

HYPERALLERGIC

INTERVIEWS

UCLA Study Holds Smithsonian Accountable for Better Institutional Latino Representation

A new study evaluates Latino representation across the institution. One of the authors, Chon Noriega, discusses the results and why they are indicative of a widespread problem in the art world.

Elisa Wouk Almino October 3, 2018

LATINO INCLUSION REPORT CARD

#	Grade	Recommendation
1	FAIL	ENSURE LATINO REPRESENTATION IN INSTITUTIONAL GOVERNANCE & EXECUTIVE RANKS
2	INCOMPLETE	ENSURE LATINO REPRESENTATION IN TOTAL WORKFORCE
3	PASS	CREATE NEW OFFICE TO ADDRESS 1994 TASK FORCE'S RECOMMENDATIONS

The UCLA study “Invisible No More” provided a report card for the Smithsonian Institution, evaluating whether they met the 10 recommendations laid out by the “Willful Neglect” report in 1994 (screenshot by the author from [“Invisible No More: An Evaluation of the Smithsonian Institution and Latino Representation”](#))

LOS ANGELES — On September 10, the Chicano Studies Research Center at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) released a report forcefully titled “[Invisible No More](#).” The study, carried out with the UCLA Latino Politics and Policy Initiative, evaluates current Latino representation at the Smithsonian Institution, which, as you might have gleaned from the title, is not looking so good.

“Invisible No More” is a followup to a study originally carried about by the Smithsonian in 1994, when the institution’s secretary, Robert McCormick Adams, appointed a task force to evaluate Latino representation across the world’s largest museum complex, including its collections, programming, leadership positions, and budget allocations. While Adams wasn’t too pleased with the study’s title —

“Willful Neglect” — he did not dispute its findings, which concluded that only 2.7% of employees at the institution were Latinos and none were in leadership or executive positions.

Chon Noriega, the director of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center and one of the authors of “Invisible No More,” describes the 1994 report as a “really groundbreaking effort.” It was one of the first things he became aware of when he became involved in the arts.

Yet, for all its good intentions, it would seem the study has fallen through the cracks. In 1996, a midterm report was carried out to evaluate the 10 recommendations laid out by “Willful Neglect,” concluding that no progress had been made. Since then, the Smithsonian has not addressed the report. “Invisible No More” may change this.

- 4 **FAIL** INITIATE PROCESS FOR NEW LATINO SMITHSONIAN MUSEUM
- 5 & 8 **PASS** PERMANENT LATINO PRESENCE IN THE COLLECTION & PROGRAMS OF SMITHSONIAN
- 6 **FAIL** ENSURE CORE FUNDING FOR NEW & EXISTING LATINO INITIATIVES

(screenshot by the author from “[Invisible No More: An Evaluation of the Smithsonian Institution and Latino Representation](#)”)

The updated study shares that the Latino workforce grew from 2.7% in 1994 to 10.1% in 2018. However, the authors find that this statistic does not keep pace with the growth of the Latino population, which has doubled to 17.8% of the total US population. It did find many more Latino curators and exhibitions of Latino art, as well as robust

programming around it. But only four Latinos have served in executive positions since 1994.

- 7 **FAIL** ESTABLISH AND ENFORCE ACCOUNTABILITY TO LATINO INITIATIVES
- 9 **FAIL** REQUEST GAO STUDY ON LATINO PARTICIPATION ACROSS SMITHSONIAN COMPONENTS
- 10 **FAIL** DEVELOP FIRM PLAN FOR LATINO INCLUSION IN THE SMITHSONIAN

According to “Invisible No More,” of the 10 recommendations laid out in “Willful Neglect,” two have been successfully met: the creation of an office to address the 1994 task force’s recommendations and the “permanent presence of Latino presence in

the collection and programs of the Smithsonian.” Among the recommendations not met is the creation of a Latino Smithsonian Museum. The Smithsonian has since issued a [statement](#) that says a museum is not up to them, but to Congress, and stresses that a permanent Latino Gallery is set to open at the National Museum of American History in 2021. The statement also provides some noteworthy updates, including a greater budget of \$2 million toward Latino initiatives. The UCLA team has since published [an update](#), though it has not significantly affected the original conclusions.



