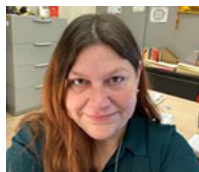




**Creating
Impactful
Humanities
Programming**

in California Libraries



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Michelle is the Collection Services Manager at Sacramento Public Library, overseeing Collection Management, Cataloging & Processing, Materials Management, and Support & Access Services.

📖 Michelle is currently reading *A Most Tolerant Little Town* by Rachel Louise Martin.



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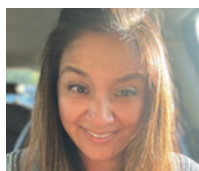
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California has the largest immigrant population of any state, with over 10 million immigrants—23% of the foreign-born population nationwide. Twenty-seven percent of current California residents are foreign-born, and almost half of the state's children have at least one immigrant parent.¹

Public libraries across the nation have long played an important role in supporting the integration of new Americans by providing resources and services like citizenship classes, English language instruction, and access to information about obtaining assistance with basic needs such as housing, food, health care, and transportation. But as we all know, human beings do not live “by bread alone.” In addition to their immediate and practical needs, immigrants, like all people, desire connection, recognition, respect, and valuation from others—social and emotional needs that the humanities (the shared focus on knowing, understanding, and communicating about the human experience—our own as well as others) are uniquely equipped to meet.

THE CALIFORNIA HUMANITIES INITIATIVE

Seeking to build on its successful 45-year partnership with California public libraries, in 2016, California Humanities, a nonprofit state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities, embarked on an 18-month process of planning and research to ascertain how to better meet the needs of our state's immigrants. With support from the California State Library, whose current State Plan identifies the need for libraries to provide programs and services of relevance to an increasingly diverse population, including recent immigrants, California Humanities staff worked with an advisory group of California library and public humanities programmers. They gathered input from experts and leaders in libraries, immigrant organizations, and museums across the country to develop an effective response.

Launched in 2017, the Library Innovation Lab: Exploring New Ways of Engaging Immigrant Communities Through Public Humanities Programming (LIL) program aims to provide humanities programming to this underserved segment of the California population, build the capacity of key partners (libraries) to deliver meaningful public humanities programs to their communities on an ongoing basis, and use the humanities to promote greater empathy and understanding among all the people of our state.

Each year, LIL engages a cohort of librarians and library staff, recruited through an open call to libraries across the state, to research, design, implement and assess a small scale, short-term public humanities project before the year's end. Working in a collaborative learning environment that includes face-to-face and virtual group meetings as well as individualized advising, cohort members cultivate their program development and project management skills, build confidence and capacity to work with immigrants, and exercise creativity and imagination through experimenting with humanities-centered public programs. The importance of empathetic understanding is a foundational principle strengthened through structured exercises

using Design Thinking and other user-oriented strategies. By applying these methods to design their own projects, cohort participants gain insight and awareness about the needs, interests, and concerns of the immigrant community or communities that are their focus. This process of learning and discovery is facilitated by peer mentors drawn from previous cohorts, and supported by experts and practitioners who share recommendations about community engagement, media relations, evaluation and other practical elements of programming. California Humanities provides each participating library with a cash grant to provide venture capital for program research and implementation expenses.

To date, over 70 libraries across the state have participated in the LIL program, engaging with immigrants and refugees from Afghanistan, Cambodia, China, El Salvador, Guatemala, India, Iran, Korea, Laos, Mexico, Palestine, Peru, the Philippines, Ukraine, and Vietnam, as well as other nationalities and cultural groups from the Middle East, Asia, and Latin America. The primary outputs of their work have been the unique projects developed by each library in response to the needs, interests, and circumstances of their community. These projects have employed many approaches to public humanities work. Various modes of storytelling and story-sharing, including zines and documentaries and spoken word performance have been common, along with participatory oral history projects, community talks with local immigrant business owners, open mic nights, podcasts, and dialogues and discussions anchored by films and books, interpretive art exhibits, presentations by scholars, authors, artists, and culture bearers, as well as experiential activities including workshops, guided walks, and interactive sessions focused on the artistry, culture, and histories of immigrant communities.

