the students had the impression that library staff were reasonably accessible should they need assistance, but they did not feel that assistance was warranted in most instances.

Alberto's impressions of library staff was arguably negative, as he reported that the librarian who led his orientation session directed the students solely to electronic databases and websites, and he left feeling uncertain about the role of the library staff. Alberto remarked that library staff did a good job pointing out helpful online resources but staff did not seem very helpful if he could not find what he wanted online. It was not clear whether Alberto meant that library staff were unable to answer his questions or merely had not gotten across to Alberto that their role was not to exclusively point him to online resources but to proactively guide his research. Regrettably Alberto did not respond to a request for a follow up conversation.

Lita's experience with library staff was negative. She said several times that library staff and student assistants at the circulation desk spoke loudly and repeatedly to her when her accent made her difficult to understand. She noted that she had no difficulty understanding their instructions, and she was embarrassed when she realized they thought she could not understand English. Lita said, too, that she felt helpless when searching for information because her subject librarian was not particularly helpful during their first and only consultation, leading her to not seek out further assistance from other librarians.

What unintended messages are Latino students receiving about the library through its collections, signage, physical lay-out, etc?

All of the students used the library principally as a study space, and only after they had recognized the need to modify their study skills and time management techniques. They found the library to provide a shelter from the distractions of living in a residence hall or apartment. Matt described the library as a "haven," or a place to study between classes before spending the evening at his job. All the students remarked, however, that the library was equal parts social destination and study environment; the tolerance for noise that accompanies group work blurred the image they held of a library as a very quiet environment best left for solitary pursuits.

However solitary endeavors were not how any of the students used the library most frequently. They came to the library with other people – and initially at other people's suggestion – and used the library for resources or services that they could not obtain elsewhere. Each of the students specifically mentioned using the library's reserve desk for class materials they could not purchase or could not afford to purchase, as well as for printing and photocopying assignments for class. Although Matt had serendipitously discovered art books that helped him explore his interest in drawing, none of the students had intentionally borrowed books and other

materials for use in assignments or personal interests. They described their informational needs as minimal and wholly satisfied by information found on the Internet.

Interestingly, Matt said that he ignored information that did not support his arguments in his papers, which suggests a level of information literacy less proficient than the typical undergraduate fourth-year student. This could support Whitmire's finding that Latino students demonstrate lower levels of information literacy than other racial or ethnic groups of college students.

Gabriela and Jazmin were critical of the library's lack of apparent inclusivity. Gabriela noted that Spanish-language popular culture magazines – which often featured Latino people prominently on the covers -- were once commonplace on the library's periodicals shelves but could no longer be found at the library at all.

I liked coming here and seeing pictures of people who look like me on the shelves. Even if I didn't read those magazines myself, it made me feel good about being here. This is a college without too many other Latina and Latino students, so seeing materials that are clearly for me and not really marketed to other students...that really sends a message to me that the library knows that I am here and they recognize me and want me to feel included. [Gabriela]

Jazmin observed that she had liked reading Spanish-language newspapers, particularly those from the Chicago area. She said, "Reading those newspapers makes me feel like I am not so far away from home, the 'block' is right here in my hands." Jazmin said, too, that she preferred reading for recreation in Spanish despite knowing Spanish and English equally well. "Spanish," she said, "is for my life and private thoughts. English is for when I go out into the rest of the world." The Spanish-language newspapers, she explained, were no longer available

at the library, and the LCC had consequently acquired subscriptions to a few Spanish-language newspapers for its student lounge.

What role do Latino students expect academic libraries to play in their lives other than merely a place for research and quiet study?

All of the students shared stories of their visits to public libraries, and two of them spoke of their elementary or high school libraries. All of the students emphasized the sense of community and the social dimensions apparent in their public libraries, and their fondness for these memories was quite evident. They shared stories of seeing people from their neighborhoods, speaking Spanish with library staff, reading books in Spanish, borrowing movies and music for personal enjoyment, and the public library as a meeting space for the people in their lives.

