Elizabeth Cramer

Servicios para la Comunidad: Sharing the Experiences of Three Hispanic Services Librarians in North Carolina

Norther Carolina libraries are experiencing an unprecedented demand for Spanish language materials and services for recent immigrant populations due to one of the fastest growing Latino populations in the country. Between 1990 and 2000, the Latino population in North Carolina increased 394%,[1] with four counties (Alamance, Cabarrus, Randolph, and Union) experiencing more than a 1000% increase.[2] The estimated Hispanic population of North Carolina in 2006 is 593,896, an increase of 64% from the estimated population of 378,963 in 2000.[3] According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 41,570 new Latino origin immigrants entered North Carolina between 2005 and 2006.[4]

> **Between 1990 and 2000, the Latino population in North Carolina increased 394%...**

Through my experience working with the North Carolina Library Association (NCLA) and the Carolina Chapter of REFORMA (Association for the Promotion of Library Services and Information to Latinos and Spanish-Speaking), I have witnessed a growing number of requests for information about library Hispanic services programs. It was at the 2003 Biennial NCLA Conference that Jon Sundell and the Round Table for Ethnic Minority Concerns (REMCO) gathered a group of interested librarians to coordinate the formation of the Carolina Chapter of REFORMA. The Chapter was formed in 2004 and is currently very busy with invitations to speak at professional meetings, averaging four programs per year. At these programs, the audiences are filled with librarians seeking information to implement or improve services for their Latino patrons. The most commonly asked questions are about user needs surveys, promotional tools, acquisition of materials, computer classes, programming, and language barriers.

As a community, libraries benefit from sharing experience and best practices. Disseminating information about successful Hispanic services programs is helpful to all libraries serving recent Latin American immigrant populations. Through my involvement with NCLA and REFORMA I have had the pleasure of working with several Hispanic services librarians throughout North Carolina, each of these librarians possessing valuable experience and knowledge beneficial to any library seeking to create or improve their own Hispanic services program. In order to share this vital information, I interviewed three of these librarians, gathered and compared their responses, and present this information so others may be informed.

Hispanic Services Throughout the United States

It has been a decade since John Sundell wrote about his experience in creating North Carolina's first Hispanic services program at Forsyth County Library. In his book chapter entitled "Library Service to Hispanic Immigrants of Forsyth County, North Carolina: a Community Collaboration," Sundell shares valuable information about preliminary actions when creating a Hispanic services program, including locating sources for funding and conducting user needs surveys. He supplies details about which Spanish language materials circulate the most—videos, children's books, and non-fiction. He also includes a helpful list of Spanish language periodicals along with rationale for their inclusion. Outreach to the Forsyth County Latino community was through Spanish language promotional tools and a network of churches, public schools, Hispanic organizations, and the local community college.[5]

Several articles have recently been written about Hispanic services throughout the United States, articles relating to collection management, program development, and outreach to the Latino community. Research methods in these articles varied and included (1) interviews with the Latino community in Dunklin County, Missouri, (2) survey results from public library directors in the state of Alabama, (3) sharing the collective experiences of a group of Hispanic services librarians in Denver, Colorado, and (4) the presentation of historical, demographic, and cultural information for the Latino community in Indiana. These articles contain valuable information on the importance of knowing the local Hispanic community, services and programs currently offered, and barriers to service.

It is important to know the local Hispanic community and their culture. Each of the four articles emphasizes this point by including demographic information about the growing Latino communities within their states. Naylor and Frey include an in-depth description of the Latino community in Indiana with population growth statistics, information about the various countries of origin for the Latino population, and estimated literacy levels. They emphasize the importance of conducting a local community analysis that should include not only demographic information but insight obtained from contact with local social agencies and churches.[6]

The Denver Public Library and its branches have implemented a number of services and programs beneficial to the Latino community. Gross et al. describe the expansion of the collection of Spanish language materials at the Denver Public Library to include reading materials (fiction and non-fiction), materials on citizenship, English language acquisition, music CDs, DVDs, magazines, and a Spanish language Web page. The Library also offers a variety of programs and classes including English as a Second Language courses (both beginner and advanced), GED classes, life skills classes, bilingual children's activities, and a children's literacy program.[7]

