

Community Needs Assessment: American Indian Resource Center of LA County Library

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Abstract

This Community Needs Assessment evaluates the community served by the American Indian Resource Center (AIRC) and identifies current and anticipated needs to be addressed. Only by understanding their community's unique needs can the AIRC best serve its members. This assessment includes an analysis of community demographics and library statistics, a study of the existing library information and services, and an onsite interview with an AIRC/LA County librarian. The process highlighted the strengths of the AIRC, its challenges, and the areas that could be expanded and improved upon. Examples of future actions to consider include loss prevention of materials and resources that are not easily replaceable, creating reports specific to the usage of the AIRC collection to aid in data analysis, and improving discoverability of circulation items.

Summary

The American Indian Resource Center is a part of the Los Angeles County Library system, located in Huntington Park, California. It was established in 1979 to serve American Indians in Los Angeles County as well as provide more information about American Indians to the larger community (LA County Library, 2022). The American Indian Resource Center claims to be the largest collection of American Indian items in the United States, hosting a variety of books, journals, and media pertaining to American Indians in both physical and digital formats. Although most of the collection targets adults, some materials and resources are curated for children. While the American Indian Resource Center collection includes all subjects, it focuses on areas specific to American Indian topics such as federal Indian law, tribal sovereignty, American Indian genealogy, and more. It also serves as an information center for resources and events pertaining to American Indians.

The Los Angeles County Library was founded in 1912 and has grown to serve 49 out of the 88 incorporated cities in Los Angeles County. As of June 2021, it has served over 3,000,000 patrons across 85 branches and 3 bookmobiles (LA County Library, 2021).

The American Indian Resource Center does not have a mission statement unique to the institution itself. However, as a cultural resource center, it helps the Los Angeles County Library achieve its broader mission: “To provide a dynamic collection that meets the informational, cultural and entertainment needs of the large and diverse population of Los Angeles County” (LA County Library, n.d.).

Demographics

In discussing the demographics of the American Indian Resource Center, two aspects must be considered. In one sense, the American Indian Resource Center is a part of the Los Angeles County Library and serves the local population of Los Angeles County. At the same time, the body of knowledge and works housed at the American Indian Resource Center specifically concerns American Indians living in the United States, many of whom do not live within the geographic area of the Los Angeles County Library. As a result of this divide, a collection development specialist handling acquisitions for the American Indian Resource Center faces the challenge of including both items that can be used to inform and advocate for American Indian issues to the population of Los Angeles as well as items that are accessible and useful to American Indians all around the country.

As of July 2021, Los Angeles County had a population of almost 10 million people. Within this population, Los Angeles County contains “the second-largest concentration of persons of American Indian descent in the United States” (Los Angeles Almanac, n.d.). Although only about 1.4% of the population identifies themselves as American Indian or Alaska

Native alone, people with native ancestry may fall under the “two or more races” or Hispanic/Latino categories, so the exact size of the American Indian population may be larger than reflected in the census statistics. However, despite lacking a statistically large American Indian population, Los Angeles County is otherwise very diverse: the county has notable populations of White, Black, Asian, and Hispanic/Latino residents, about 33% of county residents are foreign-born, and about 56% of county residents speak a language other than English at home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021).

Holding 1.4% of the Los Angeles County population, the Los Angeles Almanac website, using U.S. Census data from 2019, lists the “population of persons [in LA County] identifying as fully or partly American Indian or Alaskan Native to be 162,763.” Of this population, persons identified as American Indian, Alaskan Native, Mexican American Indian, South American Indian, and Spanish American Indian, with many tribal affiliations including Cherokee, Navajo, Apache, and the two groups native to LA County: the Gabrielino-Tongva Tribe and the Kizh Nation. “Mexican American Indian” counted as the largest tribal affiliation in LA County in the 2019 census, with an estimated population of 13,885. The number of people within LA County that reported being fully American Indian and Alaska Native is estimated to be 73,393. (Los Angeles Almanac, n.d.)

Analysis

Building Visibility

The American Indian Resource Center (AIRC) and its staff are vital to sharing the perspectives and experiences of the American Indian community while concurrently offering their perspective on how Indigenous librarianship can shape current Library Information Science (LIS) practices to support Native communities. As Gosart (2021) states, "Indigenous

librarianship may be conceptualized as a space to conduct a critical assessment of contemporary LIS ideas and practices, and also an opportunity to develop new practices informed by indigenous values and perspectives, and supporting indigenous patrons and scholars" (p. 3). Developing these perspectives is critical when book bans and challenges are at an all-time high, with the ALA's Office of Intellectual Freedom tracking 1,597 individual book challenges or removals in 2021. Most of these bans/challenges target books about or by Black or LGBTQIA+ individuals (American Libraries Magazine, 2022). It is pertinent that libraries, like the American Indian Resource Center, engage communities to combat censorship through the programming and services provided by the institution. This ensures the history of Native people is told from a Native lens rather than from a U.S. perspective.

