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Outreaching to New Immigrants: A Two Way Path

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Outreaching to New Immigrants: 
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Traditionally, the goal of outreach librarians is to 
reach out beyond the physical library building, and 
promote and make library services accessible and 
relevant to all. Demographics, which constantly 
change, are the best place to start our outreach 
work. New immigrants are more and more an 
integral part of our society. Many new immigrants, 
coming from developing countries that don’t have 
public libraries, don’t realize that public libraries 
are available to them in this country and that the 
services are free. This is something that has to be 
constantly reinforced. As outreach librarians we do 
our best to know the library’s community: learning 
about different cultures; connecting with formal 
and informal community leaders, organizations 
and agencies to create partnerships; and promoting 
our services and programs, including those catering 
to new immigrants regardless of their socioeco-
nomic, age, ability and gender backgrounds.

But what happens when these populations 
cross the doors of our physical and virtual spaces? 
The library should be a welcoming, safe place for 
everybody to enjoy.

There are several points to consider in attract-
ing new patrons to our physical buildings, that 
is, not only getting people in the door but really 
developing a sense of inclusion.

Is it better to hire library staff who reflect the 
culture of the community? Bilingual and/or bicultural librarians are always a great asset. Libraries 
should look for the best people who can work in 
a changing environment—not only technologi-
cally but culturally. They should especially look for 
those who are adept at customer services practices, 
including cultural competence. This practice is 
not limited to reference. It should also include the 
circulation desk and, of course, technical services. 
However, it’s not enough to have minorities in our 
libraries if they are still underrepresented in leader-
ship. New immigrants should be encouraged to be 
connected with the decision-making structure.

A second consideration is library resources. 
A good collection would include world language 
books, DVDs, CDs, journals, newspapers, and 
programs that include the customs, traditions, 
values and interests of a diverse community. Good

A native of Argentina, Martín Blasco has worked with under-
served communities for many 
years. Before becoming a librarian, 
he carried out ethnographic and 
social research among drug users 
in New York City. He pursued his 
studies in librarianship at Long 
Island University, New York. Upon 
receiving his MLS, he began work-
ing in Peekskill, New York where 
his outreach work began not as an 
ofﬁcial title, but by necessity to 
serve new immigrants, especially 
the undocumented. He is working 
now as an Outreach Librarian for 
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Martín sees outreach as a very 
important civic responsibility of 
promoting libraries in order to 
itroduce these communities to the 
Vast resources and programs these 
institutions have to offer.
and prominent signage is also going to help attract those who have not experienced the library culture.

Is this enough to serve a diverse community? The library staff has to be culturally competent. They must interact effectively; listening, being patient, and making the best effort to connect with all people. Cultural competency requires humility, that is, the belief that no culture is superior to others. Cultures are different.

As is the case with many libraries already, communication can be facilitated by using cards with translations of basic words and phrases, even with pictures to work with new immigrant patrons. Culturally competent library staff also concentrate on learning the names of their culturally diverse constituency. Displays, panels, flags, signage, flyers, and publicity should include words and pictures which reflect the diversity of the community.

Remember the importance of partnership. It’s crucial that we form partnerships that result in advocacy for our programs and services.

True partnerships are the ones on which we can rely to make long lasting relationships with the community, especially with new immigrants.

In regards to community organizations, partnerships work two ways. Libraries are very good at promoting other organizations’ services and programs and bringing library services and users together outside of the building, but the opposite must also be true. Our partners, community organizations, must also promote libraries and bring to them new ideas for services and events that are needed for their constituencies. For instance, a patron can take advantage of a series of citizenship classes with a community organization, but this organization, in turn, should refer patrons to the library as a place to obtain practice books for their citizenship exams or information to help them navigate the bureaucratic red tape involved in gaining naturalization.

Our directors, boards, government officials, library staff and the general public need to be brought on board regarding the importance of including new immigrants in the life of the library. The children of these new communities can be impacted by early literacy programs and will eventually contribute to our society. The success of new immigrant children will affect the community.

As outreach librarians we have to be sure that our libraries embrace a spirit of community for all, and always, always remember that outreach is a two way path: Going out to the community and getting the community into our libraries.

NOTE: Responsibility for the views set out in this article lies entirely with the author.