Ford and Stephens found that the majority of public libraries in Alabama that responded to their survey do not provide services to the Latino community, and less than 12% of these libraries offered English as a Second Language (ESL) courses, citizenship classes, programs in Spanish, or reference service for Spanish speakers. On a more encouraging note, seven Alabama libraries

that responded were quite active with their Latino community by partnering with literacy councils to offer ESL courses and one-on-one tutoring, assisting immigrant patrons with the citizenship test, creating library catalogs in Spanish, and accepting picture IDs from applicants' country of origin for obtaining library cards.[8]

Three of the biggest challenges faced by Hispanic services librarians are informing the Latino community of available library services, winning the trust of the community, and overcoming the main barrier to service—the language barrier. Denver Public Library found that the most effective method of publicizing the library was to send flyers home with children through the neighborhood schools.[9] Once the Latino patrons walk through the door, it is important that the library provides a welcoming, useful, and trustworthy environment. Rude library staff, inadequate Spanish language materials, or hostile community patrons will discourage potential returning Latino patrons. Naylor and Frey believe that "creating a library environment that Latinos find welcoming and useful is a challenge and ongoing process."[10] Bala and Adkins use the example of the Southeast Missouri Health Network as an organization that has earned the trust of the Hispanic Community due to their monthly legal assistance clinic, interpretation services, and social activities.[11] The most common barrier to service is the lack of Spanish language services. Survey results from Dunklin County, Missouri, showed that the library service most desired from Hispanic library users was computer access, but they feared that their English was not proficient enough to use the computers.[12] Only one in five of the Alabama libraries surveyed responded that they had a staff member who spoke Spanish.[13]

Methodology

For this article, I conducted interviews at three different library systems, each of which employs a Hispanic services librarian. The library systems are all located in North Carolina counties with large Latino and Spanish-speaking populations. One of the Hispanic services programs has been in existence for ten years, the other two for five years. The librarians interviewed have been employed as Hispanic services librarians for two to five years. Each of these librarians has previous experience working with Latino and Spanish-speaking populations and/or working in libraries. One of the librarians is a native Spanish speaker, and another lived in Mexico for 15 years and speaks Spanish fluently, while the third describes her Spanish language skills as "just passable."

Each of the three Hispanic services librarians agreed to an interview with the stipulation that responses would not be credited to a specific interviewee or institution. The anonymity factor may seem restrictive but is helpful in acquiring candid and sincere responses. Interviews consisted of 17 questions and were conducted at the individual libraries, lasting from one and a half to two hours. Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. I reviewed the transcriptions of the articles for recurring and common topics and created a coding system to identify topical categories. Responses were summarized under the following headings: Needs Analysis and Promotional Tools; Collection Management, Services, and Programming for the Latino Community; Support from Administration, Community, and Library Staff; and Cultural Awareness and A Welcoming, Trustworthy Environment.

Needs Analysis and Promotional Tools

Before launching a Hispanic services library program, it is important to survey the needs of the local Latino and Spanish-speaking community. Each of the three libraries conducted a needs survey prior to implementing their Hispanic services. The needs survey was conducted through interviews and surveys that asked the Latino community members what they would like to see in their county libraries. The surveys revealed that the Latino community wanted to see a Spanish speaker working in the library, computer classes offered in Spanish, and Spanish language materials made available. All three Hispanic services librarians continue to assess community needs by communicating with patrons, performing outreach services outside of the library, and attending local Latino celebrations and activities.

Publicizing and informing the Latino community of library services is achieved in several ways. All three libraries place information about hours and services in the local Spanish language newspapers. Each library also cooperates with their local public school system, sending information home with Latino schoolchildren. One library broadcasts public service announcements on the local Spanish language radio station while another librarian hangs bookmobile information (hours, services, etc.) from residents' doorknobs in Latino neighborhoods. Other examples of promotion include speaking at health fairs, open houses, and school family nights, as well as visiting businesses that hire Latinos in order to talk with Hispanic workers during their lunch hour.

