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4-H as a Catalyst to Enhance Quality of Life for Hispanic Individuals

Abstract

Improving the quality of life for all Americans by increasing economic opportunities is essential to maintaining a highly competitive agricultural system in a global economy. Because Hispanic individuals are one of the fastest growing groups of Americans, traditional youth development programs must begin to focus more on Hispanic youth development. This article outlines how 4-H Programs can serve as a catalyst to enhance quality of life for Hispanic youth and citizens in general.

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Introduction

With the 2012 presidential election complete, one issue that permeated political platforms was the awareness of the growing Hispanic population in the country. According to the latest Census reports, the Hispanic population has become the nation's largest ethnic/racial group, showing substantial increases in both workforce-eligible populations and elementary/secondary school-age youth (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). While many communities and organizations scramble to provide meaningful opportunities for this population, Extension has consistently examined ways to meet the challenge. Although previous programs have reported success in this endeavor, it is important that the profession—particularly the National 4-H youth organization—continues to make concentrated efforts to recruit and retain Hispanic American youth. Based upon the above-mentioned numbers, the National 4-H youth organization would be well served to manage effectively the career development, recruitment, and retention of Hispanic individuals.

Just as schools have begun to address educating the needs of a culturally diverse youth, so must 4-

H youth programs. As such, the purposes of this Commentary are to: (a) share the need for changes in the 4-H program to attract Hispanic youths; (b) discuss the shortage of human capital in agricultural careers and implications for Hispanic individuals; and (c) provide marketing strategies to increase the number of Hispanic youth in 4-H programs.

Need for Changes in the 4-H Program

The National 4-H Program has accepted the challenge to educate and prepare youth, and, as researchers have documented, the participation in such programs does enhance students' perception of agriculture and participation in 4-H (Lippert, 2009). Although this is the case, membership data indicates that 4-H programs are still not meeting the needs of the growing diverse population (Alston & Crutchfield, 2009; Bruyere & Salazar, 2010). Many people of color, including Hispanic youth, choose not to participate in 4-H because of the traditional image of the program and thus do not benefit from the program's positive outcomes. Yet many researchers are reporting that due to the increasing number of Hispanic youth, there must be concerted efforts to engage this population (Allen, Gudino, & Crawford, 2011; Behnke & Kelly, 2011).

Using appropriate outreach efforts may prove beneficial. Hence, the method of distributing information may need to be more targeted and specific to the audience of choice. A mass production and distribution of information will not work for all audiences, especially the Hispanic population, which often needs information in both Spanish and English (Baker & Chappelle, 2012). Specific targeted audiences gather information from different sources; therefore, 4-H program personnel need to use a variety of methods to reach and interest targeted audiences. Moreover, as the success of Extension depends on meeting the needs of its clientele, research on teaching underrepresented youth has advocated the use of culturally responsive teaching (i.e., recognizing the importance of one's culture in the teaching-learning process) as a strategy most effective in reaching youth of color (LaVergne, Jones, Larke, & Elbert, 2012).

In an effort to achieve and sustain diverse participation in agriculture-related disciplines, Extension and 4-H programs must target newer audiences who have not had a prior connection to the program. Marketing to someone who has fond memories of specific experiences is not difficult, but to build trust and respect with new clientele, Extension and 4-H must have a planned, organized, and controlled approach (Allen, Gudino, & Crawford, 2011). Using appropriate strategies and approaches, 4-H can be an effective catalyst to enhance youth's participation.

Shortage of Human Capital in Agricultural Careers

Human capital is the lifeblood of any organization, and the renewal, replacement, and sustaining of human capital is critical. In the last few decades, the agricultural industry has experienced a shortage of this vital element. A reason for this shortage has been attributed to the fact that many agriculture careers traditionally populated by White individuals are seeing fewer White individuals maintain these positions. With the historic low number of people of color already in agriculture careers coupled with the demographic increases of people of color, the need to enhance Hispanic individuals' participation is critical.

Youth organizations such as 4-H often serve as a catalyst to sustain human capital and increase

participation in agriculture-related fields. In partnership with land-grant universities and the national educational system, the 4-H program has called for a collaborative effort in providing multicultural programs to enhance the knowledge of and celebration for diversity and encourage full access, equity, and opportunities (National 4-H Fact Sheet, 2012).

Targeting specific diverse audiences has been a mandate for the 4-H and Youth Development Program since its desegregation in the 1960s, and efforts have been made to make educational programming available to everyone. However, although the 4-H program has been documented as a highly effective youth development organization with a successful record of educating youth, many youth, particularly Hispanic and African American youth, are choosing not to participate in the program; thus, they are not benefiting from the program's potentially positive outcomes.

Numerous researchers have made recommendations for targeting Hispanic audiences, which include demonstrating a commitment to providing critical information and access to services and programs (Behnke & Kelly, 2011), incorporating diverse staffing patterns within the organization, and offering opportunities for staff to learn the history, customs and strengths of the targeted audience (Allen, Gudino, & Crawford, 2011). The issues of language and cultural understanding are important considerations in that these issues often present a barrier to individuals who might be targeted to participate in youth development programs.

Perceived or real language and cultural barriers have been addressed in various ways, such as including bilingual children in program activities to help interpret for children lacking language skills and including bilingual aides. Presenting written materials in Spanish and English has also been effective (Farner, Cutz, Farner, Seibold, & Abuchar, 2006).

Marketing Strategies for Hispanic Audiences

Using appropriate outreach efforts may prove beneficial in diversifying participants in 4-H and in the agricultural industry. Establishing relationships with specific media outlets that are different significantly than what historically has been used will be a key to informing and relating to a diverse public. Targeting specific audiences should become easier as we gather more information about targeted audiences. Using the various media available to youth can be an efficient method to distribute information about youth development programming.

Previous research has provided evidence that advertising through television, radio, and newspaper provides some of the best sources of information to assist students in their career choices and that these channels may be very effective in getting the word out to youth (Center for the Advancement of Process Technology, 2005). The specific programming format of television and radio stations and the specific content of print media influence the public's viewing, listening, and reading habits, respectively. Therefore, such characteristics as individual music preference, visual media viewing practices, and print media reading habits become important considerations in deciding advertising strategies (Federal Communications Commission, 1999).

In a report highlighting the Hispanic American market, McQuarrie (2012) supported the abovementioned findings in suggesting that developing culturally relevant programs in media outlets (e.g., radio stations and newspapers) would be beneficial in marketing to Hispanic communities.

Implementing concepts of social marketing also can provide extensive, positive results in marketing the 4-H program to prospective clients (Weinreich, 2006). Additionally, partnerships need to be established with local entities such as grocery stores, government agencies, churches, and department stores frequented by Hispanic individuals so that Extension personnel may have visibility where youth can see, hear, and learn about the 4-H and Youth Development opportunities (Weinreich, 2006).

Conclusion

A need exists to increase the Hispanic representation in youth development programs. This increased participation can respond to the shortage in human capital in agriculture-related careers. Studies have shown that positive exposure to 4-H program activities leads to continued mutual benefits to participants and the program (Farner et.al, 2006). Therefore, determining effective strategies to expose targeted individuals to the 4-H program helps to achieve various objectives and goals critical to the survival, advancement, and prosperity of individuals and cultures, the United States, and the world. As 4-H participants gain important life skills and become leaders in their communities and careers, they can help ensure a positive outlook for our global society.

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