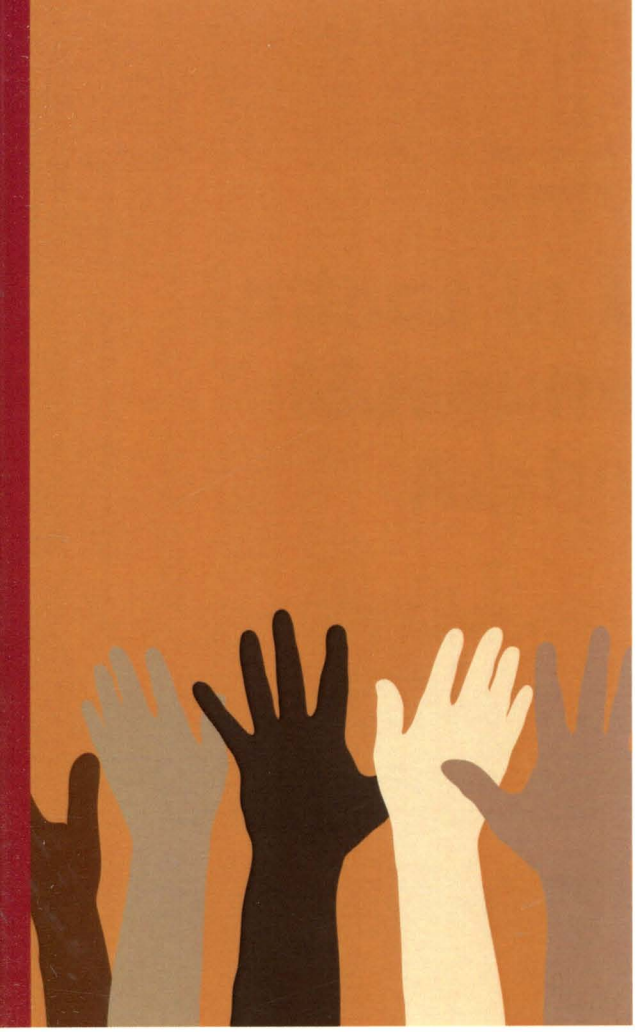

Cultural Competence in Action! An Asset-Based Approach

Latinos in Libraries, Museums, and Archives

Patricia Montiel-Overall
Annabelle Villaescusa Nuñez
Verónica Reyes-Escudero

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Foreword

Latinos in Libraries, Museums, and Archives is for anyone interested in developing cultural competence and understanding culture because it takes a different and more positive approach to working with Latinos within one's own organization. Although designed for library and information science (LIS) staff, everything in this book is applicable to every profession.

Much has been written about Latinos and cultural competence; however, *Latinos in Libraries, Museums, and Archives* applies a different focus on cultural competence by emphasizing the strengths and potential that cultural competence brings to the LIS profession in serving its diverse, multicultural communities (whether the community is defined as an academic, public, or school library, or a museum or archives). This book uses the asset-based model to help LIS professionals understand cultural competence and how to work to instill and integrate it into our LIS communities.

Helpful to readers is the domain approach. Using the cognitive, interpersonal, and environmental domains, readers are not only able to recognize and understand the crucial elements of cultural competence, but also how to use these domains as a means of self-reflection (and some assessment) relative to how the readers' individual organizations measure up to infusing cultural competence into these organizations. The authors do an excellent job of walking readers through this approach.

The text concentrates on multi-type libraries, museums, and archives, and the strengths that the Latino "community" brings to each of these institutions; it emphasizes how important it is for librarians, curators, and archivists to work in partnership with their respective communities for the good of their Latino users and patrons.

Any book that shares best practices provides readers with additional information for incorporating cultural competence into their local system. *Latinos*

in Libraries, Museums, and Archives provides overall best practices in services, programs, and resources for each of the institutions/library types covered in the text. Readers can then adapt and replicate these practices to fit their individual libraries, museums, and/or archives.

A good example of the asset-based approach is detailed in the chapter on health. The authors describe and incorporate Latino health assets and leveraging those assets within the LIS profession relative to health information services. Readers will walk away with a much better and broader concept of library and information services in the health fields and ways to develop and maintain cultural competence.

Another strength of this book is reflected in sharing the results of the interviews of Latino academic librarians who provide their experiences in the struggle for the integration of cultural competence. What's important to keep in mind is that what they share can be applied to any library type and any institution or organization.