UCLA issued an update to its "Invisible No More" report that looks into changes in Latino executive and senior leadership between 2007 and 2016 (screenshot by the author from ["Invisible No More" update](#))

Days after "Invisible No More" was published, Senator Bob Menendez and US Representatives Ileana Ros-Lehtinen and José E. Serrano issued a [joint statement](#) that said the findings were "quite alarming, but come as no surprise ... the Smithsonian Institution has ignored many of its own recommendations to improve Latino inclusion and representation at all levels of the Institution." The statement calls on Congress to establish a Latino museum.

When speaking with Noriega, it seems his greatest concern is the Smithsonian Institution's lack of accountability. "You can talk about shifts and numbers, but how it happens on the ground level is different," he told me. "The language of diversity often talks past things. But it's important to be honest about where you are in the moment."

In our conversation below, Noriega expands on why a report like this is important for a massive museum complex like the Smithsonian, even if, in his words, it "is leading at the curatorial and programming level." In other words, "we also need to look at what more needs to be done."

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Elisa Wouk Almino: *How long had this UCLA study been in the works? What prompted it?*

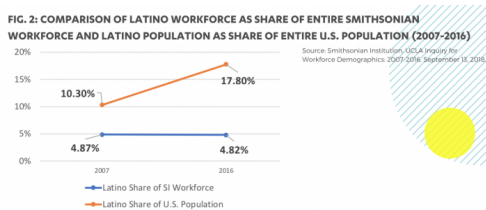
Chon Noriega: We did this fairly recently. We began discussing this in June. We began gathering all the publicly available information, submitted requests for information. The idea was assessing the progress relative to the 10 recommendations made by the report. We weren't trying to answer the issues surrounding that. It was just to say: the report laid this out, it was accepted and commissioned by the Smithsonian. There was a midterm evaluation that made clear that there was no progress. Twenty-four years later, there had never been an assessment to the follow-up to the report. Now is a good time. This is really pertinent.

EWA: *Do you think the period between 1994 and now would have been enough time to accomplish all the goals outlined in the original report?*

CN: Well, they weren't accomplished. Whether they could've been done is speculative. What struck me is it's very difficult to try to get a sense of that progress looking at what's publicly available. And that emerged as one of the important findings. We were able to put forward information as to where are we in terms of employment, leadership, governance. But the other takeaway is that it's really hard to find this out. It's not something that's there.

EWA: *During your research, you found that there was no comprehensive data on staff diversity. Were you surprised to see that there wasn't a lot of this data publicly available?*

CN: There is global information that is part of the annual report. The data is there. When we had some follow-up data provided, it was clear we had to disaggregate some of the employment figures to get an accurate sense of what is the Latino employment within the Smithsonian. This involved parsing the employment of the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute in Panama. When you group them in, it looks like you have 10% Latino employees. When you factor that out, it's closer to 5%, and it's remained fairly constant.



(screenshot by the author from "Invisible No More" update)

EWA: *Following the publication of the report, the Smithsonian issued a statement that shares new information, including that the institution actually allocates \$2.5 million to the Latino Center, not \$1 million. It also notes that "the Smithsonian Secretary and staff do not appoint individuals to the Board of Regents," Congress does. It also says*

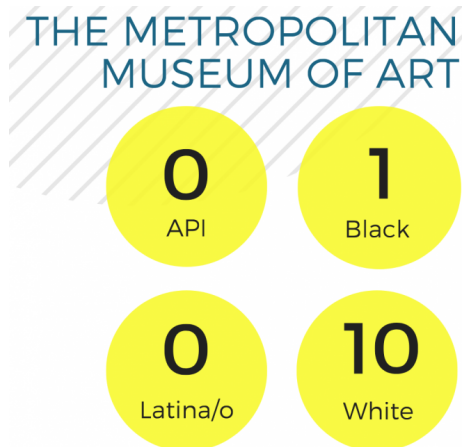
that it is up to Congress to request a "GAO study on Latino participation across Smithsonian components." Could you respond to this?

