

MuseumsForward

Fostering Belonging at Latino Cultural Institutions

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Abstract

Current research on the experiences of Latino Museum visitors has been done on their experiences at non-Latino cultural institutions. Results from this literature shows that Latino visitors are feeling excluded or alienated at these cultural institutions. In an attempt to fill a gap in Latino audience research, this article discusses a multi-case study focused on how Latino cultural institutions foster belonging for Latino visitors. The findings reveal that Latino cultural institutions develop relevance in their communities by offering services and opportunities tailored to Latino community members' needs. These institutions actively embrace Latino culture through language inclusivity, staff diversity, and community engagement, mirroring the values and experiences of their target audience. By positioning themselves as community hubs, they redefine the museum concept, offering non-traditional programming, and advocating for local and national issues alongside their community. This approach creates reciprocal relationships, wherein visitors feel a sense of identity and social capital within the institution. The article calls for further research into the practices of affinity museums and their potential replication in larger cultural institutions to enhance the sense of belonging for marginalized communities. By investing in collaborative research efforts, cultural institutions can evolve to better reflect and serve the diverse communities they represent.

Keywords

Latino; Latinx; Latine; Museums; Cultural heritage; Belonging; Inclusion

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Introduction

Research on the impact of representation and media have found that the presence or lack of a specific group serves as a marker for members to know that they carry weight in society, “The absence of portrayal leads to a feeling of relative unimportance and powerlessness” (Williams et al., 2009). Similarly, in the museum field researchers have explored how interacting with cultural institutions may impact identity formation (Falk, 2006; Rounds, 2006) and found that this is impacted by whether visitors see their culture reflected in the museum experience, programs, exhibition, and staff member demographics (Garibay et al., 2015; Stein et al., 2008). Historically these institutions have been “designed by the few for the few” (Price & Applebaum, 2022, p. 135) and served as sites of systemic othering for guests from marginalized communities. As a result, museum goers are more likely to be from white and affluent backgrounds (Maldonado & Nguyen, 2020).

Dawson’s study on the experiences of low-income and minority ethnic groups in science centers found that their experiences in these institutions were unwelcoming and exclusionary with one participant stating that these institutions did not fit in with his “culture” as there was an expectation of conduct and background knowledge needed to exist in that space (Dawson, 2014). The lack of social and cultural capital in this environment is perceived as a deficit (Hirsch, 1988), and alienates marginalized people.

Framing Latinos in Museums

Sociologist Nydia Flores-Gonzalez (2017) echoed this sentiment in her book *Citizens but Not Americans: Race and Belonging Among Latino Millennials*, an intersectional exploration of identity and belonging amongst U.S. Latinos through a series of interviews. The participants of Flores-Gonzalez’s study live a contradictory existence in white spaces as being hyper visible and invisible while eroding their sense of belonging and othering them in these spaces.

A study on the Latino audience participation, barriers, and drivers in non-Latino Museums found that the delivery, or absence, overt signals of inclusions specifically for Latinos amplified their perception of value and their experiences. Respondents indicated that the two most important signifiers that could be conveyed would be a diverse staff

that “looks like us” in language, appearance, cultural identity, and values as well as Spanish language communications (Acevedo & Madara, 2015). The inclusion of Spanish language materials was important for Spanish dominant visitors and for those hi-acculturation respondents, they indicated a more emotional reason to their reaction to Spanish signage. Meanwhile, (pg. 6) perceptions of exclusion revolved around their perception of relevance and importance to these institutions. To Latino visitors, language serves as a signifier of welcome (Renner et al., 2015, p. 35; Stein et al., 2008).

The Emergence of Affinity Museums

These feelings of alienation and exclusion between historically marginalized communities and cultural institutions lead to affinity groups creating grass roots or “community museums.” The first of these was founded in 1961 as The Ebony Museum of Negro History and Art, later known as The DuSable Museum of African American History in Chicago’s Washington Park neighborhood (About Us, n.d.). Within the decade, six more museums would be founded focusing on marginalized minority groups including the first Latino museum, El Museo del Barrio in 1967 (Ruffins, 2022). Several of the founders of these early ethnic and community museums were from outside of the museum field, such as teachers, artists, and civil rights activists, who saw how mainstream museums excluded the art and historical contributions of people of color. Marginalized groups created these institutions with the intent of centering their art and history and evolved in different ways to create relevance within their communities. This can manifest in several ways such as, but not limited to; bilingual signage and materials, cultural events, discounted or free admission programs, intentional hiring practices, or other methods of targeted engagement. Created as an alternative to the traditional museum spaces that excluded them, these institutions hold a unique identity rooted in the communities that they emerged from.