Collection Management, Services, and Programming

One of the primary functions of library Hispanic services programs is to provide materials in Spanish. All three libraries purchase Spanish language items including books, DVDs, children's literature, and English as a Second Language materials, *Inglés sin Barreras* being the most popular. Two publishers of Spanish language materials were favorably mentioned, Modera (a publisher in Spain and distributed by Lectoro) and Children's Book Press. Three commonly used book vendors were Scholastic, Baker and Taylor, and Brodart. One librarian mentioned that she also likes to buys books at two bookstore chains, Borders and Barnes & Noble.

In addition to purchasing Spanish language materials, the creation and evaluation of relevant library services is essential for the success of Hispanic services programs. Computer classes are considered a highly successful service at all three libraries even though they offer their computer classes in different manners. At one library the Hispanic services librarian and her full time assistant teach all the computer courses in the main library. They taught computer skills to 550-600 Spanish-speaking patrons in the last year, courses ranging from basic skills to advanced software such as Publisher, Excel, and Word. Another Hispanic services librarian teaches basic computer classes with assistance from the computer literacy specialist and bilingual library staff members. The computer class at this library is taught only on Saturday mornings and lasts four hours. The third library supplies an online computer class that is taught in Spanish. Patrons can complete the course at their leisure and receive certification. All three librarians believe that the computer courses are a big draw among the Hispanic population and serve as a "first step" in getting them through the front door of the library.

Two library services commonly associated with Hispanic services were not unanimously considered successful by the three librarians. Bilingual conversation clubs and bilingual story hour have been discontinued or shortened at two of the three libraries. These two libraries discontinued their bilingual conversation clubs after native Spanish speakers lost interest and ceased attending. In both situations, the native English speakers tended to dominate the conversation, resulting in more Spanish spoken than English. One Hispanic services librarian surmised that the Spanish-speakers lost interest due to the overbearing nature of the native English speakers and a lack of free time. Bilingual story time was not well attended at two of the libraries. The majority of those who did attend were native English speakers wanting to expose their children to Spanish. Librarians surmised that story-time is basically a United States concept unfamiliar to the Latino culture. It would be difficult for many young Hispanic mothers to find the time to take their children to the library and have someone read to them. Two of the libraries discontinued regularly scheduled bilingual story times but maintain visits with preschools, after school programs, and other outreach opportunities to read to children, primarily in Spanish.

Teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) is handled differently at all three libraries. One of the Hispanic services librarians coordinates ESL tutoring at the library in partnership with the County Literacy Center. The library does not teach the classes but does provide space and information. At the second library, ESL students are brought to the library by their instructor in order to receive instruction of library skills in Spanish. This same library occasionally coordinates English workshops, bringing in an English professor to teach a group of 25 Spanish-speakers or other internationals. The third library is not involved in ESL classes but informs interested patrons of a nearby technical college that offers English classes for free and with a very accommodating schedule. All three librarians recognize that other institutions may be better prepared to teach ESL, but libraries serve as valuable partners.

An innovative approach to Hispanic services is one library's homework help program for English reading skills, called Tarjetas sin Barreras (Homework without Borders). It has the full support of the library administration, which recognizes the need for, and the potential of, such a program. It has slow but steady attendance with a minimum of publicity. After more tutor volunteers are recruited, the plan is to send 6,000 flyers to the schools to inform more families about the program.

The three libraries offer a variety of programming for the Latino and Spanish-speaking population. Each library celebrates El Dia de los Niños/ El Dia de los Libros (Day of Children/ Day of the Book), an annual celebration of children and reading. Additional programs include immigration law, holiday place setting, Hispanic Heritage Month, gardening, and a Posada (Christmas celebration). At two of the libraries, programs presented in English are translated for the Spanish-speaking attendees by bilingual staff and volunteers. One of these two libraries enlists student volunteers majoring in translation services from the local university. They also are equipped with a set of fifteen walkie-talkie type devices, similar to the system in place at the United Nations. Attendees in need of translation pick up a receiving device in order to listen to a concurrent translation of the program. The librarians at these two libraries noted that translation of Spanish language programs into English is also available.

