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South Carolina's Model for Initiating Hispanic 4-H Clubs

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South Carolina's Model for Initiating Hispanic 4-H Clubs

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Abstract: *Over the past 5 years, through the initiative of several county Extension agents, South Carolina 4-H has established a successful model for bringing Hispanic youth into our program. We have found the most effective method is to initiate contact and establish partnerships with the principals and ESOL instructors in the local schools. Through this collaboration, we have started several Hispanic 4-H clubs throughout the State with further expansion in process.*

Introduction

General information regarding factors to consider for the inclusion of Hispanic youth and adult volunteers in 4-H programs has been discussed (Hobbs, 2004). Likewise, an earlier *JOE* article outlined the structure of an initial attempt to create a 4-H Hispanic program in South Carolina (Lippert, 2009). In this article, we share with the 4-H community the specific, step-by-step process successfully implemented by several of our county Extension agents across South Carolina over the past 6 years. We hope it will answer some questions such as "Where and how do I start?" and

"What can I expect as I begin reaching out to the Hispanic community?"

The Key Ally: Schools

We have always started with the schools. Contact is made first with the principal followed by the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teacher(s). The response is typically positive because they know how extra, enriching activities will benefit their Hispanic students. It's also an easy "sell" to the schools because many people are already familiar with 4-H or have been members themselves. Unless the club meets during the school hours (integrated with the ESOL curriculum) or meets after school, often coinciding with an already established after-school program, the administration sometimes prefers that the club meet somewhere off the school property.

Overall, the main advantages of working through the schools are:

1. They already have the trust of the Hispanic parents.
2. They serve as proponents and communicators between the county Extension agent or volunteer and the Hispanic families. This is especially helpful if neither the agent nor the volunteer speaks Spanish. More than likely, the students can communicate in English, but the majority of the parents may be lacking in English skills.

We have seen the most enthusiastic enrollment and participation when the Hispanic students have their own club. Of course, other non-Hispanic ESOL students are included, and the club is open to anyone who wishes to participate. At least from our experience, the ESOL classes are by far predominately Hispanic. For many of these students, the only "special" activity they had previously experienced was ESOL classes. Based on our conversations with school counselors and ESOL instructors, we believe that when Hispanic students have their own club with a distinctly Hispanic character that includes their peers, it gives them a sense of security and positive cultural self-identity reinforcement. Subsequently, they will not be afraid to make mistakes speaking English. Once the Hispanic club is established, the club members can mix with non-Hispanics through regional, state, and national 4-H activities as well as their community projects. When the club reaches a certain level of stability, non-Hispanics can be more aggressively integrated into the club, if desired.

The major selling points for the Hispanic parents are that the club will provide the members with life skills and opportunities not offered in school, a way to serve and

integrate with the community and development of leadership skills. Especially appealing is the direct association of 4-H with a university.

In-School or After-School Clubs on School Property

This is the easiest way to conduct the clubs. Many times the ESOL instructor will serve as a volunteer with the assistance of parent volunteers and the county agent. The main advantages of the in-school or after-school clubs on school property are that the students are already present and school facilities can be used, e.g., a kitchen for snacks. The biggest problem of all is avoided, i.e., transportation. Many schools have after-school programs with buses running at a later time.

Club Meetings Off School Property

These kinds of clubs usually require an initial evening meeting to give the parents an orientation overview regarding 4-H programs and activities. It's best to have present a native speaker of Spanish or someone who speaks Spanish well to help everything flow and reinforce the confidence of the parents. The ESOL teacher should be present. Once the objectives of 4-H are explained, brainstorming can be done with the parents to establish the best day and time of the week to meet. Oregon State University (Hobbs, 2007) has produced an excellent introductory 4-H overview DVD with Hispanics speaking in Spanish. We have always shown this brief DVD during the parent orientations.