Strengths: Partnerships, Programming, & Collections

The American Indian Resource Center (AIRC) has developed relationships with local organizations and universities to introduce and support Native students' research needs. In fact, the AIRC has strong ties to UCLA and their American Indian Studies Center, as the AIRC was modeled after this library. The center interacts with UCLA professors about Native American history and participates in university-wide Pow Wows to build community. Although the center has no ties to any one tribal community, the center is often invited to pow wows, celebrations, and community events throughout LA county to share the resources available to the public. Outreach and collaboration efforts by the center are ongoing and continue to be a leading method to ensure collections remain accessible to those who need them. Tribal studies and the California collection, art, and history are the most requested.

As libraries across the nation continue to navigate public access to collections and the COVID-19 pandemic, much of the programming conducted through the center continues to be

virtual with no intent to change. According to Kascia Samel (2022), the center's librarian, virtual programming has become the norm and allows them to engage audiences beyond their immediate community. By making these virtual programs readily accessible, the American Indian Resource Center (AIRC) can continue to fulfill the overall mission statement set forth by the LA County Public Library system. The institution's decision is well-thought as research indicates that Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) communities, specifically American Indians, continue to be adversely impacted by COVID-19 (Lakhani, 2021). Thus, by providing programs that reduce in-person visitations, they are expressing concern for their patrons' health and well-being.

Another strength of the American Indian Resource Center (AIRC) is the types of material available to the public. As previously mentioned, AIRC is one of a kind in the amount and type of formatted material they host related to the American Indian population. This includes, but is not limited to microfilm, dissertations, rare text, and college textbooks. Part of this collection includes handwritten correspondence between California officials and others to and from the Office of Indian Affairs discussing the status of California Indians between 1849-1880. These letters detail “some of the raw, uncensored first-hand accounts of the political squabbles between state, federal and local authorities, and the massacres and slavery of California Indians” that resulted in their population’s decline during this time period (AILA, 2016). Such material makes the AIRC collection unlike any other.

Areas to Improve, Expand, and Build Upon

While the existing services and resources have shown to be instrumental in supporting the American Indian population (both locally and nationally) as well as the general population, there are some areas that can be improved. One concern from the interview with the Resource

Center's librarian was the loss of resources, especially for items that are rare and limited in quantity. Some items in the collection cannot be easily replaced. This loss affects the amount of information available to the resource center's users. Actions to consider to minimize loss may include a change in lending policy or digital preservation of items that the AIRC cannot risk losing. In addition to the risk of losing irreplaceable materials, the AIRC would also like to be able to attain more diverse publications and those written or created from the Indian and Native experience and perspective (own voice narratives). Within these new items could be a focus on Indian and Native populations within LA County. (K. Samel, personal communication, June 25, 2022)

Another area to consider is the lack of reports that are specific to the American Indian Resource Center's collection, programs, and services. Reports play a fundamental role in providing information on how often resources are requested and utilized. Through the analysis of the data, librarians can make decisions about the development and management of their collection. It can also be a source of measurable outcomes that the AIRC librarians can link to specific initiatives. Positive results from reports may be proven as beneficial when it comes to issues of budgets and long-term sustainability.

Loosely connected to library reports are the catalog and the discoverability of the collection's circulation items. While the American Indian Resource Center (AIRC) is not its own library and is technically a specialty collection within the LA County Library, it may be beneficial for users to be able to easily view the physically available materials that are part of the AIRC collection. To make this possible, the LA County Library catalog can index and classify the items as part of the AIRC collection and a direct link can be posted to the AIRC website on

their “Collections” page. A similar model can be found with the [Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Collection](#) at the [San José Public Library \(SJPL\)](#).

Focus Questions

Proposed focus questions for the American Indian Resource Center (AIRC) will focus on the current usage of the AIRC, the usability of the collection, and determine how patrons find out about and access the AIRC. This will help the center to determine which ways they are reaching their community and which areas need more outreach.

Focus questions can be presented to patrons at any Los Angeles County Library branch that enters and asks about the AIRC or requests materials from the AIRC. As well as presenting questions to patrons inside branches, an email list can also be generated if library policy allows, and emails with the focus questions can be sent to patrons.

Demographics

What is your age?

Where do you live? (zip code list)

Current Usage

Have you been to the American Indian Resource Center (AIRC) at the Huntington Park Library?

What do you use the AIRC for?

Which LA County Library branch do you visit?

How did you learn about the AIRC?

Which tribal groups are you interested in learning about in the American Indian community?

Are you a Native American? If so, which tribe?

Usability AIRC Resources

How easy is it for you to get what you need?

What makes it hard to get what you need?

How easy is it to request materials from the AIRC at another branch of the LA County library?

What services are missing? (categories - collection, programs, technology, etc.)

Subcategories: books, digital materials, targeted audience, etc.

How else can the services be improved?

Services that should be emphasized?

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