Over the span of seven years of the aforementioned innovative and forward-looking design that emerged from the various California library cohorts, it is significant to highlight that LIL has garnered recognition within the California library community from the California State Library, the California Library Association, and Califa, a

nonprofit library membership consortium of more than 200 libraries. With their assistance, and that of other supporters, California Humanities hopes to extend the program to other states in the near future. In 2020, the program was recognized with a Schwartz Prize, an annual award made by the

Federation of State Humanities Councils for outstanding work in public humanities.

Following is a glimpse into the experiences of four librarians who have participated in LIL as project directors and then as mentors for future cohorts.

FROM IDEAS TO IMPACT: A LIBRARIAN'S LIL JOURNEY

Michelle Gordon Hartman

I was honored to be a member of the original cohort of participants in the LIL that began shortly after the 2016 presidential election. At the time, I was the New Americans Librarian for Fresno County Public Library (FCPL)—a county library system for a large county in the Central Valley. Nearly a quarter of Fresno County's 1 million residents are immigrants. FCPL already had built a strong network of community and government organizations supporting new Americans in the Central Valley over several years. I was able to take the Design Thinking training we received at the inaugural LIL cohort meeting back to my community partners and work closely with them to come up with a plan on how to engage the immigrant communities while also building interest in the receiving communities in Fresno County.

We ran a series of storytelling programs offered in different formats. *California: The Journey* included a community pot-luck program, a visual artwork program, and a live storytelling program. This series of programs was entirely dependent on our patrons providing their stories through different formats and sharing them with other patrons—in the fall of 2017. It was important to us that participants and audience members were from both the immigrant communities in Fresno as well as members of the receiving communities in order for all participants and attendees to be able to gain a better understanding of issues new Americans may face. FCPL made it a priority that participants felt safe to share however much of their stories they felt comfortable sharing. These programs provided a way to deliver individual and humanized stories of new



Local artists contribute to The Art of the Journey—an art show about the immigrant experience and part of the 2017 California: The Journey series at Fresno County Public Library. Photograph by Michelle Gordon Hartman, Fresno County Public Library.

Americans in our communities. With help from several community organizations, we were able to provide the multiple formats so participants could choose how they shared their stories and how much of their stories they wanted to share.

These programs made me step way outside my comfort zone. I had no training or knowledge about art—but I successfully created an art show with works submitted by community members that touched on their stories about coming to California. I had never planned and organized a live Story Jam program at a local theater—but the event was a great success with over a dozen storytellers taking the stage. It was the training and the encouragement of the LIL cohort, and the community connections within the immigrant communities in Fresno County, that helped me forge ahead and create

successful programs. These programs allowed me to build on existing community connections and also to create new ones.

The programs were successful and unlike anything FCPL had done before. Story sharing participants reported that they were grateful the library was there to share their stories. They felt safe sharing their stories through the library. They felt better about their own stories having learned others had similar stories. Story receiving participants relayed to us that they learned more about some of the challenges new Americans face. They also said that they could see similarities of their own lives with the stories being shared. One audience member at the live Story Jam program reported that listening to the stories led her to recognize her own privilege.

The lessons and methods learned through the LIL contributed to years of programs and resources FCPL provided to our New American communities.

As a member of the first LIL cohort, I can look back and see that the grant program was itself a product of Design Thinking and community outreach. I was incredibly fortunate to be one of the first mentors for the program, too. Seeing the program work from the other side was continuously inspiring—seeing a new cohort convene at the beginning of the grant program, to help them stretch themselves and their program ideas, and then to see how far they journeyed by the conclusion of the program.

It can be difficult to keep the passion and drive sustained over multiple years—especially considering the past several years. It is my sincere hope that other humanities organizations can take the blueprint of the California Humanities' LIL program and help spread the passion and drive throughout other states. Humanities-based programming, especially centered on marginalized communities, can only strengthen those communities and bring understanding and good will.

WE ARE MORE SIMILAR THAN WE THINK

Guadalupe Gomez

The Anaheim Public Library participated in the LIL in 2018. We conducted a series of intergenerational programs from different cultures that would give the community a better understanding of barriers that immigrants have experienced and overcome. *Rompiendo Barreras / Breaking Barriers: Exploring New Ways of Engaging Immigrant Communities* hosted over sixty programs where participants explored different cultures and had the opportunity to learn and work together to develop an awareness and appreciation of cultural diversity in our community. Programs included family nights, cultural food demonstrations, and music programs. There were also a number of educational presentations like the Power of the Scarf, Day of the Dead, a showing of the documentary *Flight of the Refugees*, and a Cultural Market Place.

