

Latinos' Informational Needs in Attaining Accredited Theological Education

Abstract

This paper explores published articles that report on theological education in the Hispanic/Latino community. It looks at U.S. demographic changes and the needs of the Latino community to provide civic and church leadership within their communities. The article reports on past efforts, and challenges, to increase Latino enrollment in graduate theological education. It looks at current strategies by Asociación para la Educación Teológica Hispana (AETH) to collaborate with American Theological Schools (ATS) and the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) to certify unaccredited Bible Institutes so that the educational standards will be strengthened and create a clearer pathway for Latinas/os to enter ATS-accredited member schools. The purpose of the paper is to present the AETH commission report and discuss ways in which theological librarians can assist in providing the informational needs of students in Bible Institutes.

Introduction

The rapid increase of the Latino population is transforming the U.S. cultural landscape. Yet, compared to the surge in growth, Latinos academic performance is stagnant. According to one source, “Latinos are the largest and fastest growing minority group in the U.S. yet have the lowest education attainment level of any group in the United States.”¹ The outcomes of how these two realities will play out in our national identity should cause all of us concern.

Between 1990 and 2000, the U.S. Latino population grew by 50 percent. In Arizona, Latinos make up 31 percent of a total of 6.5 million residents.² If national trends continue, Latinos will represent 60 percent of Arizona's population by the year 2050 and will make up 29 percent of the U.S. population overall. In Arizona, when age is calculated with race, the population is increasingly more Latino/Hispanic in the younger age categories, and over 80 percent white in the 65 and older category. Nearly 100 percent of Hispanic children under the age of 5 in Arizona — children of both documented and undocumented parents — are U.S. citizens, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Even states with the lowest Latino population are experiencing huge growth. From 2010 to 2011, for example, Alabama has seen a 158 percent increase in Latino population, moving from 72,000 to 186,000. South Carolina and Tennessee saw increases of 154 percent in the Latino population.³

A 2011 report from the Department of Education stated that by every achievement measure, Hispanic students are performing at or near the bottom. Fifty percent of Hispanic students do not receive a diploma four years after entering high school. Nearly nine out of ten (89 percent) of Latino young adults say that a college education is important for success in life, yet only about half that number — 48 percent — say that they themselves plan to get a college degree. The report concluded that a “persistent educational attainment gap remains between Hispanics and non-Hispanic whites.”⁴

¹ See the report “Winning the Future: Improving Education for the Latino Community” (Washington: U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

² See the report “Winning the Future: Improving Education for the Latino Community” (Washington: U.S. Department of Education, 2011), 1-2.

³ Pew Hispanic Center, Statistical Portrait of Hispanics in the United States, 2010 (February 21, 2012); retrieved from <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2012/02/21/statistical-portrait-of-hispanics-in-the-united-states-2010/>

⁴ See the report “Winning the Future: Improving Education for the Latino Community” (Washington: U.S. Department of Education, 2011): 1-2.

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As the Latino population in Arizona, the Southwest, and nationwide increases, an intentional effort to develop Latino leadership is critical. Latinos need to be ready to step into positions of leadership in academic, religious, and civic institutions, as well as private and business corporations. The lagging Latino educational performance heightens the urgency to create an environment of achievement that will produce civically and economically engaged participants.

One area that needs urgent attention is in the training of religious and civic leaders within the Latino community. Latino population is growing, which means that Latino churches are on the rise as well. The percentages of community and spiritual leaders who have gone to an accredited theological institution is very low. In 2012, according to American Theological Schools (ATS), only 4 percent of the 70,000 theological students in accredited schools were Latino, just slightly above Native Americans.⁵

This paper seeks to recognize and affirm current community efforts, specifically the Asociación para la Educación Teológica Hispana (AETH), in its crucial role in fulfilling its mission of developing the leaders needed to radically transform the church and the Hispanic/Latino community in the U.S., Puerto Rico, and Canada and contribute to their vibrancy, health, and growth. (AETH serves the local community by providing resources to the more than 120 Bible Institutes that are dedicated to training and equipping community members to serve within their own communities.)

