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Library and Information Needs of Latinos in Rural Dunklin County, Missouri

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Abstract

Libraries in rural Missouri are struggling to provide adequate services to a growing number of Spanish-speaking residents. This article examines the barriers to effective library services through the evaluation of a survey conducted among Latinos in Dunklin County, Missouri in 2002. Successful library outreach to the Spanish-speaking in other areas of the country have included Spanish language materials, child-friendly programs in Spanish and promotion of the library services through media outlets which target the Hispanic population.

Introduction

Although not traditionally known for its large Latino population, the State of Missouri has had a large Latino population increase between 1990 and 2000, with the population increasing by 92 percent, from 61,702 to 118,592. Latinos first settled in Kansas City, MO in 1905, as they worked on the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad, and a small Latino community has existed in Kansas City ever since then. Now, a new development is taking place. Drawn by the promise of work, low cost of living, and safe environments for their children, Latinos are settling in smaller Midwestern towns. This “hypergrowth” of the Latino population is happening all over the Midwestern United States.¹ Libraries and other public institutions in the Midwest have been challenged to provide effective service to this new community, particularly because of a language barrier. This paper looks at Latino residents’ use of libraries in Dunklin County, approximately 200 miles south of St. Louis, and the library’s response to those residents.

Rural Missouri Latinos are connected with the food industry both through *agromaquilas*, agricultural factories that produce food products, and as seasonal migrant fieldworkers. The food-preparation industry has been a driving factor in the growth of the rural Missouri Latino population. Almost 80 percent of Latino respondents to a 1999 survey said that they moved to Missouri for work, and “in rural Missouri the meat processing industry is the major employer for [Latinos].”² Although Latinos make up only 2.5 percent of the population there, Dunklin County has seen 388 percent growth of the Hispanic population.³ The influx in Dunklin County is due primarily to farm workers, as fruit crops and cotton processing require a large number of seasonal laborers in this largely agricultural area of Missouri, 100 miles north of Memphis, TN . Many of these workers are migrants, moving from one place to another in what are commonly referred to as “streams,” following the harvest of various crops. Increasingly, though, seasonal farmworkers are settling out of the stream and residing year round in rural communities like those found in Dunklin County.

A recent study of the Latino population in rural Missouri found that most rural Latinos are first-generation settlers with low educational attainment. Surveys have suggested that from 15 to 50 percent of the Latino population in various rural Missouri towns might be *sin papeles* (working or living in the United States without official immigration authorization).⁴ Missouri Latinos who live in rural areas tend to have more difficulty speaking English than those who live in cities.⁵ These problems are not limited to the adult population. With the increase in Latino population there has been an increased enrollment of Limited English Proficient (LEP) students enrolling in area schools. The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education reports that

enrollment of Spanish-speaking LEP students increased from 2,768 in 1997 to 5,098 in 2001.⁶

Enrollment data for Dunklin County's Senath-Hornersville School District indicate that Spanish-speaking LEP children accounted for more than 25 percent of student enrollment for the 2001-2002 school year.⁷

Literature Review

Libraries exist to provide public access to knowledge, information, entertainment, and increasingly to computer technology. They strive to know and serve their entire service population, but when the library service population includes Latinos, some barriers arise. Latino patrons may not know about the library, and if they do, may not see the relevance of library service to their lives. Latino patrons may be geographically isolated from the library. If a library is too far away to walk, and the patron does not have a car or a reliable system of public transportation, the library has to develop a system to bring services to the community. A linguistic barrier may exist when library staff are English-monolingual and library patrons speak English not at all or not very well. While these issues are new to Missouri, other libraries have already faced them and reported how they dealt with these concerns.

Kathleen De La Pena McCook and Kate Lippincott, from the University of South Florida, describe their efforts to survey Florida librarians on services provided to migrant farmworkers in a chapter of a 1998 book, *Poor People and Library Services*. In it, they describe the constraints many librarians face; low budgets and a lack of bilingual skills among staff. From this survey and the resulting list of people interested in exploring the issue, they formed a committee that

began their work by focusing on literacy. They identified a need for more Spanish language materials and developed a list of quality Spanish reference, easy reading and children's materials for librarians who do not speak Spanish to use when expanding their collections.⁸ Additionally, a week-long institute focusing on the needs of Spanish-speaking populations in Florida was developed and implemented in 1998. The thrust of the conference was the importance of understanding the needs, desires, activities, and background of the target population.⁹

Two libraries in the State of California developed bookmobile services targeted toward Latino farmworkers. The Fresno County Public Library and the Riverside City and County Library both attempted to establish community partnerships and flexible policies to overcome barriers. In order to foster trust between farmworkers and the Campesino Library Program, the library sought partners who were already familiar with the community, such as social services employees, health providers, and churches. To increase awareness of the Campesino Library Program, the library began a marketing campaign to promote library services through Spanish-language publications and radio stations.¹⁰