Assessment of services and programs offered is conducted through a monthly report of activities to the library administration. Included in the report is the number of Spanish language items circulated, programs offered, classes taught, reference stats, and outreach services such as day care and after school centers, fairs, and community events. Number of attendees at all programs and classes are also included. All of the Hispanic services librarians interviewed shared that their reports were seen as satisfactory, if not outstanding.

Support from Administration, Community, and Library Staff
Support from the administration is vital to any library program. Administrative support often translates into necessary funding and staff. All three Hispanic services librarians interviewed said they felt supported by their administration. Two of the Hispanic services programs received an additional staff member in the last two years, doubling their staffing levels. Funding for the three programs varied widely. One library has a materials budget of $17,000, by far the largest of the three libraries. A second library recently experienced a budget cut from $20,000 to $5,000, but the Hispanic services librarian said that the funds were being reallocated to electronic resources and that cuts were fairly distributed throughout the library. The third library has a budget of $3,000, a 100% increase from its beginning budget of $1,500 when the program began five years ago.

In addition to the official budgets of the three institutions, all three Hispanic services programs have received extra funds from outside sources. Friends of the Library groups and the local Hispanic League have helped fund programs, notably the El Dia de los Niños, Hispanic Heritage Month, and Posada celebrations. Volunteers also help with Hispanic services. One library enlists student volunteers from Americorps, a U.S. focused Federal program similar to the Peace Corps.

Each of the librarians feels that overall community support is strong, although some county residents question the use of government funds to supply services to those perceived as non-tax-paying residents. Complaints have been few and were brought to the librarians' attention via the electronic comments submission, newspaper editorials, or comments made to the staff. One librarian keeps an optimistic view, stating, "There's just a few that kind of frown about why we spend tax money serving this population group. But they're mostly supportive. There are people interested in learning about other groups." Yet another is a bit discouraged by her interactions with the community, "I know some people want to help because I know some people who try to help and support the Hispanics, and not just the Hispanics, just the people who know there is a need, help. But there are others who are against it. And they were saying, 'Why help the Hispanics? They don't have a right here. They're here illegally.'"

Vital to winning community support is educating the native-born English-speaking population about recent Latino immigrants. One of the three Hispanic services librarians was recently involved in a cultural awareness program sponsored by the Center for International Understanding. The program participants consisted of a select group of city leaders who visited a small town in Mexico where the majority of males had immigrated to work in the United States. The librarian was seen as a leader in the group, serving as translator and cultural guide. Upon returning to North Carolina,

individuals involved with the project spoke at several community gatherings, sharing their experience and new attitudes towards recent Latino immigrants.

Perceived support from colleagues varied for the three librarians. It is obvious through interactions at one library that Hispanic services are well supported, from the head of the library down to all levels of staff. This is very different from another interviewee who feels her colleagues do not support the Hispanic services program. She said she has seen staff act in a rude manner to Spanish-speaking patrons and react negatively to her speaking Spanish with patrons. She also noted that other service areas are not attempting to make contact with the Latino and Spanish-speaking community. Even though she has the support from the administration, it is sometimes overwhelming for her. "You don't get a lot of support from the staff. Even when the administration wants it, it's kind of hard to do something when the other staff doesn't help, because it is just too much for one person to do." She stresses the fact that the library needs to be a welcoming place to all patrons.

Cultural Awareness and a Welcoming, Trustworthy Environment
A primary role of the Hispanic services librarian is to understand cultural norms, beliefs, and concerns of the Latino community in order to avoid potential barriers to service. One librarian notes that her circulation is low and that even with the bookmobile services, only 1,500 items circulated in three months. This challenged her concept of the perceived level of importance of reading by the recent Spanish-speaking immigrants. "Cause, you know, we don't have many people coming to use the bookmobile. And they [manager of apartment complex, a Latino] told me in Spanish, "No les gusta leer" They don't like to read. I don't know why; he just said this matter-of-factly and seriously. Maybe it's the culture. I like to read, but I think there is something to most people not liking to read. They have other things to worry about."