The issue of exclusion, racism, sexism, and discrimination would enter the broader museum world in 1970 when the New York Artist Strike Against Racism, Sexism, Repression, and War would disrupt the American Alliance of Museum’s (AAM) annual meeting in New York to demand that those topics be addressed. Raphael Ortiz, founder and director of El Museo del Barrio, was one of the people demanding that AAM speak on these local and global social issues (Garibay, 2011). On the other side of the country, Latino artists focusing their attention on

the Vietnam War and labor issues were dealing with private galleries that were not interested in addressing social issues (Selbach, 2004).

This new wave of institutions, built the concept of community cultural wealth, which challenges the traditional definitions of cultural capital (Yosso, 2005) by celebrating and incorporating the lived experience of community members. This lens stresses that communities of color have the potential to form transformative cultural expression in institutions that can inspire and inform social movements. The obligation to meet community needs, both in a traditional and non-traditional sense, make these institutions a resource of cultural wealth for the Latinos within their community. Instead of coming in with their backgrounds being considered a deficit, their sociocultural and linguistic experiences are empowering.

Latino Cultural Institutions

In the years following El Museo del Barrio's founding, several more Latino cultural institutions emerged across the country. As of 2023, there is estimated to be 106 museums in the US that focus on Latino art, history, and culture (Yahner, Lannes, & Hinojosa, 2024). These institutions incorporate non-traditional programming to center the concerns, cultural practices, and priorities of the communities they were created to reflect. A recent guide on engaging Latinos visitors stressed that in order to overcome the barrier of perceived exclusion, museum engagement must go beyond ethnic-specific exhibitions or programs for it to be sustainable and last longer than single events, or exhibits (Aldaba et al., 2021, pp. 23–39). However, affinity museums were already holistically incorporating the Latino culture in their institutions.

During the 1970s California saw the creation of several Latino cultural institutions such as Galeria de la Raza in San Francisco. A group of Chicano artists and community activists in San Francisco's Mission District created the gallery with the intent to create a place of cultural affirmation and self-discovery for the Chicano community. Chicano scholar Tomás Ybarra-Frausto described the early years of La Galeria de la Raza as having "the tone and texture of Chicano cultural life...rambunctious and raucous with a feisty pugnacious edge" (1996, pp. 1–9). During this time there were "a non-stop succession of sit-ins, marches, and vigils." Ybarra-Frausto noted that on the opening night of an exhibit the gallery was visited by people from all walks of life including "*vatos de la calle*" that stayed to rap as well as local poets who recited their work. The demographics of the night was a shift from the

typical wealthy museum visitor to the working-class people of the community.

To this day, Galeria de la Raza continues the traditions it was founded on. Aside from exhibitions, 50 years later they are still hosting poetry readings, rallies, and marches for social justice issues (About Galeria de La Raza, n.d.) and have expanded to other non-traditional programming such as master classes in *son jarocho*, a musical style rooted in Veracruz and Cuba (Galería de la Raza, 2011). Aside from preserving material culture, Latino cultural institutions like Galeria de la Raza and Museo del Barrio have adapted to create a space where Latino visitors can feel a sense of connection and belonging. This wide range of programming, in tandem with a dedication to advocacy, and holistic integration of the culture of the local community help Latino cultural institutions remain relevant to Latino audiences. This proactive relevance, rooted in co-creation and reciprocal engagement, is key to fostering belonging (Simon, 2016).

Fostering Belonging

The concept of belonging is a complicated one that is largely dependent on the context in which it is being utilized and to what end. Fostering belonging is not a simple act of creating opportunities for inclusion, according to Dr. John A. Powel (2021), the Director of the Other and Belonging Institute, there is a notable difference between the two concepts. He wrote the following:

“In belonging you have the power to cocreate the thing to which you belong. This has huge implications for the way justice work is funded today, including racial justice, which for the most part is done without attention to power, which includes the power to cocreate (paras. 1-2) [...] Being outside was to be othered: without the recognized right to participate in the constitution of the country, to give meaning, and in many cases even be seen as fully human.” (para. 13)

With that framework in mind, the creation of affinity and community museums was the manifestation of wanting to belong. In contrast, the exclusion from mainstream museums and cultural institutions sent the message to marginalized communities that they did not belong. On an individual level, belonging can also be defined as “the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that persons feel

themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment” (Hagerty et al., 1992, p. 173). In either case, there is a sense of agency or self-determinism that plays a core role in the formulation of belonging.