The City of Anaheim serves a diverse community, including a growing number of immigrants

from the Middle East, Asia, and Africa as well as Latin America. Approximately 61.5% of residents speak another language than English in the household. We chose to focus our work at two library branches that serve predominantly Hispanic immigrant residents. Haskett Branch Library's service area contains more than nine square miles and a population of over 68,000. School surveys reveal that parents in this area are predominantly low-income. West Anaheim has the largest percentage of apartment dwellers in Orange County. Ponderosa Joint-Use Library serves a population of 28,000, predominantly Hispanic residents in high-density apartments located in a freeway pocket south of Disneyland.

Using the Design Thinking process, we worked with the community and existing partners to gather information about community and library programming needs. The overwhelming response

was the need for intergenerational programs—families expressed the need for their children to learn and understand about their immigrant journeys. The community also shared the importance of others learning and appreciating the city’s cultural diversity.

One of our programs, *The Power of the Scarf*, focused on comparing and contrasting the cultural meanings and traditions of two iconic articles of female apparel—the hijab and the rebozo. The discussion revolved around sharing the many reasons women wear scarves and how powerful the scarf is in the Latino and Muslim communities. Participants actively engaged with one another after the event, listening and learning. The presentation allowed the immigrant community to celebrate its identity, heritage, roots, faith, and liberation.

When I repeatedly heard, “we are more similar than we think,” I knew that the project had been a success. When people feel welcome and understood, there is a feeling of belonging and acceptance. Many shared their immigrant experiences with each other, but more importantly with their children, many of whom were born in the United States. The majority of those children had never heard their parents’ experiences about how and why they came to the United States.

WE WANT MORE

Sonia Bautista

In 2019, the LIL provided the City of Commerce Public Library a grant to host programs that were specifically chosen to allow participants to understand, empathize, and experience different cultures and traditions within their own immigrant community. We chose to call the collection of programs: *My City, My Voice* to embody our community. An array of programs was developed to include musical performances, an oral history project, a traditional Loteria game with a craft, poetry readings, a Oaxacan food demonstration, and a tamale-making workshop.



In 2018, the Power of the Scarf program at the Haskett branch of Anaheim Public Library focused on the cultural meanings and traditions of the hijab and the rebozo. Photograph by Guadalupe Gomez, Anaheim Public Library.

The project allowed us to share stories, connect with communities, and engage immigrants. Staff developed a new appreciation of the community they serve, and cultivated new skills. Although the project ended, its impact continues to break down barriers. I experienced participating as a member of a cohort, then served as mentor for a couple of years. While helping others to find the connection in their communities, I continued to learn and discover the importance of humanities programs in libraries.

The City of Commerce is 95% Latino, and a high percentage of the population are immigrants or first generation American. This is a community that longs for their traditions away from their homeland. The LIL grant allowed the library to provide public humanities programs that were designed to engage the community and allow them to participate as a family. At the conclusion of the programs the number one comment received was “we want more!”

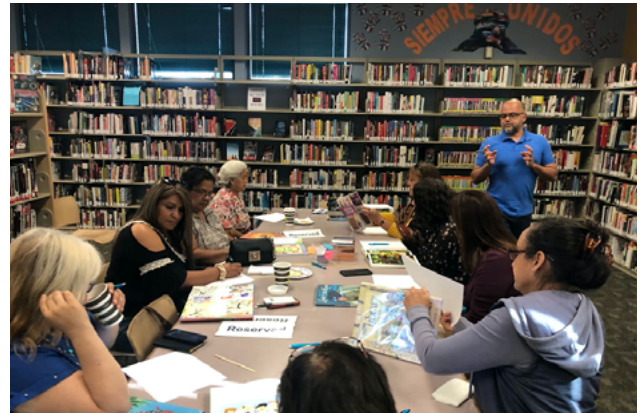
During the early stages of the LIL grant, we reached out to community members to learn about their needs and interests through a survey and

informal community conversations. Their feedback led us to realize they want to share stories of where they came from and would like to see that reflected in their community by having restaurants that serve their food, programs that talk about their culture, and opportunities to learn about their neighbors.