Stocked with English as a Second Language materials, Spanish-language materials, and nonprint materials including records, tapes, art displays, and puppets, these bookmobile services took the library to the patrons. Both libraries attempted to meet the needs of Spanish-monolingual patrons by staffing their bookmobiles with bilingual employees and including materials written in Spanish. Riverside's Campesino Library Service bookmobile issued 2,500 new library cards in

the first year of operation, reaching a quarter of the target population.¹¹ Bookmobile service is a popular response to the challenge of reaching geographically distant patrons, but a survey of Indiana libraries finds that the most cited reason for discontinuing bookmobile service was the construction of a branch library to serve the formerly isolated population.¹²

Discussion

The Dunklin County Library System has nine branches and does not run a bookmobile service; however, the experiences of California libraries in providing child-friendly Spanish-language programming, Spanish language collections, and promotion of library services through partnerships with other organizations are still applicable. The impact of “hypergrowth” among the Latino population in rural Missouri challenges institutions like libraries accustomed to serving a predominantly English-speaking population. Recognizing the growth of the Latino population is a first step toward developing library outreach to a target population. However, it is also important to understand what the information needs of the community are.

Methods

In November and December, 2002, 41 Latino residents of Dunklin County, Missouri were interviewed about their library use. With Angel Castro (Missouri Title I-C Migrant Education Center, Malden, MO), Ricardo Fuentes and Maria Flores (both of the Missouri Division of Workforce Development, Kennett, MO), Beth Bala conducted door-to-door interviews. In these interviews, Latino residents were asked whether or not they had used the library in the last six

months, and if so, which services they had used. To capture unmet information needs, residents were also asked which services, if available, would be most important to them and whether they desired Spanish-language materials. Because library use among the Spanish-speaking population of Dunklin County is very low, the survey attempted to identify the barriers to Latino library use and determine which services would be most attractive to the Spanish-speaking population.

The 41 people interviewed included 23 females and 18 males. Thirty-nine respondents identified their racial or ethnic background as Latino, one identified as Asian, and one did not identify. Respondents' average age was 34.5 years. Eleven respondents (27 percent) were between 18 and 25 years of age; thirteen (32 percent) were between 26 and 40 years of age; and thirteen more (32 percent) were over 40 years of age. Four respondents did not disclose their ages. On average, most respondents had lived in southeastern Missouri for less than three years. Seventeen respondents (42 percent) had lived in southeastern Missouri for 12 months or less; one respondent (2 percent) had lived in southeastern Missouri for 12 years. Most respondents lived within ten minutes of a library branch.

Most respondents (21, or 51 percent) had not finished high school and did not hold a General Education Development (GED) certificate. Twelve respondents (29 percent) had finished high school or earned their GEDs. Another five respondents (12 percent) had completed some college, business, or vocational training, but only one respondent (2 percent) held a college degree. Two respondents did not indicate how much education they had had. Many of the respondents were

unemployed or seasonally employed. Only eight respondents (20 percent) worked year round. Thirteen (32 percent) were seasonally employed, and five (12 percent) were unemployed. The population also consisted of five (12 percent) disabled respondents, five (12 percent) homemakers, and four (10 percent) students. One respondent did not provide employment status.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture reports that most farmworkers earn annual incomes below the federal poverty level, and half earn wages below \$7,500 per year.¹³ Household incomes for Dunklin County respondents were consistent with this. Eighteen respondents (44 percent) reported household incomes of less than \$15,000 per year. Nine respondents (22 percent) reported incomes between \$15,000 and \$19,999, and four (10 percent) reported household incomes between \$20,000 and \$34,999. Ten respondents did not know or chose not to report their annual household income. The average number of people living in a household was 4.8. The total number ranged from a low of two people per household to a high of nine.

Results

Of the 41 residents interviewed, 78 percent (32) had not visited the library in the past six months. When asked why they had not used the library, 34 percent (14) cited a language barrier. Other reasons cited for not using the library included conflict with work hours and a lack of need. None of the respondents suggested that they had concerns about registering with the library due to undocumented status.

Library Books and Materials

Seven respondents (17 percent) indicated visiting the library once or twice during the last six months, and 2 (5 percent) had visited the library more than three times in the last six months. The book circulation service was used by three respondents (7 percent); video circulation and magazine services were used by two respondents each (5 percent); and audiobook circulation and tax form availability were used by one respondent each (2 percent). Most respondents (28, or 68 percent) said they would like Spanish-language books at the library; 18 (44 percent) said they would like Spanish-language videos. Fifteen (37 percent) wanted Spanish-language children's books, and five (12 percent) wanted reference services provided in Spanish.