In order to measure belonging in museums and cultural institutions, Price and Applebaum created a survey instrument to measure belonging across three axis: how “People Fit” in regards to feeling included or excluded from an experience, “Place” the physical environment of an experience, and “Context” of the unique lived experiences of the individual (Price & Applebaum, 2022, p. 140).

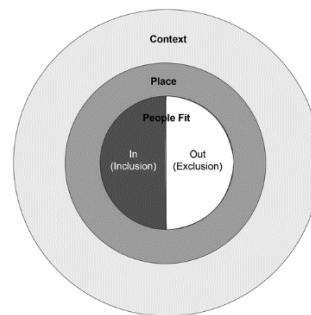


Figure 1 model of belonging at cultural institutions. Credit: Museum of Science and Industry, Chicago.

Price and Applebaum tested this model of belonging with 333 participants across different demographic groups and found that visitors had a high sense of belonging to their community at the museum (p. 146). Notably, when asked to define community, White visitors thought of community in the terms of place or locations whereas Black, Asian, or Latino visitors were more likely to think of their community in regard to race and ethnicity (p.152). Despite feeling similar levels of inclusion as their white counterparts, Black, Asian, and Latino visitors felt lower levels of community in terms of agency and belonging (ex. “I could be myself here”, “I felt like an outsider at the museum.”).

Significance

Latino Cultural institutions have evolved and grown in different ways but there hasn't been a study to understand how they are creating a sense of belonging within their communities. Existing literature on Latino audiences focuses more on the feelings of alienation and exclusion that they face at non-Latino institutions (Castaneda, 2006; Eusebio, 2017; Garibay, 2011). This study will think on the practice of

community and how it is manifesting within these organizations by researching what commonalities exist at these sites and what factors are a result of those phenomena. By examining the roles cultural institutions can play in building relationships with visitors this study will build on and expand our collective understanding on how affinity institutions foster a sense of belonging within their target communities. By analyzing the strategies that Latino centered institutions utilize to engage their target communities we can begin to identify what steps non-heritage museums can adopt into their own practice.

Purpose

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to identify the ways in which Latino-centered institutions foster a sense of belonging for Latino audiences.

Research Questions

The following questions guide this research study.

1. How do Latino cultural institutions perceive their role in the community?
2. In what ways do Latino cultural institutions reflect their community/ies?
3. In what ways do Latino cultural institutions foster agency for their community/ies?

Methods

Methods

This study utilized a multi-site case study approach and collected qualitative data through semi structured interviews and supplemented information through document analysis of publicly available information about the participating institutions. Transcripts of the interviews were analyzed to identify emergent themes that contributed to creating a sense of belonging. Transcripts were automatically generated through Zoom or Word's dictation software and edited for accuracy. Excerpts included in this article have been edited to remove filler words and repetitions without changing the intent or words of the participant. Cultural institutions have been anonymized.

Data Collection

In order to be considered for this study, sites needed to be cultural institutions operating with the intent of centering Latino history, art, or culture as a core tenant of their organization. This was most often reflected in the mission statement or in the institution's values. The interviews were conducted with the Executive Director or equivalent of the institution. The line of questioning for the instrument was informed by Dawson (2014) and Flores-Gonzalez's (2017) research results, and for the purpose of this research I took inspiration from Price and Applebaum's model of belonging, as well as Powell's definition rooted in agency and co-creation.

Three semi-structured interviews were conducted over Zoom, the duration of each interview ranged from 30 to 60 minutes in length. All participants were executive directors or in an equivalent position at the time of the interview. Prior to the interview, participants were informed that the data would be anonymized and that they may withdraw consent or choose to skip a question at any time. Participants were provided the interview guide several days prior to the interview to allow them time to think over their responses. In preparation for this project, the researcher also collected publicly available data on 9 other similar institutions across the country. This data included mission statements, programming information, budgets from sources such as the institution's websites, social media, annual reports, or GuideStar reports. This additional research allowed for a more holistic view of the practices and programming of Latino cultural institutions.

