

Pulseando con el difícil: Resourcing the Hispanic/Latino Program

by Déborah E. Ortiz-Rivera

ABSTRACT: Theological libraries are confronting the challenge of resourcing multilingual and long-distance programs. This essay focuses particularly on Hispanic/Latino programs in seminaries in the US, drawing from the history of advocacy from Hispanic/Latino scholars for systemic changes in theological libraries' approach to servicing these programs. Rather than focusing solely on how to find resources, the essay advocates for a comprehensive approach to serve the needs of Hispanic/Latino students at theological seminaries.

The title of this essay references Puerto Rican author Ana Lydia Vega's renowned 1994 essay, "Pulseando con el difícil," which employs a colloquial expression to describe Puerto Ricans' complex relationship with the mandated acquisition of English: *pulseando* (arm-wrestling) with *el difícil* (the difficult one) (see Delgado 2017). Vega deploys Puerto Rican slang to critique the assumed superiority of English over Spanish as the language of the academy and economic progress in general. It might sound strange to bring Vega's metaphor to a conversation about the challenges theological libraries are facing to resource their institutions' Hispanic/Latino programs, particularly with theological works in Spanish. Certainly, many seminaries have integrated programs aimed at students from other ethnically and linguistically diverse communities, but Hispanic/Latino programs continue to increase as part of institutional efforts to increase enrollment (Solís-Walker et al. 2023; Goitia-Padilla 2025). Some of these programs existed before the pandemic, which accelerated the adoption of distance-learning modalities, forcing theological libraries to expand the availability of electronic multilingual resources. But the complexities of Hispanic/Latinos in the US and the general landscape of theological academic publishing in Latin America might force libraries to rethink their approach to serving these programs. Thus, librarians are now the ones *pulseando* (arm-wrestling) with the difficult task of providing not just resources but instructions and reference to the students and faculty enrolled in the Hispanic/Latino programs.

This essay seeks to contextualize the present challenge of developing collections in Spanish within the historical advocacy of Latino/a theologians for library services that meet the needs of their students in seminaries in the US. Offering resources is just one dimension of how theological libraries can improve the overall quality of the seminary experience for Latino/a students and continue to make room for others in higher theological education.

In the late '80s and early '90s, Latino/a scholars and educators conducted surveys about the challenges Latino/a students and faculty were facing as a minoritized group in the seminaries accredited by the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) (The Hispanic Theological Initiative, 2017). Hernández, Davis, and Wilson (2002) published one of the most comprehensive studies about the situation of Latino/a students in graduate theological education which included questions about ease of access to library services and resources specialized in Hispanic and Latin American theologies. Later reports have continued to identify the difficulties Latino/a students face with accessing adequate library resources (Saxton, 2014; Hernández et al., 2016; Solís-Walker et al., 2023). While these studies

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highlighted library services as one of the many challenges Latino/a students encounter in seminary, they also provided a context for understanding that the problem goes beyond the availability of Spanish language resources in the catalog and electronic databases. The studies from the early '90s also led to the emergence of organizations such as The Hispanic Theological Initiative (HTI), The Hispanic Scholars Program (formerly known as The Hispanic Summer Scholars, HSP), The Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians of the United States (ACHTUS), and *La Asociación para la Educación Teológica Hispana* (AETH). These organizations have continued to advocate for improvements to the seminary and theological education of Latinos in the US.

HTI commissioned Martínez-Vázquez (2005) to lead an investigation of bibliographical records of theological works from Latin America available to Latino/a doctoral students at ATS accredited institutions. *The Latin American Bibliographical Project* included surveys and conversations with students and librarians finding “widespread ignorance concerning the availability and location of these materials” in theological libraries and calling it a “silencing of Latin American theological voices” (46). According to Martínez-Vázquez, even when advisors were receptive to their Latino/a students’ ideas for researching sources in Spanish, it was still difficult to find what was needed at the library. Martínez-Vázquez concluded his report providing librarians with a list of resources available in CD-ROMs and other websites of the time that could potentially help them to integrate new resources from Latin America.