For this reason, Commerce Library decided to focus on programs that would meet the needs and wants of the community. The various programs we provided contributed to the enrichment of the community. The participants were able to engage, understand, and appreciate the diverse backgrounds of members of their own community.

The LIL provided a space not only for the community to come together but it gave staff the opportunity to engage with other librarians and library staff and foster a collaborative learning approach to promote programming for the immigrant community. The meetings during the grant period allowed librarians to develop new skills in program management, share experiences on best marketing methods to target the immigrant community, and have a safe environment to meet not only with the cohort but with individual mentors.

The grant not only guided me to reach out to the community but allowed me to sit back and really think about the reasons we host and provide library



Cultural Poetry Workshop presented by poet Juan Farias at City of Commerce Public Library, 2019. Photograph by Sonia Bautista, City of Commerce Public Library.

events. Our library tagline is “Create, Discover, Connect,” and this grant recreated a framework and made it easier for us to emphasize what we have always tried to convey.

I was fortunate to be able to participate as part of a cohort but also as a mentor. LIL gave me the opportunity to first receive valuable information and later share it with other California librarians and library staff as a mentor. I was privileged to lead LIL participants and witness the development of exceptional humanities-centered programming through this program.

THE POWER OF EMPATHY

Patricia Mallari

I had the great privilege of participating in the LIL cohort of 2021 as an adult reference librarian with the San Leandro Public Library (SLPL). San Leandro is a growing suburb nestled in the San Francisco Bay Area between Oakland and Hayward. With a population of over 90,000 residents, San Leandro is home to a growing and diverse community- 31% Caucasian, 36.1% Asian/Pacific Islander, 27.6% Hispanic/Latino, 10.3% African-American, and 0.9% Native American. It is important to consider that as of 2021, 36.1% of San Leandro residents were born outside of the country. In the midst of a pandemic,

where community engagement presented a magnified set of challenges and impediments, SLPL hosted a series of events focusing on engagement with different immigrant groups in the community just as the Bay Area was beginning to open up again. *(be)Longing: Woven into the Fabric of the Community* was a series of events that included a passive art exhibit featuring the textiles of El Salvador, a community culinary talk with a Salvadoran chef, cultural programs highlighting the local Filipino American community featuring a cultural dance performance, as well as a Health Talk with Mental



Mam (Indigenous Mayan) cultural festival, one of Oakland Public Library's 2018 series of events, Oakland MOSAIC, celebrating the diverse immigrant communities of this Bay Area city. Photograph by Erin Sanders, Oakland Public Library.

Health Specialists from the Tongan Community. We included dance performances and a Teen Zine Workshop with a Native American poet and activist whose focus was linguistic sovereignty, which resonated with youths whose first language was not English.

I came to the decision of engaging these specific communities after examining the San Leandro Unified School District and the U.S. Census data, which showed that Spanish is the language most spoken by non-English speaking households followed by Chinese and Tagalog. We found it important to reach different marginalized communities that we had not had the opportunity to engage prior to the pandemic. We have had previous success in engaging the Mexican community with our Dia de Los Muertos and Loteria nights, and the Chinese community with our annual Lunar New Year celebrations. Our research led us to provide programming targeting the Salvadoran community, the Filipino and Fil-American communities, and the Pacific Islander (Tongan and Samoan) communities.

Design Thinking paired with the power of empathy formed the basis of our program planning in the LIL. Due to the limited contact protocols caused by the circumstances of the pandemic, I was not at liberty to hold large group community conversations or even conduct surveys during my

empathizing. Instead, I was honored to have conversations and interviews with over 30 immigrants and professionals working with immigrants in the San Leandro community. More amazing was that many of the interviews lasted upwards of over 45-75 minutes, where each interviewee talked to me about what it feels like to be welcomed, and what they miss about their homelands, and what events they would like to attend. One interviewee from Israel even went on to request a second interview. The responses that emerged from these one-on-one interviews demonstrated a universal need--the need to tell your story, and be heard with respect and genuine interest. In a population that often goes unseen or unacknowledged, this ability to tell personal stories is empowering.

As demonstrated through the emphasis on empathizing with immigrant communities, California Humanities provides each cohort with a framework that first directly focuses on community needs, and then centers its objectives around those needs. Due to Design Thinking's emphasis on testing prototypes, LIL participants can look at their own programming with the lens of innovation and an emphasis on the expressed needs of the community. By focusing on the humanities aspect of our programs, we remove some of the pressure of statistics and attendance, are given the freedom to try new things, and turn more towards the heart of engagement in community experiences.