Limitations

Due to time restrictions around the approval process of creating a multilingual study, all interviews were conducted in English. At least one participant indicated that they would have been able to communicate their ideas more clearly had the interview occurred in Spanish. Due to scheduling restrictions, one participant was only able to be interviewed for roughly 30 minutes which caused for some questions to be skipped and lacked the time needed to build better rapport between the researcher and participant. Full length interviews allowed for more nuance to be captured. In order to work around this, the researcher contacted the participant via email with any follow up questions regarding their institution.

Positionality

Before the findings are presented, in the spirit of self-reflexivity, the researcher would like to acknowledge their standpoint as a first-generation Mexican immigrant and how that identity may impact the interpretations of the findings. The institutions involved in this study served all Latino communities and the author shares their background to bring awareness of how implicit bias rooted in Mexico-centrism may impact the interpretations of the research of belonging in non-Mexican communities. While the researcher’s academic background is in Ethnic Studies and Anthropology, the predominant influence on their reflection of community outreach is based on their own work in social services organizations that predominantly serve Latino immigrants.

The researcher is also understanding, and in agreement, with the use of Latinx/Latine/Latin@ and the other gender affirming alternatives. However, for the purpose of search engine optimization and accessibility, this article will be utilizing “Latino” when referring to people of Latin-American descent.

Museum Backgrounds

| | Founded | Local Latino Population by zip code | Annual Budget | Staff Size | Annual Visitors |
|--------|---------|-------------------------------------|---------------|------------|-----------------|
| Site 1 | 2011 | 48.4% | \$5,002,725 | 26 | 70,000 |
| Site 2 | 1982 | 28.7% | \$5,176,593 | 38 | 150,000 |
| Site 3 | 1991 | 29.4% | \$775,608 | 25 | 11,271 |

Site 1

Site One is a free museum based on the West coast. This institution was established within the last decade and is partially funded by the local city government for the upkeep of the historic building it is housed in. The first decade of this museum’s existence was to establish it within the community and the leadership is now making plans to change the direction of the museum to focus more on aspects of inclusion and access. This institution is in the process of creating a policy that pays all volunteers and often works with local community experts to create cultural cooking classes, gardening, and exhibit related programming.

Site 2

Site Two is a museum in Illinois that has been free to visit since its founding. The institution was founded by teachers and other community members to provide an accessible space to recognize and showcase Mexican art within a working-class community. The institution is currently expanding and purchasing a new building and emphasizes that museums should be the center of the community and that they must expand outside of the traditional expectations of a museum. This institution partners often with organizations to provide social services programming for their visitors.

Site 3

Site Three is a museum in Colorado that charges \$8 for admission to non-members. This institution was founded by a group of Chicanos, Latinos and Hispanics to create a space where artists of similar backgrounds could be brought into mainstream galleries and museums. The institution chooses its exhibits by what community members bring to them as potential topics. This institution, intentionally, does not focus on one Latino culture or iconography to be able to represent all Latin American communities.

Analysis

1: In what ways do Latino cultural institutions perceive their role in their community/ies?

Identity

A theme across the three sites was that they described themselves as being different from “traditional” museums. During their inception they prioritized celebrating the communities they emerged from rather than focusing on building collections. The executive director of Site 1 went on to say that they first and foremost “collect stories, not objects.” All institutions pushed back against ivory tower museum culture that traditional museums practiced where culture institutions are exclusionary, and inaccessible to common people.

All interviewees noted that their institutions were more nuanced in their ability to respond to community needs because they saw themselves differently than the traditional Western European idea of what a museum should do. The founder of Site 3 emphasized that “the museum is not a building. It's an idea, it's a concept.”

The reasoning provided for their ability to operate in this way was that they were able to be freer because they were not beholden to anyone.

“We are very unique in that sense because we don’t have any filters, and then immediately we can have really tough conversations...” (Site 2)

This perceived freedom allows them to take non-traditional roles in regard to community advocacy, resources provided, and programming.

Community Hubs

When asked about the role their institution plays in their local Latino community, a common trend among all sites was a perceived responsibility to fill in a gap in resources for Latinos in the area. While all three institutions are considered art museums, they operated in the capacity of a multi-purpose community hub or cultural center. This was more obvious in Site 3, the largest of the institutions, and the way they connect community members to social services as needed.

Cultural Caretakers and Conduits

Each site also considered it their responsibility to act as caretakers of art and history, and also as conduits for passing down cultural knowledge such as language, recipes, or other intangible aspects of culture. Sites 1 and 2 had regular programming for language learning and retention whether it was classes to learn Nahuatl, an indigenous language of Mexico, or gatherings to practice Spanish.