Before theological libraries embraced electronic resources, Danielson (2011) attempted to map the Christian publishing sector in Latin America by providing suggestions of possible distributors and vendors across different countries. This commendable effort was in part overshadowed by his assumption that the Caribbean lacked a strong Protestant publishing industry. Even though works in translation were and still are prominent in the region, a closer look would have revealed the efforts of local denominations and other organizations to produce original content. Danielson compiled a strong list of options for librarians to consider when developing their Spanish collections, although most of the resources were Catholic. This project stands out for the inclusion of journals and websites (most of them no longer in service) dedicated to theological analysis in the Protestant and Catholic traditions.

Saxton (2014) opted to focus on what AETH was doing to serve the informational needs of Latino/a students enrolled at certificate programs sponsored by ATS schools. Here the conversation starts to shift from finding resources to the role of theological libraries in providing instruction, reference, and identifying a “core Latino collection” available online (25).

Some years later, Darke (2021) provided a brief but helpful account of the Christian publishing industry in Latin America, stressing two of the still prevalent issues among Spanish readers: the over-reliance on translated pop Christian resources, and the scarcity of original Protestant academic works. Local efforts continue to address this situation, which is compounded by the trends in the Latin American market related to the slow growth of ebooks on religion.

Meyers (2021) conducted his own research about the insufficient availability of multilingual resources in theological libraries across the US. Meyers blamed restrictive interlibrary loan policies as part of the problem to facilitate or expose students to the diversity of theological thought from around the world. His focus on institutional policies casts a wide net on issues such as budget cuts, lack of multilingual personnel, and policies preventing the implementation of new strategies. Meyers also raised concerns about cataloging practices that could obscure relevant resources. An example of this can be found in Ortiz-Rivera and Michael (2025) analysis of the items catalogued under the “Liberation Theology” subject heading at their library, finding a homogenization of titles from Latin

American and Latino/a authors from the US. Their project intended to distinguish works by Latino/a theologians in the US from the works of the first generation of theologians that had birthed the movement in the '80s. Instead, they found catalog entries missing critical information such as geographic, historical, and denominational details that could help users understand the context of the works.

The preceding literature review stresses both the insufficiency of resources in Spanish, the paucity of bilingual librarians, and the perceived academic and informational needs of Latino/a students. Since the late '80s, Latino/a scholars have been calling out seminaries for implementing Hispanic/Latino programs without adequately supporting their libraries with the budget and systems that could improve the effectiveness of such programs. While today we can find more library guides devoted to Hispanic American or Latin American theologies (see, for example, Boston College's Theology and Ministry, Princeton Theological Seminary's [Colección Latinoamericana](#), [Pitts Theology Library](#), [Boston University School of Theology Library](#)) there is still a need for more subject and bilingual librarians who can approach resourcing the Hispanic/Latino programs not as a *pulseo*, but as an expansion of the learning experience for all students and faculty. As Saxton (2014) stated over a decade ago, resources and instruction strengthen the overall quality of the curriculum. This issue is more relevant now that many seminaries have extended their certificate-level programs in Spanish in the hopes of moving Latino/a students to MDiv and DMin programs.

Since the '90s, AETH has been advocating for this type of integrated approach to library services for Hispanic Bible institutes (See Hernández et al., 2016). In 2023, with support from the Lilly Foundation, Inc., AETH partnered with Pitts Theology Library at the Candler School of Theology to launch a digital theological library for Hispanic Bible institutes in its certification program. [Biblioteca Digital Pitts](#) provides the institutes with access to a curated catalog of resources relevant to theological work and ministry from a Latino perspective in the US as well as a selection of works from Latin America and Spain. It also provides reference, library instruction, and other services to strengthen academic, theological, digital, and cultural fluency. The resources include other works in English or translations relevant to these programs.

Once again, the academic needs at the certificate level might be different from those at the doctoral level, but in each case, libraries can provide services tailored to their contexts. Conversations with the faculty and the different organizations supporting Latino education could guide our analysis of the priorities to be considered when acquiring resources. The lessons learned could also be applied to other multilingual programs.

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