The same librarian was surprised by the fact that childcare centers and after school programs were requesting story time in Spanish only. These programs believe in the importance of children retaining Spanish, but the Hispanic services librarian saw the matter in a different light: "In the centers that I go to they prefer that I give the story time in Spanish when I feel like I should be exposing the kids to English. They are going to be going to these schools, you know, in one or two years. So, then they only want it in Spanish. They say they want it in Spanish because they want them to be exposed to the [Latino] culture."

All three librarians and much of the literature about Hispanic services stress the importance of winning the trust of the Latino community by creating a warm, welcoming, and useful environment. To accommodate recent immigrants, all three libraries have changed the identification requirements for obtaining a library card. In the past, a driver's license and/or a social security card was required. Now a photo ID and proof of county residence are sufficient. Photo IDs can include a passport, driver's license (from Mexico), voter registration card from country of origin, a school ID, or a consular matricula (photo ID available from regional consulates). But still the ID requirements make it difficult for many new residents, particularly young mothers, to obtain a card.

A key ingredient in providing welcoming services to any recent immigrant community is the ability to communicate. All three of the interviewees agreed that libraries needed to have bilingual staff in order to meet the needs of Spanish speakers but they also agreed that all libraries, regardless of Spanish language ability, can provide services to the Hispanic population. One librarian shared, "I teach Spanish here to my colleagues, and am constantly saying to them, 'Your smile, your warmness, your welcoming attitude are what's important when you need the Latinos to come to your library.' That's what I'm telling them, but in reality I also know the Spanish language is so necessary because when push comes to shove, that person living here would like to hear, if possible, someone speak their own language. Even if it's broken with an accent."

One last consideration in providing a welcoming environment for the Hispanic community is childcare. Many Latino patrons cannot afford childcare for their children in the evenings. Without childcare, they are unable to attend classes or programs. Only one of the three libraries provides childcare services. At a recent program for immigration issues, this library provided craft activities for older children while younger children were allowed to remain in the audience with their parents. The Hispanic services librarian admitted that the young children in the audience were disruptive, but no one intervened. At this same library, regularly scheduled computer classes are held in the computer lab, which is right next door to the children's room. Older children are allowed to read or to play on the computers in the children's area while parents learn computer skills.

Conclusion
The three librarians interviewed for this paper share a wealth of inventive and practical approaches for Hispanic services. They present a wide variety of options for services including computer classes in Spanish at various levels (either in person or online), library programs in Spanish or with Spanish translation, and childcare. They reach out to the Latino community in innovative ways and facilitate library access by changing identification requirements for obtaining library cards. All three Hispanic services librarians emphasize the ability to communicate with the Spanish-speaking patron by hiring bilingual staff or enlisting bilingual student or community volunteers. Yet, they stress that even in libraries without Spanish-speaking staff, a smile and a welcoming attitude will suffice. These librarians feel supported by their administration and strive to build better understanding between the Latino and English-speaking community members. Two surprises from the interviews are the perceived lack of staff support for Hispanic services at one library and the lack of success for bilingual story time and conversation clubs. Hopefully other libraries will benefit from this shared experience and knowledge, learning from others in order to create policies and services particular to their community and institution.