In practice, the programming from the 2021 LIL series continues to serve as a framework for my programming and for my colleagues in the SLPL library system. The networking skills that I built throughout the program allowed me to understand the importance of partnering with art groups as well as community nonprofit organizations. We created additional programming with other marginalized communities in mind as coworkers began to regularly use the model in my library system's concentrated efforts in outreach. As I complete my second year serving as a mentor for a new LIL cohort, I continue to be inspired by and learn from the cohort members as well as California Humanities staff members.

The LIL can be a refreshing and energizing way to delve into innovative program design—especially after multiple years of dealing with the pandemic in public libraries. Not only do participants learn how to create programs with Design Thinking, but the supportive and encouraging environment provided by California Humanities staff and the cohort mentors creates conditions for success in services as well as professional development. Cohort members inspire each other, offer different perspectives, encourage one another, and also serve as thought partners when designing their processes. Their strategies and spirit of innovation can and often do ripple out to other staff members at their own systems. The LIL program can often lead to community engagement with groups with which staff are not currently engaged. The framework learned in LIL also encourages thoughtful reflection as well as an iterative process which invites further surveying, and deeper experimentation and learning. The model learned through LIL can equate to perpetual innovation.

Once the momentum of the LIL grant project passes, the onus to continue programming the lands with library staff. Hopefully, after completing months of training, learning more about the community, and creating pathways with community partners, participants will stay motivated to continue creating programming with new prototypes, reiterations of models, and deeper learning of communities as they evolve. Budgeting future programs remains challenging, as well as fostering the commitments of stakeholders. ESL services and programming are developing in my library system, as we also work on a humanities-based approach when designing programs. Our library recently worked with focus groups in order to delve into community needs and public opinion in relation to our library and our services, which demonstrates a commitment towards community-centered planning. However, competition with technology-based programming and outreach challenges highlight the need for further work.

CULTIVATING CONNECTIONS

The results of this work are varied, as you saw from reading the accounts of some of the participating librarians, but some common elements stand out. First have been the outcomes for patrons and communities. LIL projects have empowered immigrants to represent themselves and their experiences—either directly, by sharing first-person stories and accounts, or as mediated through artistic and cultural forms. By providing opportunities for immigrants to celebrate, practice, and share their culture and heritage, LIL-supported programming has enabled immigrants to feel seen, heard, and valued. Connecting immigrants and other community members through programs that provide opportunities to listen and observe, as well as dialogue, exchange, and active participation, LIL projects have encouraged learning, understanding, and the growth of empathy, helping to improve community relations and foster more inclusive communities.

The outcomes for the participating library staff members (mostly, but not all, librarians) have also been significant. Over the past seven years, participants have reported how the program has increased their capacity and confidence to work effectively with immigrants and other underserved constituent groups; developing valuable skills in program development, management, and assessment; and provided opportunities to build and demonstrate leadership abilities. Many participants have earned promotions or garnered other forms of professional recognition. More than a few have called out how the program helped them renew their interest and commitment to the profession, enabling them to overcome feelings of burnout, and rediscover the joy that originally led them to work in libraries.

Participating libraries have also benefited, as LIL activities engage teams of staff and volunteers, and require support from administrators and external partners. In virtually all instances, participants report that their libraries developed new connections with immigrant communities that have

resulted in long-lasting relationships. By emphasizing the importance of engaging outside experts and resource providers, the program has encouraged libraries to strengthen ties with a host of community partners: immigrant organizations, social service providers, faith-based organizations, artists and arts and culture organizations, educational institutions, media outlets, and local businesses. All of these connections have helped to advance positive perceptions of libraries and widen appreciation for

the role they play in fostering welcoming communities in which everyone can feel at home. [PI](#)

REFERENCE

1. Cesar Alesi Perez, Marisol Cuellar Mejia, and Hans Johnson, "Immigrants In California," Fact Sheet, Public Policy Institute of California January 2023, <https://www.ppic.org/publication/immigrants-in-california/>

To learn more about the Library Innovation Lab program, come visit our session at PLA 2024 on April 4th at 2:00pm—Breaking Barriers: Engaging Immigrants and Building More Inclusive Communities. Check the conference app or placonference.org for room location.

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