

WORKING WITH LATINO PARTNERS: *SEVEN INSIGHTS*

Conducted August - September 2012 by the
Latino New South Learning Network:

**Levine Museum of the New South, Atlanta History Center
and Birmingham Civil Rights Institute**



INTRODUCTION

Latino/Hispanic population is rising dramatically across the U.S. South, from barely 1% in 1990 to 10-15% in many cities today. The change is highly visible in this region which historically received few immigrants in America's last big immigration wave a century ago. The excitements and stresses foreshadow wider changes as the nation becomes increasingly multicultural: by the 2040s no single racial/ethnic group will be in the majority in the U.S.

Levine Museum of the New South, thanks to a prestigious Innovation Lab grant from the American Alliance of Museums, is joining the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute and the Atlanta History Center in a multi-year Latino New South Project. It aims to document this history-in-the-making and to develop strong partnerships with Latino communities. Already, the museums have conducted extensive Listening Sessions with Latinos and non-Latino representatives in each town. What stories/information/messages need to be shared? Can museums become "civic tools," helping their cities build the cultural bridges that are needed in this era of change?

In August and September 2012, the three museums conducted two-day listening sessions in their three cities. For each, the home museum brought Latino/Hispanic leaders and community members to the museum, and also arranged bus visits to Latino/Hispanic institutions out in the city. The following insights summarize what was heard.

SEVEN INSIGHTS

I. Latinos are here to stay:

- Latinos have gone from 1% or 2% of the population to nearly 10% or more in many localities.
- Roughly half of Latinos counted by the U.S. Census are already citizens. Many are born here in the U.S. Latino youngsters are the fastest growing group in most school systems.
- Museums must convey this new reality by facilitating discussions of the challenges and opportunities such demographic changes incur.

II. Latinos are from many cultures:

- While Mexico has sent numerous immigrants, a third to 1/2 are from other locations in Central and South America.
- The terms "Latino" and "Hispanic" are U.S. creations (also see Insight VI). Latinos often self-identify as Cuban American, Colombian or their original Mexican state.
- They want receiving communities to appreciate their culturally rich backgrounds with the desire that their Latino neighbors and their own children learn of this. Do not want assumptions made of being Mexican or questions asked such as "Where in Mexico is Puerto Rico?"

III. Bi-culturalism is growing:

- Young people raised in the U.S. are, without exception, English-proficient and bi-cultural (embracing U.S. food, entertainment, etc., without abandoning Latino heritage). Adults are not able to change as quickly or as completely.
- Latinos are more likely than the U.S. population to use the internet and social media. This is partly due to young people who are "digital natives."
- The most expressed fear of receiving communities is that "they refuse to become American (learn English, follow laws and customs). Countering this misconception and fear can be a top goal for museums.





IV. Extended families are important:

- Latinos usually experience cultural offerings as an extended family unit (to use a sociological term) - mother, father, several kids, grandparents, cousins, maybe even a friend or relative.
- When choosing an activity, they look for those that will bring both pleasure and renewal or self-improvement - and engage all family members

V. Bridging is essential:

- We were urged to get outside of the museum setting and visit places where people are already established.
- They spoke of the need for multiple introductions: Latinos to other Latino groups; Latinos to receiving communities; Latinos to Southern history (especially African American); receiving communities to Latinos; and so forth.
- Latino to African American bridging is especially needed. On one hand, many Latino immigrants bring anti-Black stereotypes spread by American media; and both groups often compete for entry-level jobs. On the other hand, Civil Rights history can be an inspiring model for immigrant efforts today. Both groups are excited and grateful to learn each other's story - "something we never head in school."

- The organization Welcoming America, emphasizes that communities become welcoming only when immigrants and non-immigrants do things together, and get to know each other.

VI. Language is a powerful symbol:

- Spanish - words on the wall, personal greetings from a Visitor Services person - is a powerful signal that Latinos are welcome. For young people who are usually comfortable in English, this welcome is symbolic. For older people, it is functional - Spanish is needed in order to be able to guide their group, teach their children.
- Spanish text also signals to non-Latinos that the South is now increasingly bi-cultural.
- The terms "Latino" and "Hispanic" seem largely interchangeable. In Charlotte, we heard Latino more often; in Birmingham we heard Hispanic more often.
- The term "illegal" offends many Latinos who say that acts may be illegal, but no person is "illegal." We suggest using the term "undocumented."

VII. Becoming "documented" is difficult, often impossible:

- People in receiving communities often ask, "why don't immigrants just obey the law" and work toward legal citizenship? The most common negative reaction is "they don't want to learn English."
- In fact, quotas and convoluted regulations often make legal immigration impossible. People pointed to a graphic "What Part of Legal Immigration Don't You Understand?" as an illustration of the barriers. At best, it is an extremely lengthy process requiring expert assistance. One participating Charlottean from Mexico spoke of the 19 years it took her to become a citizen.
- These legal problems can split families. Young children born here can suddenly find their parents sent back to the country of origin. Those children born elsewhere yet raised here can suddenly be deported "back" to a strange land that they have never known.
- Post 9/11 fears and new "show your papers" laws in Alabama, Georgia and South Carolina have greatly increased problems for Latinos. Anyone who "looks" Latino - even a distinguished India-born surgeon in one case - can be jailed until they prove their legal status.
- In our Listening Sessions, Latinos and non-Latinos both asked that museums help receiving communities understand their realities.

