Proceeding Paper

Including Latinx Communities in Academic Libraries: A Theoretical Approach to Information Access †

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Abstract: While more Latinx students continue to enroll in higher education, physical, intellectual, and socio-cultural barriers to information may continue to impede their success and inclusion. A tripartite theoretical model that examines physical, intellectual, and socio-cultural information access provides insights for academic libraries to better meet Latinx students' information needs and include them in campus life. This paper gives an overview of the theoretical framework along with practical steps libraries can take to improve information equity.

1. Introduction

Even as the Latinx community has emerged as the largest ethnic minority group in the United States (18.7% of the US population, US Census Bureau, 2021), this community faces multiple barriers to information access and equity, especially in higher education [1]. The enrollment of Latinx students in universities is up by 142% over the past two decades and is expected to increase by another 25% by 2030 (Fullmer & Fiedler, 2021), but only 24% of Latinx adults hold an associate degree or higher, compared to 46% of white adults (Excelencia in Education, 2020) [2,3]. Aside from equity gaps in enrollment and graduation, Latinx students, who are more likely to be the first in their family to go to college (Flink, 2018), may face unique cultural challenges in navigating college life, finding community, and accessing information [4]. Since academic library use improves student success and retention, especially among first-year students (Soria et al., 2013), academic libraries have a unique opportunity to improve education equity and the cultural inclusion of Latinx and other underrepresented students [5].

A three-pronged or tripartite model of information access theory (Thompson and Afzal, 2011) that examines the physical, intellectual, and socio-cultural aspects of information access provides a compelling framework for understanding and approaching information equity for Latinx students in higher education [6]. Physical information access and inclusion examines the roles of library policies, infrastructure, universal design, and usability analysis on information equity. Intellectual information access and inclusion assesses the roles of language, technology, and information literacy on information and education equity. Finally, socio-cultural information access explores the roles that culture and formal and informal information channels have on information equity and inclusion. Ultimately, this discussion of information access theory will provide a framework for developing policies, programs, and systems that best serve the complex information needs and enhance the college experience of Latinx students, along with students of all backgrounds.

2. Information Access Model

The tripartite theory of information access (Thompson & Afzal, 2011) is rooted in information poverty research. Information poverty is defined as a lack of information available inside or outside of one's information world, and those who are information-poor—"perceive themselves to be devoid of any sources that might help them" [7] (Chatman, 1996, p. 197). It is important to note that information poverty does not necessarily connote economic poverty. Information access and information poverty are closely tied, as lack of information access largely determines the extent to which a group is considered information poor.

Using this model, we first turn to the concept of physical information access, which focuses on information infrastructure. In the context of libraries, physical access means having access to books, journals, the internet, and other resources that best meet an individual's information needs (Thompson & Afzal, 2011). Recently, many discussions on physical information access have focused on equitable access to the internet, commonly known as the digital divide (Goldberg et al., 2019) [8]. While the digital divide is narrowing, especially among the Latinx community, the lack of equitable internet access remains a major impediment to information access, especially in rural areas. However, even if digital and other physical information barriers are eliminated, this does not necessitate the achievement of information equity.

Moving beyond physical information access, intellectual information access examines the technical competence and language skills needed to acquire and process information (Thompson & Afzal, 2011). An important piece of intellectual access is information literacy, defined as the ability to effectively seek, evaluate, use, and create information (UNESCO, 2005) [9]. This is currently a major focus in academic library instruction, especially considering gaps between underrepresented groups, such as Latinx students, and the greater student body (Dabbour & Ballard, 2011) [10]. Even if an academic library keeps its doors open and WiFi turned on 24 hours a day, intellectual access barriers may remain for underrepresented students, which impedes their ability to find, understand, use, and create information. While intellectual access adds to the discussion of information access and points to possible ways to close equity gaps, its focus remains largely on formal education practices and does not encompass all aspects of information access.

Social information access, which examines how interpersonal networks and relationships impact information flows, completes the tripartite model (Thompson & Afzal, 2011). Social alienation can be as significant of a barrier to information access as the lack of access to technology or physical infrastructure. If an individual or group feels like outsiders in a larger information world (such as a college campus) and does not trust the authoritative sources of information, they may ignore or reject information even if it is physically available and intellectually understandable. Especially within the Latinx community, information flows typically rely heavily on social interaction (Bladeck, 2019) and information gatekeepers (Metoyer-Duran, 1993), making social access essential to meaningful information access [11,12]. Furthermore, multilingualism, in which individuals are expected to operate in different languages in different contexts, has social access implications (Thompson & Afzal, 2011). Therefore, when focusing on the information needs of underrepresented groups, such as Latinx college students, their physical, intellectual, and social needs must all be considered and addressed.

3. Latinx Students and Academic Libraries

When discussing Latinx students and university libraries, Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), institutions with 25% or more enrollment of Latinx students and a demonstrated commitment to their academic success and inclusion (Excelencia in Education, 2021), are a good place to look [13]. HSIs were formally created by the federal government in 1992 to promote the enrollment and graduation of Latinx (or "Hispanic") students by providing grant funding opportunities to eligible institutions. Unlike Historically Black Colleges and Universities, HSIs are historically white institutions with no prior mandate for serving

minority students. HSIs have the potential to not only promote academic success among a diverse population but also to become institutions where information equity exists with respect to physical, intellectual, and socio-cultural information access.