Another way this communal responsibility presented itself was through acting as a convener location or conduit for community learning.

“We do a whole series of *platicas* where we bring people to have conversations about both the historical perspective and the contemporary perspective. We definitely see that as our responsibility, really being a convener. We’re not the experts, but we can convene folks who are experts to have those conversations.”
(Site 1)

Validation from Community

All institutions mentioned pushing up against the perception that more traditional museums have on them because of their non-traditional

methods of operating. Two sites had mentioned elitism and disdain from their more contemporary counterparts for their decision to operate in working class communities and preferred the validation they received from the people in the neighborhoods their museums are situated in. Site 3 said the following about receiving national recognition:

“[They] recognized that we do great things, but the only ones that validate you are the ones from your own community. [...] You can’t beat that.”

2: In what ways do Latino cultural institutions reflect their community/ies?

Advocacy

The perceived freedom from operating like a typical museum that these institutions felt seemed to be tied to how they prioritize social responsibility to the communities they emerged from. These institutions are actively involved in political advocacy issues that impact the Latino community on a local and national level. Common issues that they spoke on, or created exhibits and programming around were issues of domestic violence, gender violence, LGBTQ+ issues, labor rights, gang violence, sexual assault, hate crimes, immigration, and political representation. Sites 2 and 3 tied this back to their founders being community members and advocates.

Sites 1 and 2 utilized their space to host rallies, or to platform conversations between community members and their representatives involving themselves in local and national politics. The founder of Site 2 explained the frustration of this disconnect between the museum world and social issues, citing an incident where after talking about the health clinics the museum provided at an AAM conference, he was told in the following weeks, “Why are you doing that? Museums don’t do that!”

The founder of Site 2 also cited another incident where a local child had been killed by police and as a result, the museum called an emergency board meeting to brainstorm what could be done “for the kids” in their community. As a result of that meeting, the museum is going to expand their youth programs and buy another building to operate as a youth center in a neighborhood that known to be “dangerous.” That intentionality to create change is a marker of these Latino institutions.

“We aren’t gonna change what’s important to us just to please the art establishment. I love those kinds of museum, I love them, but museums have too often, instead of being agents of change...they're a problem. When you see the racism there is in the arts world look at museums! For God's sake, and so that needs to change, and I'm not afraid to call it out. ... I’m about change, and if the change isn’t popular or not, who cares.” (Site 3)

“We also have a role as a civic institution, [to have] conversations that are relevant and important to Latinos [...] it goes back to that intersectionality. There have been challenges in terms of our political representation or Latino political representation in City Hall, that are sort of very specifically rooted in anti-Blackness, anti-indigeneity and we bring those folks together for conversation.” (Site 1)

Locally and Community Relevant Programs

All three institutions run programs that would be considered non-traditional in the museum world. This includes but is not limited to: Gang prevention meetings, domestic violence groups, mammograms and other health services partnerships, cooking classes, gardening classes, summer camps, language clubs, public theater, vaccination clinics, legal fee scholarships, and queer proms. Following the murder of a local trans woman, one site went on to plan an event with the victim’s mother speaking on transphobia in the Latino community.

Included in this are cultural events such as Dia de los Muertos, Dia de los Ninos, and other Latin American holiday traditions. The cultural festivals, cooking classes, and languages classes are seen as a way to connect and reconnect community members to intangible heritage.

Staffing

Latino staff are present at all three institutions and there is a preference for hiring Spanish speakers to be able to communicate fully with their target audience. Site 3, which is located in a Latino community with demographics from several Latin American countries, emphasized that their staff are also from different Latin American countries such as El Salvador, Peru, and Argentina. The practice of

hiring staff that is reflective of the Latino community they are in, often from within the same neighborhood, and of the culture they are representing in their institution was shared across all sites. A look at the websites for each organization showed Latinos at every level, from volunteer docents to senior leadership positions. When seeking artists or workshop instructors, these institutions also prioritized finding experts with lived experience over academic experience.

Signage and Aesthetics

Every site noted the importance of having bilingual signage, exhibits, tours, and programming, in Spanish and English, to connect with Latino visitor. All sites hired Spanish speakers. The three institutions noted that they decorated in bright colors, as is common in Latin American countries, as opposed to the classic neutral colors of museums. Site three is rooted in Mexican tradition and utilized step frets, or Xicalcolihqui, a design motif common seen in Mesoamerican art (Sánchez, 2012, p. 69).