Elizabeth Cramer is a cataloger at Appalachian State University

References

[1]Pew Hispanic Center. "The New Latino South: The Context and Consequences of Rapid Population Growth." http://pewhispanic.org/files/reports/50.pdf (April 5, 2008): ii-iii.
[2]Ibid., 26.
[3]U.S. Census Bureau. Population Division. "Annual Estimates of the Population by Sex, Race, and Hispanic or Latino Origin for North Carolina: April 1, 2000 to July 1, 2006 (SC-EST2006-03-37)." http://www.census.gov/popest/states/NST-ann-est.html(December 16, 2007).
[4]Ibid.
[5]Jon Sundell, "Library Service to Hispanic Immigrants of Forsyth County, North Carolina: a Community Collaboration," in *Library Services to Latinos: an Anthology*, ed. By Salvador Güereña, 143-168. (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2000).
[6]Shelly Naylor and Susan M. Frey, "Where Cultural and Information Literacy Meet: Spanish-Speaking Library Users in Indiana," *Indiana Libraries* 25 (2006): 2-7.
[7]Barbara Gross et al., "A Library for All: Denver Public Library Designs Services to Meet the Needs of the Hispanic Community," *Colorado Libraries* 32 (2006): 32-36.
[8]Charlotte E. Ford and Annabel Stephens, "Alabama Public Library Services to the Hispanic Community," *Alabama Librarian* 57 (2007): 6-19.
[9]Gross, 35.
[10]Naylor, 4.
[11]Beth Bala and Denice Adkins, "Library and Information Needs of Latinos in Dunklin County, Missouri," *Public Libraries* 43 (2004): 121.
[12]Ibid., 121.
[13]Ford, 10.

Selected Bibliography

Bala, Beth and Denice Adkins. "Library and Information Needs of Latinos in Dunklin County, Missouri." *Public Libraries* 43 (2004): 119-122.

Ford, Charlotte and Annabel Stephens. "Alabama Public Library Services to the Hispanic Community." *Alabama Librarian* 57 (2007): 6-19.

Gross, Barbara, Julie Rea, Pilar Castro-Reino, Sherry Spitsnaugle, Sue Christenson, and Becky Russle. "A Library for All: Denver Public Library Designs Services to Meet the Needs of the Hispanic Community." *Colorado Libraries* 32 (2006): 32-36.

Naylor, Shelly and Susan M. Frey. "Where Cultural and Information Literacy Meet: Serving Spanish-Speaking Library Users in Indiana." *Indiana Libraries* 25 (2006): 2-7.

Pew Hispanic Center. "The New Latino South: The Context and Consequences of Rapid Population Growth." http://pewhispanic.org/files/reports/50.pdf (April 5, 2008).

Sundell, Jon. "Library Service to Hispanic Immigrants of Forsyth County, North Carolina: a Community Collaboration" Chapter 12 in *Library Services to Latinos: an Anthology*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2000.

U.S. Census Bureau. Population Division. "Annual Estimates of the Population by Sex, Race, and Hispanic or Latino Origin for North Carolina: April 1, 2000 to July 1, 2006 (SC-EST2006-03-37)." http://www.census.gov/popest/states/NST-ann-est.html(December 16, 2007)

Appendix

Library Services and Outreach to the Latino and Spanish-Speaking Communities in North Carolina

Questions for interview

1. What is your job title?

2. How long have you been working with the Latino and Spanish-speaking community?

3. How long have you been employed in your current job?

4. Could you give a brief description of your job duties as they pertain to outreach and services to the Latino and Spanish-speaking community?

5. How long has your library district been providing library service and outreach to the Latino community?

6. Have you perceived changes in the Latino and Spanish-speaking community since you began this job?

7. What do you think are some of the biggest misconceptions about the Latino and Spanish-speaking community?

8. How does your library determine the needs of the local Latino and Spanish-speaking community?

9. How does your library's administration perceive the need to provide library services to the Latino and Spanish-speaking community?

10. In your opinion, how are Hispanic services perceived by the English-speaking, native-born patrons of your library?

11. How are your services to the Latino and Spanish-speaking community funded?

12. How do you measure the success of Hispanic services in your library?

13. In your opinion, how important is the ability to speak Spanish in service to the Latino and Spanish-speaking population?

14. What are some of the biggest obstacles you face in providing library services to the Latino and Spanish-speaking community?

15. What are some of your biggest successes in involving the Latino and Spanish-speaking community with your library?

16. Ignoring real-life constraints of limited support, staffing and finances, what actions do you believe would be most advantageous to providing services to the Latino and Spanish-speaking community?

17. Do you think there are concerns about providing library services to the Latino and Spanish-speaking community that we have not discussed?