Computer Access

The library service most frequently used by these respondents was computer access. Six of the seven respondents who had used the library in the past six months indicated using computers at the library. Indeed, when asked what services would attract them to the library, seventeen of the respondents (42 percent) said that computer access would do so. Over half of the respondents knew that the library provided free access to computers. When asked why they had not used computers at the library, 23 respondents (56 percent) said they did not know how, and 13 respondents (31 percent) felt their command of English was not good enough to use the computers. Most respondents (36, or 88 percent) said they would use the library's computers if they knew that the computers had a Spanish-language interface. Although a Spanish-language interface already existed on these Gates Foundation computers, this feature was not marketed to the population that would benefit most from it.

Desired Services

When Latino residents were asked what library services would be of value to them, 22 respondents (54 percent) said that literacy-related skills (learning to read or improving reading ability) would be useful. Twenty-one respondents (51 percent) said that learning to do research and being able to do that research would be helpful, while help with school work and help completing their education were cited by 18 respondents (44 percent) each. Nineteen respondents (46 percent) wanted to improve their computer skills, while 18 (44 percent) said that the ability to write and print reports at the library would be helpful. In general, respondents' desires from library services were education-oriented.

Barriers

Latinos living on low incomes in rural Southeast Missouri face problems similar to other groups including finding affordable and safe housing and adequate medical care for treatment of chronic diseases such as diabetes and high blood pressure as well as acute medical crises. However, many Latinos also face a language barrier. According to Rosie Garcia, an outreach specialist with the Missouri Career Center, a lack of Spanish-language brochures, forms and other materials make simple tasks like opening a checking account at a bank, getting a driver's license and car insurance or buying an auto part very difficult, without the assistance of an interpreter. For the undocumented, most of these chores can be all but impossible because they lack a valid social security number.¹⁴ Angel Castro, a recruiter with the Migrant Education Center, said that the majority of the people he contacts do not speak English. They rely upon their children to

serve as interpreters, though they want to learn English. Work takes precedence over all other activities, but still, a growing number of people are making the time to take ESL classes at a local church.

Castro said the Spanish-speaking community trusts and relies upon the many services provided by Southeast Missouri Health Network, a federally-funded health clinic with branches throughout Southeast Missouri which offers medical and dental care on a sliding scale fee structure. In addition to medical services, the clinic offers interpretation services, a monthly legal assistance clinic, social activities and serves as a clearinghouse for referrals to other agencies and organizations. If a Latino has a question their neighbors and friends can't help with, the next call would probably be to the clinic. The library isn't viewed as a place which welcomes Latinos because there are no resources for non-English speakers, and often, according to Castro, library staff assume because he's Hispanic that he cannot speak English, and treat him as though he's a bother to them.¹⁵

Conclusions

This survey documents the library usage patterns of 41 Latino residents of Dunklin County, Missouri. While it cannot be definitively said that Dunklin County Latinos are representative of the entire Latino community, this survey provides other rural Midwestern counties some information for dealing with their own growing Latino populations.

The survey reveals a high level of library underuse by Latino residents. Because most respondents lived relatively close to library branches, it was considered that geographical barriers did not apply to this situation. Respondents' comments suggested that language and publicity barriers were more likely to cause library underuse. A lack of Spanish-language materials and bilingual library staff contributed to a sense that Latinos are not welcome in the library. Additionally, the library's lack of advertising and networking was revealed in patrons' assumption that library computers were not accessible to the Spanish-speaking. Library services can and should be advertised in media that reaches the Spanish-speaking population, and outreach efforts can be conducted with local health and education workers who are known to the Latino community in rural Missouri.

This Midwestern Latino community seeks to focus on education and self-improvement. This is a good opportunity for the library to work with community agencies to provide educational programs for the Spanish-speaking community, using community agency employees or volunteers to provide programming and Spanish-language translation.

Notes

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http://mcdc2.missouri.edu/websas/dp1_2ktmenus/mo/Counties.html, accessed 3/15/03.
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5. Lazos, Cambio de colores, 25.
6. Lazos, Cambio de colores, 44.
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9. Catherine Jasper, "Services to Migrant and Seasonal Farmworkers." in *Library Services to Youth of Hispanic Heritage*. ed. Barbara Immroth and Kathleen De La Pena McCook. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2000), 45.
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11. Ibid., 256.
12. Stephanie Davis, Cynthia Harnish and Elaine Walker, "Bookmobile Service in Indiana: Its History, Its Present and Its Future," *Indiana Libraries* 20, no. 1 (2001): 3.
13. See National Center for Farmworker Health Facts about Farmworkers, available at: http://www.nchfh.org/factsheets_01.shtml, accessed 7/28/02, references Oliveria, V.; Effland, J. Runyan; and Hamm, S. *Hired Farm Labor Use on Fruit, Vegetable and Horticultural Specialty Farms*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1993.
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15. Angel Castro, recruiter with Migrant Education Center in Malden, interview by author, November 25, 2002.

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