Literature Review

Latinos, today and in the past, have valued spiritual connections. A comprehensive study undertaken by Hispanic Churches in American Public Life (HCAPL), funded by the Pew Charitable Trust, provided statistics on religion and public life among U.S. Latinos, presented in the published report in 2003.⁶ HCAPL learned that 93 percent of Latinos surveyed identified themselves as Christian. The Christian group with the highest identification level was Roman Catholic at 70 percent, followed by Protestant at 23 percent. Seven percent identified themselves as having no religious preference/other/none. A more recent study⁷ shows that Latinos self-identifying as having no religious preference/other has grown to 12 percent. Even though secularism is on the rise, spirituality is embedded in the Latino culture.

As stated by Mejido, religion “provides structure and moral order in a destabilized and vulnerable life world.”⁸ Many Latinos live in a state of “inbetweenness,” straddling the ancestral/private and dominant/public. Latino spiritual history provides a transcendent point, a sacred place to deal with this hybrid reality. Religion, according to Mejido, is a vehicle of social empowerment, a place where community and networks are forged, a place where social activism is nurtured, a place where every voice is heard. Religion within any marginalized cultural group can serve as a vehicle to perpetuate their cultural heritage, and a buffer against forces of assimilation.

University graduate programs and seminaries “have a responsibility to ensure that Latinos/as can obtain the education they need to serve their growing community.”⁹ The National Survey showed that Latinos pursued further religious training to meet the needs of their community. Respondents stated pastoral counseling (90 percent), social service (75 percent), and youth work (69 percent) among primary fields of interest. Young Latina/o leaders showed high interest (89 percent) in learning about community development and social work. Religious schools provide not only spiritual leaders for churches but also community leaders in civic groups, and counselors and social workers who can serve within their communities. Latino families and communities face many life challenges in our complex world. They need trained, informed, and specialized professionals to design and provide services such as family counseling, economic and community development, and civic leadership.

⁵ Association of Theological Schools Factbook and Data Tables, 2012 (Pittsburgh: The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada), table 2012-2013.

⁶ G. Espinosa, E. Elizondo, and J. Miranda, “Hispanic Churches in American Public Life: Summary of Findings. (South Bend, IN: Institute for Latino Studies at the University of Notre Dame, 2003)

⁷ J. Navarro-Rivera, B. Kosmin, and A. Keysar, “U.S. Latino Religious Identification 1990-2008: Growth, Diversity, and Transformation.” <http://www.trincoll.edu>

⁸ M. Mejido, “U.S. Hispanic/Latinos in the Field of Theological Education.” *Theological Education* (34(2), 1998: 58.

⁹ E. I. Hernández and K.G. Davis. “The National Survey of Hispanic Theological Education,” *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 8, no. 4(2001): 44.

There are many barriers between Latinos and higher education, and not all of them are academic. Edwin Hernández conducted a Pew Charitable Trust national survey to assess and provide data in understanding Hispanic spiritual leadership.¹⁰ This was the single largest study of Latino religious leaders ever conducted. The study provided wide presentation from diverse religious denominations. The questionnaire was bilingual, included 302 queries, and was sent to 16,240 Hispanic religious leaders. The responses collected in 2001 from more than 2,000 returned questionnaires provided a large data pool to help understand the role of theological education in the lives of Latinos. Hernández identified the barriers that hinder Latinos advancing to higher education.

