
Providing Informed Referrals for Immigrant Populations

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Abstract:

As immigration continues to be an important topic in the sociopolitical world, libraries have increasingly become a trusted provider of information services for immigrants, English-language learners and new Americans. Strategically located in the most diverse county in the United States, Queens Borough Public Library, recipient of a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, has developed a curriculum and already trained over 200 librarians and public-serving staff members on enhancing reference services to immigrant customers, just over half of the project goal of 400 by early 2017.

Queens Library staff members have participated in an extensive workshop-based training program that develops core skills, such as cultural competence, communication, creating and maintaining referral systems, and developing key community partnerships. These workshops have increased the quality of information services by further aligning Queens Library's Core Values and Mission of meeting the "informational, educational, cultural, and recreational needs" of our ever-changing and diverse community.

This presentation and paper highlights the successes and lessons learned in the implementation of the "Librarian Digital & Integration Gateway Project" at Queens Library and its impact on internal and external services and partnerships, connecting with immigrants and English-language learning populations, and increasing informational and organizational referrals for patrons.

Keywords: immigration, development, technology, resources, reference

As the home to the most diverse population in the United States, Queens County, New York has been a haven for nearly 2.2 million residents. Of the county's total population, nearly 48% of its residents are foreign-born, representing over 70 countries; Spanish-speakers from more than 12 countries make up 28% of the county's population. With the increasing diversity in Queens, nearly 30% of the residents consider themselves "less than very well" when it comes to their English speaking skills. Coupled with low English speaking and literacy skills, approximately a fifth of the population has less than a 9th grade education in their native countries, and many are at or below the poverty level.

For these reasons, Queens Borough Public Library (referred to as Queens Library) has made the initiative to begin equipping its public-serving staff members with the tools and resources necessary to support the immigrant population in Queens County. Beginning in April of 2014 after receiving a grant fund from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, Queens Library has written a training curriculum focused on developing frontline staff members to better serve and support immigrants in finding informational resources. The Librarian Digital and Integration Gateway project brings together key informational components to provide to over 400 public-serving staff members. The 12-session training focused on four main content areas: Cultural Competency and Demographics; Digital Tools and Technology in the 21st Century; Community Referrals and Customer Reference; and Civic Engagement and Immigration.

For many new immigrants, the library is a primary resource for information, assistance and education. Despite low-English proficiency, many foreign-born customers continuously and eagerly seek new information that can help them to build a better life for themselves and their families. With many challenges, such as low computer literacy skills and low-incomes, immigrants seek the skill sets that will help them to surpass socioeconomic and organizational barriers to mobility.

As more and more services are being requested by immigrant customers, an even larger skills gap has been exposed within the organization, especially in those who interact on the frontline with customers. Many times, staff members are stunted by cultural and linguistic barriers, hindered by limited knowledge of different community resources, and are unable to effectively implement trainings on digital resources and technology that can directly benefit new non-English speaking families.

Queens Library has historically provided a space for immigrants to gain a foothold in the US, and has played a key role leading Queens County residents to enhance the economic, civic and cultural profile of the borough. The training curriculum provides library staff members with in-depth information on barriers that immigrants face, resources that are available to customers both internally and externally, and utilizing the various technological tools that can more easily connect customers with the best and most relevant information.

Year One: Needs Assessment and Curriculum Development

The development of this staff-oriented training occurred after an initial needs assessment was drafted and provided to all staff members via an online surveying tool. Over 400 staff members represented in all 62 library locations completed the survey, providing a strong and detailed foundation of work. Sample questions from the needs assessment included:

- Which foreign language(s) have been spoken to you in the course of serving library members?
- What service(s) and /or assistance has/have your library patrons needed from you?
- What kind of information was/were most requested by your library patrons?
- What additional information/services do you think Queens Library could improve on or provide more of to you?

Each question provided various types of answers, grouped into categories based on need. Based on the survey, the project team was able to determine that the highest needs were higher education assistance, healthcare assistance, housing, entrepreneurship and financial assistance. These not only were demonstrated through interactions with customers, but have been backed up and supported by the demographics prevalent in many parts of Queens- low educational attainment, moderate poverty levels and low-incomes. Many customers of the library were requesting computer classes (offered in both English and native languages), US citizenship information, job skills and information on childcare and children's education.

There were many needs that were expressed through the needs assessment survey by the library staff members. Many of the participants felt as if they lacked the technology and digital literacy skills to navigate the ever-changing online resources, felt ill-equipped to effectively refer customers to the best external resources, particularly other community-based organizations and non-profit organizations in their neighborhoods, and lacked the skills necessary to help guide library customers to online resources and teach them how to access job resources when called upon.

