



# How to Engage with Latino Museum Communities in the Research Process

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## Highlights

As gatekeepers for what constitutes valid research, institutions like Urban have the obligation to develop and **elevate data methods that more accurately and respectfully represent marginalized communities** and the barriers they face.

We recognize the colonial origins of the word “stakeholder,” and instead refer to people impacted by and invested in the ALHC program’s development as **community representatives and collaborators**.

**This is one of a series of products from Urban’s research to inform development** of the new American Latino History and Culture program to be administered by the Institute of Museum and Library Services. This grantmaking program aims to strengthen the capacity of American Latino museums at promoting and preserving the study of Latino life, art, history, and culture. For more, see: <https://www.urban.org/projects/planning-american-latino-history-and-culture-program>.

Note: We use the term “Latino” throughout to remain consistent with legislation authorizing this new program (Public Law 116-260), and intend for it to reference all diverse people of Spanish and/or Latin American origin in the US.

The Urban Institute collaborated with the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) to conduct comprehensive, actionable, and community-engaged research and planning for a new American Latino History and Culture (ALHC) program.

The purpose of this collaboration was to provide insights for the ALHC program that would strengthen the capacity of American Latino museums and educational organizations nationwide. For this, Urban researchers engaged with Latino museum representatives in cities and rural communities across the United States. Through this initiative, our team sought to conduct field outreach that was broadly inclusive, accessible in English and Spanish, and included community listening sessions, semistructured interviews, and a survey.

In this summary, we describe Urban’s best practices and guiding philosophy for community-engaged research. We outline the following strategies for community engagement: identifying the right audience, accommodating community needs, and relaying information with dignity. We then assess limitations of Urban’s approach and reflect on future improvements.

## IDENTIFYING THE RIGHT AUDIENCE

Urban’s guiding philosophy for this project attributed voice to American Latino museum professionals throughout the research process. Reaching and identifying people with lived experiences to partner alongside us and provide input on the ALHC program’s development was key to engaging culturally diverse American Latino museum representatives. The project parameters required a focus on the institutional sphere of the museum space, but when possible, museum staff and allied institutions were included.

As an initial step in engagement, our team acknowledged the problematic history of some research practices, particularly in communities of color, where people have been unethically treated and data have been collected only to benefit researchers. This included learning about racist policies that have excluded people of color from opportunities in government, research, museums, and educational organizations. To this day, many of these institutions underrepresent Latinos in leadership roles.

A main strategy Urban used to systematically engage culturally diverse perspectives was to leverage internal resources, such as Urban’s Latinx Affinity Group (including Spanish-fluent staff and translation capacity) and multidisciplinary research centers (e.g., the Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center, the Justice Policy Center, and the Office of Race and Equity Research). Latino research and policy staff at Urban were involved at every level of this project, collaborating with key Latino staff at IMLS.

**Centering the institutional voices and experiences of Latino museums in the research design and implementation required us to understand their historical development.** Primary data-collection efforts were informed by Urban’s internal DEI toolkits, and in our search of the landscape of the Latino population in the US, we were attentive to Latino intersectionality and how different characteristics like class, disability, gender, sexuality, family structure, immigration status, and justice involvement intersect to give rise to unique strengths and inequities. We were considerate of factors specific to the establishment of Latino museums, including colonialism, struggles with national identity, and tensions between institutions and government.

To elevate the voices of American Latino museum and educational organizations, their funders, and allied professionals, our team aimed to engage two groups of American Latino community representatives and collaborators:

- Group one consisted of Latino museum directors, curators, educators, conservators, and other representatives of organizations that may be potential applicants to the ALHC program.
- Group two consisted of key collaborators from supporting entities in the Latino history and culture landscape (e.g., IMLS and other federal agency staff, other funders, key Latino community leaders).

## ACCOMMODATING COMMUNITY NEEDS

Working in collaboration with IMLS, Urban’s team used a mixed-methods research design to pursue the project’s objectives, collecting qualitative and quantitative data. This included English-language and Spanish-language virtual community listening sessions to create space for participants to provide direct feedback on how to optimize the ALHC grant program. This involved inviting diverse representatives of American Latino museums to share (1) their overall experiences applying for and securing grants, and (2) cultural equity considerations, outreach strategies, and performance-measurement suggestions. The Urban team hired live interpreters to attend both language sessions, which then broke into smaller groups where Urban-trained staff who were fluent in English and/or Spanish engaged in facilitating and notetaking on topics to inform the ALHC program’s development.