This survey provided insight into the role of Bible Institutes, and the realities of university graduate programs and seminaries for the Latino/a student. (I will discuss Bible Institutes more specifically later in the essay.) With respect to accredited graduate studies, the respondents cited family responsibilities and the necessity to stay employed as factors that hindered their completion of academic studies. Added to this fact, the majority of Latino churches are not able to support fully their pastors or leaders in vocational positions. Financial factors were seen as key barriers (seventy-two percent) to finishing their master's and PhD programs. Respondents cited reputation, location, and treatment of minorities as other key concerns in choosing a pathway for advanced education. Reputation — defined not by academic status, a reputation for spirituality, or theological standing, but by reputation in perceived treatment of Latino/a populations — was a primary concern for prospective students.

Latinas/os, students, faculty, and published scholarship are inadequately represented in theological education. Hernández's survey indicates that financial need, scarcity of time, and cultural marginalization contribute to this shortfall. As we have stated previously, ATS Latino enrollment is at 4 percent. Latino faculty are underrepresented as well: out of 2,925 total faculty in ATS member schools, only 130 of them are from the Latino community.¹¹ The number virtually stayed the same from 200 (100 male and 30 female faculty) to 2012 (98 male and 32 female). The effects of this are seen throughout the institutions. The courses and curricula lack a relevant component to Latinos. Curricula are most effective when integrated with a cross-cultural concern, and engaged in the plurality of social realities that are facing the Latino community. This begs the question of how effective training can take place when curricula are detached from the real needs of the Latino community. The low number of Latino faculty places additional pressure on the ones who are there, making it extremely difficult for Latino students to have access to Latino mentors, advisors, or dissertation committee members. Institutions place minority faculty on committees as well as expecting them to build minority enrollment. Lastly, there is a lack of Hispanic scholarship. Latina/o attendance and papers presented at the American Academy of Religion (AAR) are embarrassingly low. In September 1993, the journal *Church History* published a bibliographic article entitled "American Religious History in the Eighties: A Decade of Achievement."¹² The author, Martin E. Marty, provided a comprehensive analysis of scholarly books dealing with the religious history of the United States published during the period 1980-1989 and commented, "Sadly deficient was the attention paid to the largest non-English speaking group in America, Hispanics."¹³ The fact that U.S. Latinos' religious life is dismissed seems like a bad dream. However, the reality is that the cultural record and history of Latino Protestants is being greatly neglected.

Hernández's research led to a new fellowship program, the Hispanic Theological Initiative (HTI), which helped overcome some of the barriers that had existed between Latinas/os and higher education. Over the course of ten years, HTI has supported numerous Latina/o scholars with the following mission:¹⁴

- To help identify and prepare highly trained educators and leaders who can articulate, model, and help teach values and ideas that will inform and make an impact in our Latino faith communities and communities in general

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Association of Theological Schools Factbook and Data Tables, 2012 (Pittsburgh: The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada), table 2012-2013.

¹² M. Marty, "American Religious History in the Eighties: A Decade of Achievement," *Church History* (1993): 336-371.

¹³ Marty, 353.

¹⁴ Hispanic Theological Initiative, Princeton Theological Seminary. Mission: http://www.ptsem.edu/uploadedFiles/HTI/Home_Page/Publications/FINAL%20BROCHURE%2011-12.pdf

- To increase the recruitment, retention, and graduation rates of Latina/o PhD students across the nation by uniting and leveraging institutional resources (human, financial, and infrastructural)
- To increase the presence of Latina/o faculty — especially tenured faculty — in seminaries, schools of theology and universities
- To provide a forum for the exchange of information, ideas, and the best practices to address the needs of Latina/o faculty and students

This study and creation of the HTI moved the ball forward, but has still left theological education of Latinos/a in the hands of a very few. In the past fourteen years, HTI has successfully supported the graduation of forty-three master's and seventy-four PhD Latina/o students in theological and religious education.¹⁵ Even so, that works out to three master's and five PhD graduations a year, for a total number of 117, assuming there is no overlap. Accredited theological and religious schools are still out of reach for so many Latinos. The desire and need to have future leaders be more fully trained and academically sharpened has led many church- and denomination-based institutions to provide it for themselves.