3: In what ways do Latino cultural institutions foster agency for their communities?

Part of fostering a sense of agency at these institutions focused on becoming more approachable to Latinos in their community. On a surface level, this was tackled by removing the cost of admission or having it significantly reduced. On an interpersonal level, the sites in this study have a more casual atmosphere of operation and actively seek feedback from community members for exhibits, and programming. All three institutions noted instances where a community member reached out with a desire for a program and a partnership or event was created from that initial conversation.

Physical Accessibility

Sites 1 and 2 are in larger locations and have intentionally created opportunities for the space around their museums to be used by community members. Whether it's due to a public access garden or by purposely hosting events or dance classes outside they have done so with the intent to encourage people to come onto the museum's property without the pressure of entering the museum. The space is encouraged by the institutions to be utilized by community members

for official and unofficial events, rallies, or gatherings. To work around the limit of its size, Site 3 goes into the community and in 2021 held workshops and tours off site.

Approachable Atmosphere

The sites in this study curated a more relaxed atmosphere for their institutions to foster a reciprocal relationship with their audiences. The executive directors interviewed reported instances where community members, ranging from elders to children, feeling comfortable enough to pull them aside to talk about the operation of the museums. Several Latin American cultures value inter-generational family relationships, in recognition of this the director of Site 2 emphasize that the way they, and similar Latino institutions, see children's presence in museums differs from what is traditionally the case for art museums.

"They [art museums] see children as a problem, are they gonna run around, break something? I see a kid in a museum and I see that kid is going to be a future artist. I see hope and future, and they just see bad things happening. We get after school kids, coming in weekly after school, it's their museum, it's their right to come in and criticize the museum."

Notably, this site has no admission fee and receives weekly visits from students of the local schools wandering in and out of the museum. This site also reports that Latinos make up over 50% of their visitors every year.

Cost

All institutions stressed the importance of reducing barriers to participation or accessing the institutions. These institutions that visitors with a low socio-economic status would perceive prices as a barrier to visitation and so Sites 1 and 3 do not charge admission fees and Site 2 kept their admission at \$8 or \$5 for seniors and students. Site 3 tickets also offered free admission for anyone under the age of 13.

When considering the stress on income that participation may bring, these institutions have developed solutions to work around this. Site 1 is in the process of shifting their volunteer model to make them paid positions. Site 1's student summer camp works with corporate partners to make it that out of 67 students attending their summer camp, 37

have a full scholarship, and 9 receive a partial scholarship in 202. By eliminating the financial barrier of participation, they institutions are creating opportunities for involvement that may have otherwise deterred their visitors.

Solicited Feedback

All sites participating in this study emphasized the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion in their exhibitions, artists, staffing, and partnerships. All institutions noted an importance of community building with other Latino organizations but as well as with other groups for marginalized communities.

“We’re not just one building, we're part of an entire neighborhood. So how are we collaborating?”

These institutions actively solicited feedback from community members and made intentional decisions to seek diverse opinions across class, race, and nationalities. Site 2 creates their exhibit based on what the community suggests as topics, while Site 1 requires that people from specific marginalized groups or community positions serve roles in their board. These institutions are actively seeking out and receiving feedback from their community members leading towards the co-creation of programming, exhibits, or other changes to the institutions.

Discussion

The purpose of this article was to identify the ways in which Latino-centered institutions foster a sense of belonging for Latino audiences. The following discussion will summarize how the emerging themes relate to existing literature and provide suggestions for future research in this area.

Reframing Latinos in Museums

The common themes emerging across all three sites was the need to provide Latino community members with services and opportunities they were not having met elsewhere. The cultural institutions in this study remained relevant to Latinos by operating outside of the sphere of what they perceived to be Western, Eurocentric, museum tradition, tied to practices of elitism and exclusion, and shaping themselves to be familiar to Latinos in atmosphere, staffing, language, and engagement. These findings address the students concerns in Dawson’s (2014) study

where the students felt alienation rooted in the expectation that they did not have the background knowledge of how to conduct themselves in museums.

