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4-H Community Clubs and the Challenge of Inclusion: The Isleton Experience

Abstract

In California, where 54% of students in kindergarten through grade 12 are Latino, only 21% of 4-H community club members fit this demographic. Consequently, California 4-H is focused on developing Latino membership. This article describes lessons we learned while developing and delivering a project targeting inclusion of Latino youths in an established 4-H community club.

Keywords: [4-H](#), [Latino audiences](#), [program expansion](#), [community clubs](#), [inclusion](#)

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Introduction

The United States is becoming a minority-majority nation. By 2020, more than half of the nation's children are expected to be part of a minority race or ethnic group (Capital Public Radio, 2015; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012, 2015; Wazwaz, 2015). Many traditional youth-serving organizations, such as the 4-H youth development program (4-H YDP), were designed in a different age and have served predominantly White audiences (4-H National Council, 2017). Efforts to expand the 4-H program to new communities have been challenging, especially with regard to the traditional club program (Behnke & Kelly, 2011; McKee, Talbert, & Barkman, 2002). However, the future of 4-H depends on its ability to respond to the needs of the new demographic and culture of the nation (Fabregas Janeiro & Horrillo, 2017).

In California, 54% of students in kindergarten through grade 12 are Latino (Buenrostro, 2016), but in 2016, the Latino population was only 39% in the state's 4-H YDP and only 21% in 4-H community clubs (California State 4-H Office, 2016). Options for increasing Latino engagement in 4-H clubs include (a) initiating projects targeting the Latino population within established community clubs and (b) starting new clubs (community, afterschool, or special interest). This article describes the successes and challenges we encountered in our efforts to expand Latino participation in California's River Delta 4-H Community Club and identifies lessons we learned that may prove useful to others attempting such an endeavor.

The Isleton Experience

In spring 2016, we were focused on developing Latino membership in Sacramento County 4-H. Author Bird presented demographic data to community club leaders, discussed 4-H's challenge of growing and diversifying its

program, and offered support to clubs seeking to expand their reach. Leaders from River Delta 4-H Community Club expressed their desire to include new audiences in the club's membership.

Sacramento County has a large urban core, although many communities on the outskirts are still rural and largely agricultural. The River Delta 4-H Community Club is in such an area. In spring 2016, the club had 18 members enrolled in five projects: poultry, rabbit, lamb, swine, and cooking. We met with 4-H staff and the club leaders during summer 2016 to identify challenges and opportunities related to initiating a project targeting Latinos and then proceeded with recruitment and program implementation. On the whole, we developed a successful recruitment strategy for the Delta area but were unable to sustain the project due to lack of parent engagement and community buy-in. Our focus on delivering service circumvented an emphasis on recognizing and developing the assets within the community, a misstep that easily happens when serving marginalized groups (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993).

Recruitment

We identified the Catholic Church as an avenue for recruitment. The area has two parishes served by one priest. The club leaders contacted the priest, who suggested that the greatest need existed in Isleton, a small Delta community. He invited the club leaders to talk about 4-H after a bilingual Mass and offered the Isleton church as a meeting place. Because the church had both a garden and a kitchen, the club leadership decided to offer one project—healthy living, which incorporated both gardening and cooking. Author Fabregas Janeiro addressed the families after the bilingual Mass. Parents and children were invited to attend a meeting and register for 4-H the following Sunday. At that time, existing 4-H members and leaders were on hand to describe the program and give an overview of the project. The meeting was conducted in English and Spanish. Enrollment fees were waived as a gesture to welcome the new members.

Program Implementation

As a Spanish-speaking Latina residing in the Delta area, author Fabregas Janeiro volunteered to be the project leader. We made efforts to recruit volunteers from outside the Isleton community to assist with the project. We did not ask parents of the Latino youths involved in the program to assist, thinking that allowing them time to learn about 4-H and feel comfortable with the program would be the better approach. Only one new volunteer was recruited, and one of the community club leaders attended project meetings regularly, making a third volunteer.

The members met two Wednesdays each month, from 3:00 to 5:00, in the church hall. Most of the children walked to the meetings from their homes. At meetings, members were organized by age into three groups. Each volunteer led a different activity—cooking, gardening, or healthy living—and groups rotated through the three activities at each meeting. Members learned the 4-H pledge and made group agreements. After meetings, the project leaders debriefed and shared observations. They agreed that members were motivated to learn, as evidenced by their excitement, the questions they asked, and their engagement. At the end of the year, the members participated in the county fair with a wheelbarrow garden and won their first ribbon.

Successes and Challenges

Successes

The club enrolled 28 new members, aged 6 to 17, all Latino. This positive response shows that Latino communities are willing to participate in extracurricular activities. Organizers successfully identified and nurtured a community partner, the priest, who provided entre to the Latino audience and a familiar and safe meeting place.

Challenges

Youth attendance at the meetings was irregular. At every gathering new members joined the group or youths arrived late due to other commitments. The project leaders struggled with the broad range of ages and were not successful in developing teen leadership or age-appropriate activities for the older youths; thus their attendance dropped. The group in Isleton, a 20-min drive from where the community club met, never fully integrated into the larger River Delta Club. Latino youths did not attend the club Christmas party or any monthly meetings, which were held in the neighboring town.

Lessons Learned

Looking back, we recognize that our effort included some "rookie" mistakes. Some best practices for forming clubs—for instance, finding ways to encourage parental participation—were not considered. Further, we struggled with engaging older youths, working with mixed-aged groups, and addressing irregular meeting attendance. Although these are challenges for many 4-H clubs, our case was different. For parents and youths who are unfamiliar with the 4-H program and its benefits, there may not have been enough incentive to work through these issues in anticipation of future payoff.

Overall, however, we concluded that the Latino community is interested in providing developmental opportunities to their youths and that 4-H seems to be a good match for their needs. On the basis of our experience, we make the following recommendations for engaging Latino audiences:

- Identify and invite community leaders to engage in the process.
- Find a familiar, safe place to meet, ideally within walking distance of participants' homes or school.
- Involve a bilingual advocate to assist in engaging parents, who may not speak English even though their children most likely are proficient in the language.
- Understand that cultural openness and experience is important.
- Recognize parents as an asset, and find ways to encourage their participation and buy-in.
- Develop specific strategies that draw youths and parents into participation in the community club.

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