Community-based and “Organically Grown” Theological Education

In contrast to mainstream, academy-based theological education, the majority of Latino pastors and lay leaders receive training through local Bible Institutes. These schools are in large urban areas and are tailored specifically to the needs of Latinos in their communities. Advantages of Bible Institutes for many Latinos are that they are accessible, small, inexpensive, offer night classes, and — most important — do not require a bachelor's degree for admission. These unaccredited schools provide much of the leadership training, if any, that Latino pastors and community leaders receive. However, there are disadvantages as well. Attendees are poorly trained in critical thinking and research methods. Many do not pursue master's or doctoral studies.

In 2011, The Asociación para la Educación Teológica Hispana (AETH) received funding to collaborate with the Association of Theological Schools (ATS), with two goals:¹⁶ (1) to promote and improve the theological education of eligible Bible Institutes, so that their graduates can function at a baccalaureate level, and become equipped to become leaders for the transformation of church and society; and (2) to provide accessible pathways to enrollment in ATS-accredited graduate theological schools for graduates of AETH-certified Bible institutes. For this to occur the commission recommended certain criteria for Bible Institutes to become certified. Once the Bible Institute goes through a self-study and makes the changes needed, a visiting team from AETH evaluates its progress. After certification is granted, graduates will have access to attend ATS member schools, which are fully accredited seminaries and divinity programs, sometimes affiliated with universities. This approach will set up Bible Institutes as “feeder” schools to accredited theological programs, and will require ATS to be in close partnership with the AETH certification process.¹⁷ Not only will institutional partnerships will be forged, but students from the various Institutes enjoy the benefit of increased opportunities to connect with each other.

The report cited specific ways for libraries and librarians to assist each Bible Institute to achieve certification status.¹⁸ Each institute must have access to adequate library resources, including both online resources, and resident collections of books and periodicals. Students need to exhibit information literacy skills, such as finding and using common digital and printed information resources, and engaging in library research, as well as the ability to use computers and the Internet. The report states that students will be expected to conduct focused research on Latina/o contributions to mission and theology, and prepare written and oral reports. The assumption, then, is that the Bible Institutes will house, or develop,

¹⁵ Hispanic Theological Initiative, “Story” (http://www.ptsem.edu/uploadedFiles/HTI/Home_Page/Publications/FINAL%20BROCHURE%2011-12.pdf)

¹⁶ The Asociación para la Educación Teológica Hispana (AETH), 2013 (<http://www.aeth.org/>)

¹⁷ E. I. Hernández and K.G. Davis, “The National Survey of Hispanic Theological Education,” *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 8, no. 4 (2001): 44.

¹⁸ www.aeth.org

collections good enough to facilitate such inquiry. This would be a challenge for any institution, but for community-based, small, and privately run institutes/colleges, these standards can pose a heavy burden.

Miguel Figueroa, former Director of Member Programs for the American Theological Library Association (ATLA), discussed AETH's needs for services, programs, and resources to expand in order to be a success. He observed that "the biggest challenge in first generation Bible College or other institutions is that they are ill prepared for the research component."¹⁹ Right now even fully accredited theological graduate programs and seminaries, barely have a minimum of resources. "They have what is easy and available," observed Figueroa. When I asked him about what programs, services, collections, and technology he would design specifically for them if he could, his response was that having a "core collection" of Latino resources for Bible Institutes and ATS member schools is crucial to meet the deeper and prevailing needs of the Latino community. Developing this would require a wider discourse between ATS and AETH. "Theological collections in libraries and repositories do not even know what they have."²⁰ To this end, there needs to be a comprehensive assessment of Latino resources, as well as the ways and means for Bible Institutes to access effectively and integrate such resources with their course work.