Oftentimes when we deal with a topic like cultural competence, we find ourselves defending the need for such competencies. The breadth of appeal of this book is such that our message is no longer just to the "choir." *Latinos in Libraries, Museums, and Archives* is a must read for gaining a better understanding of and dealing with the complexities of incorporating cultural competence in the LIS profession. The practical applications for dealing with various topics make this book invaluable. I will certainly be using aspects of it in the workshops I present on cultural competence.

Dr. Camila A. Alire
Dean Emerita
University of New Mexico and Colorado State University
President, American Library Association, 2009–2010

Preface

Cultural competence has been discussed in the literature of various disciplines for more than four decades. Discussions have concentrated on such questions as, How do we meet the needs of a growing population of minorities in the United States? How do we close the gap in disparities between minorities and "mainstream" groups? How do we solve their educational, health, and social problems? Although there have been significant efforts to narrow the gap by increasing funds for those "at risk," too little improvement is evident. Indeed, the disparities between cultural groups sometimes seem greater today than ever before. While attention to disparities is important and has helped society concentrate on the unmet needs of minorities, little change can be expected until the underlying reasons for the disparities are openly discussed.

We wrote *Latinos in Libraries, Museums, and Archives: Cultural Competence in Action! An Asset-Based Approach* to open a discussion with library and information science (LIS) professionals about the ways in which mainstream society, including the LIS profession, undervalues Latinos, particularly their language and culture. Latinos are increasingly losing ground in academic achievement and access to information and health care; however, sociopolitical and sociocultural factors play major roles in the inequity gap. At the top of the list is societal intolerance of speakers with accents, which may evoke images of poverty and difference. In the United States, people with French accents, for example, encounter almost none of the negative attitudes directed at those who speak Spanish or English with a Spanish accent. Spanish is treated as a second-class-status language instead of an asset.

An asset-based perspective leads to knowledge and respect of cultural diversity and the recognition that differences are the basis for creative and innovative thinking. Underlying this approach is the belief that Latinos have much to contribute. For example, they have the potential to be bilingual citizens, a highly

useful and desirable ability that can greatly benefit society, particularly as global communities become more connected. As Alberto Ríos, Arizona's first poet laureate explains, "We are each other." This progressive way of thinking about linguistic diversity exemplifies asset-based cultural competence.

A secondary purpose of *Latinos in Libraries, Museums, and Archives* is to provide LIS professionals with state-of-the-art information and research related to Latinos and their culture and norms. Such information guides best practices for delivery of services in libraries, museums, and archives. A broad review of the literature in multiple fields informs discussions on such issues as race, ethnicity, culture, language, and multiculturalism. The best practices identified in this book recommend that LIS professionals work in partnership with Latinos and give them a voice in decisions that involve them.

We highlight the assets and strengths of Latinos and illustrate how culturally competent LIS professionals can influence the social structures that impede the success of cultural communities. Asset-based thinking builds on the strengths of the individuals providing services and those receiving services; this approach is a two-way street.

The recommendations and best practices we propose are intended to improve services and decrease disparities. *Latinos in Libraries, Museums, and Archives* was written with that perspective in mind. It refocuses cultural competence from a deficit model to an asset model, one that provides LIS services to Latinos and other groups that have been identified as "underserved" and "deprived." An asset-based model focuses on what is right in communities and builds programs, services, policies, legislation, and funding around community strengths. In our suggested model, community members are actively involved in the delivery of services. Deficit models focus on the negative aspects within communities, and members are not participants, but beneficiaries, of services.

We invite library, museum, and archive professionals to consider a number of issues. How can cultural competence be developed? How is cultural competence to be evaluated? Should cultural-competence guidelines recommended by one group within the profession apply to the entire profession? To what extent is cultural competence incorporated into the curriculum of LIS schools? We address these and other questions in this book. If cultural competence is to become widespread, however, LIS staff should not wait for it to be regulated. Each individual and institution in the profession can play a role in moving cultural competence forward. For example, in recent years, a diversity component has been added to the curriculum at a number of LIS schools, including the University of Arizona School of Information. But the number of LIS schools and iSchools (i.e., those that focus on technology) that require students to take a cultural or diversity course is small. Much work is needed to promote cultural competence

within the LIS profession and make it an integral part of the profession and the core curriculum in LIS schools.