Clearly, the public and school libraries reflected the predominantly or heavily Latino communities in which they grew up in Chicago, and the students viewed the libraries as mechanisms for cultural support and expression. Although few of the students claimed to be fluent in Spanish, all of the students reported speaking at least some Spanish as children and taking delight in the books and resources that emphasized this aspect of their identities. Carolina, Gabriela, and Jazmin were obviously conscious of this absence from their academic library by noting the lack of Spanish language materials or visual representations of Latino people, both in posters and signage.

The students appear to have a vague sense of confusion about the role of the public library as distinct from the academic library. The juxtaposition of the library as a social destination and community center and the library as a quiet environment for study is perhaps not easily reconciled by the students. The academic library is arguably alien and does not translate

easily to their personal experiences with libraries in other contexts of their lives. This might explain their detachment and relatively late use of the academic library.

Discussion

The results of this study confirm many of the conclusions of previous studies investigating Latinos' perceptions of libraries. Solis & Dabbour and Whitmire suggested that Latino students use the library less frequently, seek assistance from librarians less often, and demonstrate lower levels of information literacy than students of other racial and ethnic groups. While the principal investigator cannot conclude how the participants in this study compare against students of other racial and ethnic groups, the results indicate that these Latino students do, in fact, use the library relatively late in their academic experience and arguably do not utilize the library's resources to their full advantage. At least one participant in the study has demonstrated qualities suggestive of a student with less sophisticated information literacy than students typical of his age and status as a fourth-year student.

These students, too, confirm the findings of Ayala and Ayala's study that Latino patrons of public libraries seek out forms of cultural support and representation of their cultural identities. There is arguably a connection, too, between Ayala and Ayala's conclusion that Latino patrons use public libraries principally for servicing their ephemeral needs that cannot be obtained elsewhere, and these students' predominant usage of their academic library for class reserves, printing, and photocopying. While the results suggest that Latino undergraduate students experience ambiguity and confusion through their experiences with academic libraries, just as Akins and Hussey concluded in their study of Latino graduate students, the study cannot with certainty confirm Luevano-Molina's conclusion that libraries exhibit a "chilling" factor or environment that deters Latino students.

However Haras, Lopez, and Ferry concluded that language use is a barrier responsible for Latino students' lower levels of information literacy, lower rates of library usage, and infrequent interactions with library staff.²⁵ Given that the participants of the study spoke fluent English, language is not a barrier to their academic success. However these students indicated that they used the library late, interacted with library staff minimally, and possibly demonstrated lower levels of information literacy.

The results suggest that factors or conditions other than language are responsible for Latino students' lower levels of information literacy, low library usage, and infrequent interactions with library staff. These factors or conditions are more closely related to Latino students' perceptions of the library as a social destination and as a community network. Additionally, Latino students' marked difference in library usage might stem out of a confusion between the role and purpose of the academic library as separate and distinct from the public or school library because of the academic library's lack of familiar resources and expressions of cultural inclusion.

Implications of the Study

The study has several practical implications for academic librarians and educators interested in improving the persistence of Latino college students. Generally, Latino students are exploring academic libraries relatively late in their academic experience. This suggests that academic librarians must market the library differently to Latino students beyond the standard orientation session embedded in the general education curriculum. Instead, academic librarians must provide targeted outreach to Latino students – not only at spaces where Latino students are likely to gather for cultural support but also significantly early in the students' freshman year.

There is evidence that Latino students desire a personal connection to library staff and are not particularly clear on how library staff can assist their academic endeavors. This finding has several implications – that academic libraries should increase the racial and ethnic diversity of their staff and create multicultural competencies for the existing library staff. There is also evidence that academic librarians are not doing a good enough job at explaining their purpose to Latino students, and forms of marketing and the content of the message need to be examined for greater articulation and relevance to the students' lives and circumstances.

These students perceive libraries as cultural spaces, yet no attempts are made in academic libraries to engage Latino students culturally. Perhaps if Latino students witnessed visual representations of their cultural identity at the library, such as magazines or other reading material clearly intended for Latino audiences, perhaps they would perceive the library differently. Cultural traditions or celebrations could be showcased or performed at academic libraries, which increasingly dedicate space to student services and activities. More substantially, libraries could partner with student organizations, student support services, and cultural houses for shared spaces dedicated for Latino student services. There is significant library literature on the integration of academic and career advising services at libraries with learning commons, but a dearth exploring collaborations between cultural support and learning support in libraries with learning commons.