Moving Forward

For information to be accessible to a user, it must be available, findable, reachable, comprehensible, and useable.²¹ The information provider in this scenario has the burden, or duty, of the "production" of information material. The quality of resources enhances users' access when materials are organized, distributed, and communicated clearly. When there is a shortfall of producing library resources for a marginalized group, this exacerbates the information-seeking deficiencies of that group. This lack of access further disenfranchises the minority group. Bible Institutes that want to empower their community members and provide in-depth education that helps develop critical thinking skills and the ability to write about complex issues that will empower their voice on the national stage need to identify, collect, and create information resources for the benefit of that community.

Similarly, it is important now to bring an innovative and a holistic approach to the design model. New empirical data documented in "A New Culture of Learning: Digital Storytelling and Faith Formation as well as Engagement 2.0"²² and "How the New Digital Media Can Invigorate Civic Engagement"²³ shed light on how this can have a transformative effect. A new "culture of learning" has been ushered in by shifts in learning and energized by widespread access to digital technologies. Learning shifts are described in terms of participation rather than time based virtual rather than face to face. This, along with the data on how digital story telling can provide group identification, can help foster the creation of a virtual social network that can provide a powerful link between participants and resources, foster community identity, and inform community members of local and national issues. In summary, for information resources to be effective in strengthening the Latino community, they must be accessible digitally, foster a sense of community identity, and provide some means of linking users to community activity.

How might theological librarians and religious communities seek to assist AETH in fulfilling its goals? Some good starting points are a careful study of the AETH commission report, along with reflection on past and future trends in theological librarianship. These could lead to a design model of a centralized, virtual full-service library specializing in Latino resources. Such a deliberate endeavor could not only prove strategically beneficial for Bible Institutes but also for theological programs that seek a bigger presence of Latino informational resources within their institutions.

¹⁹ M. Figueroa, personal communication with the author, February 16, 2014.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ K. Mathiesen, "Facts of Access: A Conceptual and Standard Threats Analysis" (Paper presented at the iConference, Berlin, March 2014).

²² Mary E. Hess, "A New Culture of Learning: Digital Storytelling and Faith Formation," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 53 no. 1 (2014): 12-22.

²³ Lindsay Pettingill, "Engagement 2.0? How the New Digital Media Can Invigorate Civic Engagement." Conference Papers — Midwestern Political Science Association (2008 Annual Meeting): 1-22.

The AETH report points to two challenges that need to be overcome: (1) the lack of resources that are identified and accessible for students and professors in Bible Institutes, which will affect the strength of course curriculum; and (2) the absence of support services and training to access informational resources, as well as to gain proficiency in research and writing that will enable students not only to succeed and go on to an accredited theological institution but create life-long learners. Theological institutions and religious communities, can provide collaborations and intelligence that could greatly advance this design model. Suggested activities to make “Latino 2.0” a reality are

- A careful evaluation of the information-seeking habits of Latino Bible students and teachers
- The creation of clear links to library resources and support services currently available to them locally
- The identification of Latino theological resources; a “Core Collection” that will be accessible online
- The creation and design of an online course, or instructional aids, that are culturally relevant to help develop skills and writing proficiency
- The provision of a virtual space to record and display historical and cultural portraits of faith in the U.S. Latino context, looking at current issues from a faith-based ideology.

It is the hope of many to see such a design model come to fruition, and that a greater number of Latinos will have access to theological education that facilitates transformation throughout the Latino faith community while at the same time helping to shape national identity. Community leaders who can meet the needs of the whole person — spiritual and emotional — and who can be a voice of encouragement, are needed as Latinas/os seek to overcome barriers to the theological education and empowerment they need.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined current challenges that face theological education today, as well as current efforts to overcome the obstacles Latinos encounter in their endeavors to secure accredited theological education. We have also discussed current strategies by AETH to strengthen educational standards in Latino Bible Institutes. Finally, we have attempted to explore ways in which theological librarians and the religious community can work alongside AETH in developing an effective strategy for providing research resources.

Fulfilling a challenge as great as this will not be easy, and it will take time. Nonetheless, it is an opportunity that theological and religious communities are uniquely equipped and empowered to undertake, together.