If the ESOL teacher agrees, announcements for the off-school-property meetings can be made through their classes via flyers or verbal announcements. To attract the parents to the initial orientation meeting, some schools have an automated "call out" in Spanish just for Hispanic families.

The ideal locations are "neutral" facilities such as the YMCA, library, community center, or the county Extension office. Church facilities are generally not a good idea because the club will tend to be associated as a youth group for that church. We have seen problems with this and have subsequently changed the venue.

Be prepared for several families to arrive from 10 minutes to about ½ hour late for every meeting. Even though there is a cultural aspect of time involved, often the tardiness is due to the limited availability of transportation or finding someone to drive, which has to be coordinated around work schedules. It's best to have icebreakers at the beginning and schedule the core activity to begin about 20 minutes into the meeting time. Certain age groups can be targeted to form the club members, such as middle school students, but their younger siblings (and sometimes

older siblings) will often accompany them to the meetings. From past experience, this is not a problem. Younger children join in whole-heartedly, and their older siblings act in parental roles to care for them. Plus, these younger children are in training to become the future "older" members and eventually club leaders.

In some areas, soccer is a huge draw if offered by the school or parks and recreation department, and subsequently, the 4-H attendance will drop significantly. This occurs in the spring in our state. Aside from the difficulty in communicating with the families to remind them of the up-coming activities and the transportation issues, summers are a great time to do activities with the club members because the students may be bored with nothing to do. In this case, if the addresses of all the members are collected, reminder letters can be sent in English, which will be understood by the 4-H members. Transportation options will need to be worked out before the school year ends. Our experience has shown that if the parents truly value what 4-H offers to their children, they will find a way to transport them via friends, relatives and creative carpooling.

Volunteers

It has been a challenge for us to find volunteer parents among the Hispanic families. This may be because:

1. The concept of volunteerism in their own country is not strongly promoted.
2. Many parents ask, "Why should my children interact with children from other families when he/she has his/her own family and cousins?"
3. They don't have the time due to their work schedule or family obligations.
4. They are limited with regard to transportation.
5. They are apprehensive because they never had the opportunity to be in a leadership role or in a situation to organize anything.

Often the agent will need to run the club until an appropriate volunteer can be found. It is easier for the Hispanic parents to volunteer once they see first-hand what 4-H is and how a club functions. Agents who run the club initially have the advantage of experiencing the issues involved in working with the Hispanic culture.

The security clearance requirement will be a huge deterrent for some Hispanic volunteers due to the non-legal status of many. In that case, they can help with the

club as a visitor as long as another "approved" adult is also present with the members.

Local colleges or institutions that offer Spanish classes are good prospective places to find 4-H volunteers because many times the students are retirees or non-working adults.

Choice of Activities

Our experience has shown that the majority of the students are not used to having "wide open" choices of activities. They are accustomed to being told what they are going to do with few options. It's best to have a list of options for activities and then let them choose. Otherwise, they may just draw a "blank."

The importance of including community service projects cannot be overemphasized. Reaching out to the community, whether by reading to younger children, visiting a nursing home, or making Valentine cards for the elderly, serves to enable the members to connect and integrate with the community and feel empowered. All of our S.C. Hispanic 4-H clubs have a strong community service component.

It is especially important to regularly send project reports and photos to the local English and Hispanic newspapers. These reports show the Hispanic students in a positive light, and, when the club members and their parents see the articles, it reinforces for them the importance of their involvement in the club and community.

The project materials for the students do not need to be in Spanish because many of them are becoming or are already comfortable with English. Additionally, providing them with materials in English reinforces the objectives of the ESOL program. A brochure or tri-fold in Spanish that gives a simple explanation about 4-H, however, will be helpful for first meetings with parents.

Summary

There is always some apprehension when jumping into a new venture like this, where there are undeniable cultural differences and language barriers. Once the parents and their children realize all the advantages that 4-H has to offer them—and it won't take long—you'll have their 100% commitment.

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