Limitations of the Study

The small number of participants in this study limits the conclusions that can be generalized to Latino students. A sample population with a greater number of participants, and thus a broader swath of the target population, is likely to yield results that are more generalizable for the target population. Additionally, the participants were recruited through convenience

sampling, which tends to produce less “information-rich” cases than other types of purposeful sampling.²⁶

All of the participants in this study were recruited from the same university, which is classified as a research-1 institution. Typically, research-1 institutions are competitive in their admissions standards and admit students with strong academic credentials. The university is primarily residential with predominantly full-time students. It is also geographically distant (at least two hours by car) from areas with substantial Latino communities. Considering the significantly diverse urban institutions studied by Solis and Dabbour and by Lozano, Watts, and Huerta in their respective investigations, the strongly contrasting educational environments embolden suspicion that Latino students enrolled at urban, diverse, less competitive institutions are likely to experience academic libraries differently than Latino students enrolled at semi-rural, predominantly white, research universities.

All of the participants were also recruited through their association with the Latino Cultural Center. Not all Latino students will identify strongly with their cultural background and not all will seek out such organizations. These students are likely to be difficult to reach by researchers, but their responses may yield significantly different results.

Additionally, the participants were not all fluent in Spanish. This may be a sign of cultural assimilation. As Haras, Lopez, and Ferry noted, language is a barrier for Latino students in the development of information literacy and research skills when English is not the students' primary language.²⁷ Because all the participants in this study were fluent in English and significantly less comfortable speaking in Spanish, they are likely to have a fundamentally different – and arguably more productive – relationship with academic libraries than their peers

who do not speak English as a first language. Most of the students were native U.S. citizens, and Adkins and Hussey note that “bilingual skills are typically lost within three generations.”²⁸

Recommendations for Future Study

The results of this study could be more compellingly generalizable if the sample population were expanded to include Latino students from multiple colleges and universities. Private institutions, two-year colleges, and public comprehensive universities attract significantly different student populations than research universities. A subsequent study that increases the size of the sample population is also likely to increase the diversity of the ethnic composition, socio-economic statuses, preparation for college study, and language affiliation of the participants.

Additionally, the study revealed the students' emphasis on the library as a physical space. Academic libraries are increasingly moving to a virtual presence that provides students with a wholly different experience than the library's physical environment. Little exploration of the Latino students' perceptions or interactions of the academic library as a virtual presence was conducted in this study.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the attitudes of Latino undergraduate students in regards to their use of the academic library and its librarians, and to identify the conditions which impede or facilitate their use of the library. The results of the study confirm previous studies that Latino students use academic libraries less often, seek assistance from library staff less frequently, and possibly demonstrate areas for improvement in information literacy. However the results of this study also suggest that language is not the principal barrier to library usage as other studies concluded. Rather, Latino students perceive libraries principally as cultural support

mechanisms and use libraries predominantly for services that cannot be obtained through other means.

The role of the academic library is less distinct to Latino students than the role of the public or school library, and Latino students experience some confusion in their relationship with the academic library. This study provides insight into only a small number of Latino students but still suggests areas where academic libraries can improve their message and services through greater and earlier outreach, the development of multicultural competencies, greater articulation of their purpose in student success, and engaging students culturally through a critical examination of their role in Latino students' lives.

Author's Note

In the interest of researcher reflexivity, I should disclose that I am a librarian employed in an academic library, although not at the institution where I recruited the participants. Despite my anglicized name, I identify as Arab American. I recall feeling distinctly culturally different and isolated during my higher education in the American Midwest. It is perhaps no surprise that I am deeply interested in the experiences and perceptions of minority students as they navigate academic libraries and, by extension, higher education. I should further state that my cultural identity is neither visible to, nor shared by, the participants.

Notes

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