

LSTA Grant Evaluation

Expanding Latino Outreach – Grant Project Number 12-01-1p

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Summary of Evaluation

The staff at Cornelius Public Library have done an excellent job in persisting as they developed an internship program designed to improve outreach to the local Spanish-speaking Latino community and to offer library programs in Spanish. The start of the internship program was delayed when they were unable to recruit viable intern candidates from among area Masters of Library and Information Science and Masters of Education students. Wisely, the project was refocused on undergraduate students, which resulted in the recruitment of two interns who have been able to meet the project goals for the initial program period.

Project Objectives

The Cornelius Public Library is a small library with limited staff serving a community where the population is now more than 50 percent Latino. Many of those residents are native Spanish speakers. Library staff pursued LSTA funding after identifying a strong need to improve the library's services targeted at Spanish-speaking Latino residents. The goals of the project are to increase awareness of the library in the Latino community through outreach, to develop Spanish-language library programming, and to create Spanish-language instructional materials on the use of the library.

Project Method

Cornelius Public Library staff initially proposed using LSTA support to hire Spanish-speaking interns from among the pool of area residents currently seeking a Masters of Library and Information Science or a Masters of Education. Working with partners from such MLIS programs as the University of Washington, Emporia State University, San Jose State University, and Pacific University, as well as the MEd programs at George Fox University, Linfield College, Marylhurst, Portland State, and Concordia University, Cornelius Library Director Karen Hill twice posted for paid internships of up to 15 hours per week. Requirements included bilingual skills in Spanish.

The challenge at this point was that neither recruitment was successful. No applications were received in response to the first recruitment. In the second, only one potentially qualified individual applied, but that person withdrew from consideration after receiving a better offer.

Before beginning a third recruitment, Hill received approval to expand the recruitment effort to include undergraduate students. After advertising in October 2013, the library reviewed applications from four excellent candidates and selected two – a female freshman from Pacific University and a male in his final year at Portland Community College – to work as interns until June 2013. Both had excellent Spanish-language skills. The first is a student from Cornelius who was educated in a dual-language immersion program through fourth grade and continued with Spanish-language coursework in middle and high school. The second developed his language skills while teaching computer skills in Chile and the Dominican Republic.

Each intern was trained provide outreach services, visiting literacy nights and other community events to provide Spanish and English language information about Cornelius Public Library programs and services. Interns observed and were trained in storytime techniques so they could provide off-site storytimes as part of the outreach efforts.

Interns were also assigned the task of developing a program in Spanish to be offered at Cornelius Public Library. They started with a list of 10 possible programs identified by library staff. The programs selected were (1) a Spanish/English Language Exchange and (2) computer classes that includes Spanish-only computer instruction and a Spanish/English language open lab. Under the supervision of Hill and Outreach Assistant Maria Aguilar, the interns were responsible for the programs from planning to promotion to actually leading and instructing.

Finally, the interns were asked to work together to develop web videos and other library instructional materials in Spanish that would help Spanish-speaking members of the community learn to navigate the library and its systems.

Project Results

After being hired and trained, the interns were able to start visiting community events to promote the library early in the year. They have been able to talk to residents at school literacy nights, parenting workshops, and Head Start programs throughout the area, providing information about library materials, programs, and services.

Their Spanish-based library programs were launched in February 2013 and have been well-received, with 6-8 attendees at most program sessions. These numbers are consistent with the available meeting space and computing stations.

Finally, the pair developed a Spanish-language video focused on placing holds which was posted on YouTube and made available in the library.

Project Impact

The outreach focus of the internship program has increased the visibility of the Cornelius Public Library in the community by expanding the library's ability to go out and start conversations at a variety of community events and sites.

The Spanish-language programming has also brought 35-40 people to the library each month to participate in the Spanish/English Language Exchange meetings or the Spanish-based computer classes.

Suggestions for Improvement

The key improvement to be made in this program was already recognized and made by Library Director Karen Hill. After the two failed attempts to hire a MLIS or MEd candidate for the internship, Hill indicated that she recognized some important factors. The majority of MLIS candidates and many MEd students are non-traditional students or adults returning for further education. Thus, many are already working while they attend school, frequently in their field of focus. It is also common for these students to have families and other outside demands on their time. Given that Latino and/or Spanish-speaking students are a small percentage of the current MLIS and MEd classes, Cornelius Public Library was simply left without a viable pool.

Hill wisely sought permission to refocus her efforts on undergraduate college students, greatly expanding the number of potential candidates.

The change has been largely positive. Hill says she has realized that the undergraduate students are highly capable and able to take on the majority of projects initially identified. The one loss is that at this level, interns will not have the skills to become involved in cataloging or collection development. On the other hand, the re-focus on the undergraduate population opens the door for this internship program to actually encourage bilingual undergraduate students to envision a career in libraries.

It will be important for the library to continue to seek ways to improve the Spanish-language cataloging and collection as a part of this project. Sending people out into the community to encourage residents to come try the library is a great way to begin to build new relationships, but it is crucial that those residents who give the library a try find programs, materials, and services that satisfy their expectations so they will return after their initial visit.

Completing additional videos, particularly a video that provides a general introduction to the library, is also recommended. The instructional video focused on holds is practical and useful, but low-key in its tone. It would be a great tool for all library staff to have an upbeat video that features images and footage of the library, the library in use, and the friendly faces of library staff members. Showing something like that during community visits and having it available on YouTube can help residents unfamiliar with libraries in general and the Cornelius Public Library specifically feel more confident about approaching the library.