California State University Northridge is an example of an HSI that has leveraged opportunities to implement grants with the aim of improving physical, intellectual, and social access to information (CSUN University Library, 2020) [14]. CSUN received a 5-year HSI grant from 2002 to 2006 with the goal of improving "student success through strengthening its library collections, archives, and information competence." This grant sought to improve Latinx students' physical access to information by acquiring, digitizing, and improving the accessibility of primary archival materials related to local Latinx individuals and organizations. The grant also addressed intellectual information needs by "expanding the Library's collection of books, journals, electronic resources, media, and teacher curriculum materials related to Latino history, social sciences, and culture" (in Spanish) and assessed the impact of library information literacy instruction. Finally, the grant addressed social information needs by seeking partnerships and alliances and conducting outreach with the Latinx campus community. This example demonstrates how libraries can address all three areas of information access by proactively seeking funding opportunities and actively engaging with their diverse student communities.

4. Inclusivity in Practice

Regardless of whether an academic library is located at an his, an emerging HSI, or anywhere else, they can use the tripartite model to inform their design of inclusive information buildings, services, and programs. For physical access, one of the best practices an academic library can use to best serve Latinx and other students of diverse backgrounds is universal design. Universal design is broadly defined as "the design and composition of an environment so that it can be accessed, understood, and used to the greatest extent possible by all people" (Center for Excellence in Universal Design, n.d.) [15]. Libraries can incorporate universal design principles in their architectural design and physical layout by making the space inviting and easy to navigate. For example, libraries may set up different environments within the building that accommodate different learning styles and needs, with space for both socializing and quiet study (Gant et al., 2019) [16]. Since students unfamiliar with the library may be intimidated by the size of the building or the sheer number of resources available (Brinkman et al., 2013), libraries should also seek ways of bringing physical access to students beyond the library's walls [17]. Self-access carts, which are like a roaming reference desk staffed by a librarian or other campus employee, can bring digital technologies and print resources to students all over campus (Bordonano, 2019) [18]. Services such as this provide personalized service and support outside of the library building that encourages physical access, engagement, and inclusion of students who may be reluctant library users.

For intellectual access, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) takes the concept of universal design and applies it to learning, in which there are multiple ways of engaging students, representing content, and expressing learning (CAST, n.d.) [19]. Chita-Tegemark et al. (2012) focused on using UDL for culturally diverse learners since culture is shown to impact interpretations of information and problem-solving approaches [20]. They argue that not only can UDL reduce barriers for students of diverse backgrounds, but that it can increase cultural learning for all. Most importantly, this approach ensures that no one is at a disadvantage in libraries or other learning environments. Libraries can further support intellectual access by developing effective and relevant information literacy pedagogy. Information literacy is defined as the ability for people of all walks of life "to seek, evaluate, use and create information effectively to achieve their personal, social, occupational and educational goals" (UNESCO, 2005). A study by Dabbour and Ballard (2011) shows that while Latinx students use the academic library at a higher rate than the general student population, they still score lower on information literacy assessments than their peers. This indicates a need for a greater focus on information literacy instruction for Latinx students.

Academic libraries may seek to partner with local high schools and community colleges to share best practices and introduce information literacy to all students at an earlier age. Additionally, librarians can assist the teaching faculty by integrating an information literacy curriculum into their courses, ensuring that the curriculum is relevant to students of diverse backgrounds, and engaging in evaluation to make sure it is effective. A greater focus on information literacy instruction will help close equity gaps while also benefiting all students, as help with selecting, evaluating, and synthesizing information are common needs of all college students.

Finally, academic libraries can build lasting relationships and trust with their students by utilizing informal information channels to improve social access to information. Academic libraries can identify and engage with information gatekeepers or intermediaries who can help facilitate conversations between the library and diverse groups of students (Metoyer-Duran, 1993). Information gatekeepers, who may be student or community leaders, non-academic campus workers, or information professionals, move between cultures and the insider and outsider groups of a larger community (Adkins, 2018) [21]. Their social influence is critical, as they have the power to either encourage or discourage the participation of an outsider group within the larger information community. Often for first-generation Latinx college students, information gatekeepers may include non-academic staff with whom they feel comfortable due to shared language, experiences, or cultural backgrounds (Brinkman et al., 2013). Academic libraries can improve social inclusion within their learning environment by hiring librarians who reflect the language, experiences, and cultural backgrounds of Latinx students. Libraries should also seek to offer cultural competency and language training for current staff and partner with known community gatekeepers on campus to foster engagement and incorporate the community's feedback into program development.

5. Conclusions

This paper examines the three core aspects of information access: physical, intellectual, and socio-cultural, and provides examples for academic libraries to improve the success and experiences of Latinx students. These examples are by no means exhaustive but rather starting points for academic libraries to consider. This discussion should also not be restricted to only institutions with a critical mass of Latinx students or imply that certain students should be viewed through a deficit lens. While Latinx students face significant education equity gaps and barriers to success in higher education, they are not a monolith and have diverse cultural, economic, and education backgrounds. Therefore, our recommendations of focusing on Universal Design for Learning, information literacy instruction, and partnering with information gatekeepers are applicable in many circumstances and can be assets for students from all walks of life. Encouraging a diversity of learning styles and perspectives, improving students' ability to synthesize information, and allowing students to find someone who looks like them and shares their experiences in the library will help create a vibrant library culture for all.

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