As we wrote *Latinos in Libraries, Museums, and Archives*, it became apparent that there are significant differences in perceptions of cultural competence. Recent cultural competence frameworks for LIS professionals are often modeled after guidelines in other fields, including health, psychiatry, and social work. There are distinct differences between the LIS profession and these disciplines. The literature on asset-based models, which is shifting deficit perspectives to asset-based thinking, influenced the model we now propose for LIS professionals.

We propose a definition of and a way of thinking about cultural competence that is comprehensive and we have broadened the concept as it applies to LIS professionals in schools, public and academic libraries, museums, and archives. Cultural competence from an asset model sees LIS professionals as community builders who work with and in communities and draw on their strengths. Cultural competence is an ability that is essential to fulfill the goals of the American Library Association (ALA), whose mission since its founding in 1876 has been to "provide leadership for the development, promotion, and improvement of library and information services and the profession of librarianship in order to enhance learning and ensure access to information for all."[1]

This statement establishes a purpose for the work of LIS professionals, who are leaders in society. We propose going back to the ALA mission to create a more positive framework for developing cultural competence, one that not only engages all LIS professionals, but also accomplishes the ALA's goals. A more positive framework will improve outcomes and eliminate disparities for Latinos and other populations. As members of the LIS profession become more aware of cultural issues and the underlying reasons for disparities, their efforts to eliminate those disparities will be more successful. Recognition of the special abilities of Latinos and their families can go a long way in narrowing educational and other societal gaps.

Furthermore, cultural competence should also be viewed as important because it is intrinsically good for society. This is particularly important in the LIS profession, whose services are perceived to be intrinsic components of a democratic society.

Structure of the Book

The chapters in *Latinos in Libraries, Museums, and Archives* are organized based on three main areas within the LIS profession: libraries, museums, and archives. The first chapter introduces a cultural-competence framework and presents defi-

nitions of culture, ethnicity, and race as a foundation for the following chapters. Four chapters are dedicated to cultural competence in libraries, including school, public, academic, and health libraries. The chapters on school and public libraries discuss the planning and implementation of library programs. The chapter on academic libraries discussess services to Latino students and reassesses standard practices in higher education. A recurring issue is the role of language in providing culturally competent services to an increasing population of English-language learners (ELLs), including promoting first-language maintenance through Spanish-language book collections, digital resources, and archives. Two chapters address cultural competence in museums and archives, presenting issues that museum personnel (e.g., curators, educators, historians, collection managers, and registrars) and archivists must address to ensure the cultural integrity of collections and archives. The chapters end with suggestions for providing culturally competent services to Latinos and other populations in the future.

From our perspective, it is important to thoroughly understand social justice and inequality issues associated with Latinos. Critical race theory and Latino critical theory will be discussed inasmuch as these provide a lens for understanding inequities experienced by Latinos where "artificial impediments against asset accumulation" are imposed. Societal structures are designed to hinder the upward mobility of groups such as Latinos through policies, regulations, and legislation. LIS professionals must acknowledge their role in effecting change. LIS services have been based on traditional institutional structures and organization. Asset-based thinking acknowledges that structural changes begin by changing practices within institutions such as libraries, museums, and archives, and within LIS professionals themselves.

We are concerned about the unmet needs and inequities in services for Latino and other populations. The approach we propose is different and more likely to succeed than traditional approaches that focus on what's wrong within communities. The collective experiences of Latino LIS professionals, educators, and community-builders have compelled us to develop a different way of thinking about cultural competence. Our hope is that LIS professionals who embrace the diversity of communities and recognize the attributes of diverse groups provide important abilities that are essential for everyone working in the modern global economy. In the twenty-first century, we need culturally competent LIS professionals not only to address the challenges associated with a growing population of potential library users from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds, but also because LIS professional have to understand global issues. They must be culturally competent because they themselves are becoming more diverse. The culture of the profession has changed. The need for cultural competence is

greater than ever so that we can support good planning, organizing, and policy-making, and address diverse and complex issues.

Patricia Montiel-Overall
Annabelle Villaescusa Nuñez
Verónica Reyes-Escudero

Notes

1. The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) passed "Diversity Standards: Cultural Competency for Academic Librarians" in October 2012. The American Library Association mission statement can be found at www.ala.org/aboutala/missionhistory.

2. George Lipsitz, "Libraries and Memories: Beyond White Privilege 101," *Progressive Librarian* 32, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2008): 7.

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