CN: We did release an update that reflects on some of that. We'll be doing an update in some of the areas. As a general response, one of the things the 1994 report was insistent on was accountability. They were calling for a lot of things, but underneath all that was a larger initiative: to call for more equitable participation and greater inclusion in exhibitions, programming. Everyone is accountable in the institution — it can't just be put in one corner. We have to have a clear sense of who's accountable. This is still an ongoing issue. The Smithsonian can respond and say it's not our responsibility, this rests over here, but that doesn't deal with the issue. The issue remains there.

When you're looking at publicly available data, there's a lag time — it only went up to 2016. Following that, the operating budget increased for the Latino Center from one to two million. What we pointed out in that original report is still valid. It's great that they increased the budget to two million. But if we're looking at a 24-year period, there was a flat line for 22 years. Part of what we're trying to do is look at this initiative in the context of the overall budget and overall Latino population.

EWA: *Do you think a Latino museum is the solution here?*

CN: The only solution is “both and.” If you're given five avenues and pick one, then you're not going to get a solution. The nature of diversity doesn't come down to one mechanism. That would be like saying my center at the university — one of four under the chancellor's office — was responsible for diversifying staff across campus. We can be impactful but responsibility is up higher. It is the responsibility of the institution to articulate that responsibility.



Source: Data collected from the Met "Leadership" webpage, metmuseum.org/about-the-met/leadership.

Data collected from the Metropolitan Museum of Art's leadership information (screenshot by the author from "[Invisible No More: An Evaluation of the Smithsonian Institution and Latino Representation](#)")

EWA: *In the introduction to the study, you write: "Latinos remain largely excluded from participation in arts and cultural institutions that tell the American story." Here you are referencing not only the Smithsonian, but presumably cultural institutions across the country. Could you elaborate a little and give a bigger picture of how this problem is manifesting?*

CN: We point this out at the end of the study with other examples. The Getty is a close comparison because it is a research institute; the Metropolitan is one of the largest museums in the world; and the Art Institute of Chicago is a museum but also a school. What's

happening here is comparable. This is a widespread problem across institutions, many of which are doing good work. But when you look at leadership and governance it's not reflected there.

This problem is indicative of a large problem in the arts world. There are a lot of things happening at the program level. It's more challenging within the institution itself.

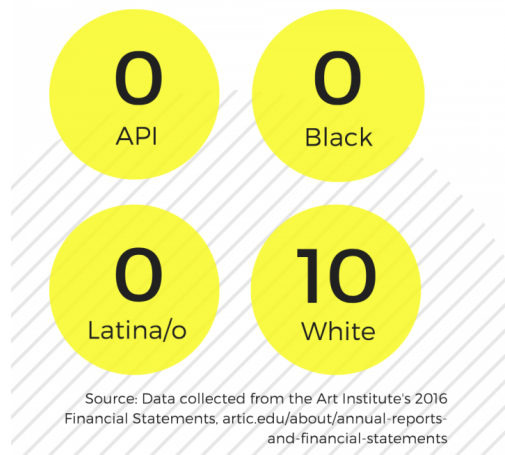
THE GETTY



Source: Data collected from The Getty "Officer and Directors" webpage. getty.edu/about/governance/officers.html

Data collected from the Getty's "Officer and Directors" page (screenshot by the author from ["Invisible No More: An Evaluation of the Smithsonian Institution and Latino Representation"](#))

THE CHICAGO ART INSTITUTE



Source: Data collected from the Art Institute's 2016 Financial Statements. artic.edu/about/annual-reports-and-financial-statements

Data collected from the Art Institute of Chicago's 2016 financial statements (screenshot by the author from ["Invisible No More: An Evaluation of the Smithsonian Institution and Latino Representation"](#))

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