Queens Library sought out various subject matter experts to help develop the curriculum; the development team included a sociology professor from New York City's City College of New York (part of the City University of New York System), a demographer, an adult literacy and resources specialist, internal job skills training professionals from the Job and Business Academy at Queens Library, legal experts from the New York Legal Assistance Group, and civic engagement professionals from the Center for the Integration and Advancement of New Americans. Each of the developers contributed content knowledge, constructed workshops from their available resources, and tailored the sessions towards the principle trainee- the public service librarian. The contracting and curriculum development was completed for the duration of the grant's first year, which was finalized on March 31, 2015.

Year Two: Curriculum Roll-out and General Training

Year two of the Librarian Digital Integration and Gateway Project mainly focused on the introduction of the program to library staff members, testing and revision of the training curriculum, and continuous evaluation and development of the program as guided determined by the grant terms. In order to establish an objective third-party evaluation team, the McSilver Institute for Poverty Policy and Research at New York University was contracted to provide the project's formative evaluation and feedback.

The project's trainings have been provided for over 200 librarians during the project's second year. After extensive deliberation and planning, the curriculum was tested during the summer of 2015 with an initial 26 participants, who received not only the content knowledge, but the methodology for becoming trainers; this group of 26 became the principle trainers for the in-person sessions that were scheduled for the other public serving staff members. The cohort consisted of positions from multiple internal departments, including the Adult Learner Program, the New Americans Program and from the Community Library Services department. Many of the trainers had a rich background in services in multiple environments, from classroom to the service desk.

All participants from the first group participated in pre- and post- knowledge assessments after every workshop (eventually every 3 workshops), an individual session feedback document, and a module level (3 workshops) feedback form. All participants were required to

also participate in specialized methodology trainings geared towards content delivery and professional development. Based off of the feedback from the participants, the project team, with help from the consultants, was able to revise and finalize the training curriculum for Cohort 2 during the fall of 2015 and Cohort 3 during the winter of 2016.

After the revisions were finalized, the workshops and modules were constructed as below:

Module 1

This module introduces and discusses the concepts of cultural competency and trains participants to assess and analyze community demographics and immigration trends to better serve their respective immigrant constituency. The workshops included are below:

- 1: Cultural Competence and the Immigrant Community
- 2: Community Needs Assessment
- 3: Community Needs Analysis

Module 2

The goal of this module is to familiarize participants with a range of digital and technological tools, devices and applications needed to aid immigrants in accessing information about translation, legal, financial and other services, and how to complete or download online applications. The workshops included are below:

- 4A: Physical Spaces, Collections and Facilities
- 4B: Technology and Electronic Resources
- 5A: Digital Spaces and 21st Century Literacies
- 5B: Job Seeking and Educational Resources
- 6: Community Engagement and Communication

Module 3

This module will teach participants how to access resources and make referrals to immigrants for translation, housing, health, citizenship, job training, employment and other services. The workshops included are below:

- 7: Closing Communication Gaps & Building Bridges for Library Customers
- 8: Creating a Community Referral System
- 9: Gatekeepers and Door-openers

Module 4

This module teaches participants about the new immigration laws and how they impact their constituency, as well as about existing citizenship and naturalization services (the Library's and partners), including citizenship, civics and ESOL workshops and classes, naturalization attorneys or BIA accredited representatives. The workshops included are below:

- 10: Library Services for New Americans and ESOL Speakers
- 11/12A: Immigration, Citizenship and Integration (Two-Parts)
- 12B: Civic Education and Engagement

Year Three: Results and Implications

Preliminary results from the second year of the project have returned positively; many of the assumptions and needs made prior to the curriculum development were confirmed, and the trainings helped to further develop the staff members who have completed the trainings. Confidence levels with using technology to assist customers increased in all cohorts, participants felt more comfortable with directing customers to online and community-based resources both internal to Queens Library and externally to other organizations. Nearly all participants improved in the knowledge assessments, particularly those about demographics, cultural competency, civic engagement and legal resources/regulations.

Queens Library has taken steps to continue to offer the trainings by developing a learning management system to allow all participants to access the curriculum content and resources to review independently. Simultaneously, a referral management system was developed to help staff members better access information for over 1500 organizations in areas such as educational resources, financial assistance, housing assistance and other community- and needs- based resources.

The project's focus has been about sustainability- ensuring that staff members are striving to meet the needs of the ever-changing population in Queens County, New York, and further established the library system's place as a leader and vital resource to the residents of Queens. During year three, the project will conduct an additional in-person cohort and begin conducting webinars to participants throughout the system. Additional activities and forums will be available to staff members through an online chat community through the learning management system.

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