The hypervisibility that Flores-Gonzalez (2017) researched touched on as well as Renner's (2015) points emphasizing Latino audiences in non-Latino cultural institutions signifiers of welcome include, staff that "looks like us" and Spanish language communications, are also addressed by Latino cultural institutions. This focus on language is important as studies have shown that Latinos valued bilingual signs and labels as "signals" of that the venue welcomed Latinos (Stein, Garibay, & Wilson, 2008). At Latino cultural institutions, the physical signifiers missing from traditional institutions are front and centered, and incorporated into the institution at all levels.

Latino Cultural Institutions and Relevance

This study showed how Latino cultural institutions reflect the values seen in the Latino community on topics such as family, the arts, and social issues through shared experience. They do not rely on an implied relevance to the Latino community simply for possessing Latino-centric collections but are actively participating and involved in the community they are physically located in, with the everyday people there. In intentionally holding programming outside, they make it so that they are making it possible for community members to see and stumble across them. The public access component of institutions such as Site 1 and Site 2 resembles the practice of Mexican plazas, or zocalos, that serve as communal third spaces in cities and neighborhoods (Wagner et al., 2013, pp. 195–197). Third spaces "host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realm of home and work." In combination with a more relaxed atmosphere this sets themselves apart from traditional institutions.

In his unpublished manuscript detailing the early years of Galeria de la Raza, Chicano scholar, Ybarra-Frausto describes this difference in ambience as the creation of "*el nuevo art del pueblo*" (a new art of the people).

Visual vocabularies and cultural strategies would be extruded from everyday life practices in Mexican American communities throughout the country. Barrio customs, rituals, and traditions were investigated as fertile, nutrient sources of symbols, imagery, and formations. Both continuity and change would frame an egalitarian new relationship between art and its audience.

This reflection on the early years at Galeria de la Raza was followed by an anecdote of the differences in the audience that showed up for an exhibit opening. The interview with the founder and executive director of Site 2, he echoed a similar sentiment.

“Do you know, if you go to an opening at an art museum, you never see kids. If you come to our museum, you see baby carriages, and you see different sets of people. You could see some woman dressed in expensive clothes with people in jeans, with people from the neighborhood. It's the way we operate. It's a different type of situation.”

Identity and Cultural Capital

Positioning themselves as community hubs, providing a range of services and programming ranging drastically from health clinic days to language classes, sets them apart as something different than traditional museums. This separate identity provides them the freedom of movement, co-creation, advocacy, and community celebration. By involving themselves so deeply in the community these Latino cultural institutions become places where welcome is implied, instead of questioned. Latino audiences going into these spaces are not doing so with a perceived deficit in social capital but with the knowledge that their language, culture, and values will be reflected by them at every level from the staffing to the signage and aesthetics.

Conclusion

In order to foster a sense of belonging in Latino audiences, Latino cultural institutions have established themselves as separate entities when compared to the traditional museum. The resulting sense of identity, often rooted in social responsibility, leads these institutions to redefine what it means to be a museum by becoming community hubs. Instead of assuming their relevance (Simon, 2016) to the community they are actively meeting the needs of Latinos in their area through non-traditional programming and activities. By incorporating the values, language, and traditions of the Latino community they are creating approachable spaces that celebrate the community's cultural wealth and act as a conduit to reconnect with cultural practices. The way these institutions advocate alongside Latinos on local and national issues sets them apart from traditional institutions that may be more hesitant to speak out on politics. Involvement so entrenched within the Latino communities they reside in create a reciprocal relationship with

individuals who may have otherwise not felt comfortable interacting with a cultural institution.

The issues identified in the current literature researching the sense of belonging of Latinos visitors in non-Latino museums, science centers, and cultural institutions are organically addressed by the practices of the three institutions in this study. An identity rooted in celebrating community cultural wealth, advocacy, prioritizing the community along with collections, is what truly set Latino cultural institutions apart.

The themes and examples discussed in this article raise a series of questions for affinity museums engaging with the communities they emerged from. Did they also develop practices that inherently reflect their communities? Are they also engaging in partnerships to create non-traditional programming and activities to meet the needs of their community members? How can large museums engage in these practices to increase the sense of belong that Latinos and other marginalized people feel at their institutions. How much are larger institutions willing to change to accomplish that?

These are not questions that can easily be answered, further research on how collaborations between the broader cultural arts world and affinity institutions are needed. An exploration of how many of the differing practices affinity museums are formalized or inherently developed may also give insight into how they can be replicated and applied elsewhere. By investing time and research into this, more institutions can move forward to become places where they become actively relevant to their communities and create an atmosphere where belonging is inherently implied upon entering.

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