Urban’s team considered four factors when accommodating communities’ needs during research engagement. Those factors, and lessons we learned from this project, were as follows:

- **Community engagement by digital/virtual means.** Although this approach was critical to engaging a geographically widespread and large number of participants, remote engagement can pose challenges when forming personal connections and trying to create an environment where people feel heard and are motivated to contribute and participate. For future engagement efforts, we highlight the importance of individualizing and personalizing outreach, including through phone conversations and by visiting communities in person to connect with people in their environments rather than only inviting them to a virtual space.
- **Bilingual outreach.** The American Latino museum space is diverse in culture and language, and conducting outreach using bilingual (English and Spanish) writing can convey a sense of respect, comfort, and inclusivity. During Urban’s virtual community listening sessions, we organized English-language and Spanish-language sessions. It was imperative to offer sessions in Spanish to provide a space for Spanish-speaking participants to feel included and have the opportunity to engage as their most authentic selves. In future engagement

with this population, our team would accommodate other Latino museum populations by incorporating accessibility for Portuguese-speaking participants.

- **Outreach through different platforms.** Outreach for Urban’s community listening sessions was done through English, Spanish, and Latino social media because many smaller cultural organizations have Facebook presences but no official websites. In addition to social media platforms, our outreach plan could have targeted more of the Latino museum community via radio stations, podcasts, and site visits.
- **Engagement at the planning stage.** Urban’s team leveraged consultation by two Latino museum professionals who advised on research activities and facilitated Spanish-language community listening sessions. With more time, we may have developed a larger Latino museum community advisory board to help identify participants and contribute to research design; we may also have consulted with other Latino community collaborators to ensure findings had maximum utility and impact in a time of significant change and opportunity in the Latino museum field. This study’s community engagement objectives were to incorporate the perspectives of Latino museums into each phase of the ALHC program’s research process to foster equity and inclusion, contribute (eventually) to more effective grantmaking, and ultimately improve Latino museum empowerment. Urban recognizes and values that community-engaged methods nurture a community’s assets and strengths, making policy recommendations more effective and sustainable.

## RELAYING INFORMATION WITH DIGNITY

The community engagement efforts Urban made, which included an online survey, interviews, and the aforementioned listening sessions, were instrumental for informing the new ALHC program. Our team worked to accurately represent the themes learned from participants’ experiences. Considering the limited time we had to disseminate research, we recognized two important methods for relaying information with dignity that we were not able to implement but should be best practices in future engagement with Latino museum communities.

First, a key step in relaying information with dignity is to get ongoing feedback from community members when disseminating research. Our project did not include regular and ongoing contact with community members to share the development of findings and obtain feedback. As agents of change, our research must create a continual loop of outreach and feedback to ensure systems and structures that hold power are responsive to the needs of Latinos in the museum space. Although our project could not incorporate this crucial step, we recommended that the ALHC program’s implementation involve continued outreach for feedback from the community by IMLS.

Second, to accurately and fairly represent the contributions of Latinos in the museum space in the research process, research dissemination must foster community empowerment at the planning stage through the delivery and reporting of findings. Engaging with individuals and community partners who can speak to the knowledge, expertise, and lived experiences on this topic is crucial to fostering community empowerment, culturally relevant research, improved policy, and more effective programming and services. Our team recognizes that conducting in-depth community engagement methods early and frequently is essential to best represent the needs of communities involved in a particular research initiative. This step ensures that researchers act as mediators and not drivers of the development of change.

Working in collaboration with IMLS, Urban’s team identified grant-development processes to foster equity and inclusion, contribute to more effective grantmaking, and improve American Latino public policy and empowerment. As gatekeepers for what constitutes valid research, institutions like Urban have an obligation to develop and elevate data methods such as these that more accurately and respectfully represent marginalized communities and the barriers they face.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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