

8-1-2004

Latino Outreach Programs: Why They Need to Be Different

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Recommended Citation

Hobbs, B. B. (2004). Latino Outreach Programs: Why They Need to Be Different. *The Journal of Extension*, 42(4), Article 2. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol42/iss4/2>

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August 2004 // Volume 42 // Number 4 // Commentary // 4COM1



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Latino Outreach Programs: Why They Need to Be Different

Abstract

As Extension reaches out to first- and second-generation Latinos, changes must be made in the design and delivery of programs. These changes often cause concern among existing audiences and some staff who wonder about the need for them and their impact on programs and Extension's future. Part of the challenge of Extension outreach includes bringing concerned participants and staff along to understand the cultural characteristics of diverse community members and how these affect programming. New approaches do not mean the mission of Extension has changed; they mean that Extension is becoming more capable of serving all audiences.

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Introduction

Increasingly, Extension programs across the country are working to meet the needs and interests of Latino Americans. The rapid growth of the Latino population since 1990 has caused many counties that previously had little or no Latino representation to become home to significant numbers of Latino residents. Often Latinos represent a new audience for county Extension programs and one that is not readily integrated into existing programs.

To successfully engage Latino audiences, particularly first- and second-generation Latinos, programs must be culturally responsive; that is, they must reflect the cultural traditions, beliefs, and values of the people (Koss-Chioino & Vargas, 1999). When we do this, Latino participation increases dramatically. But the changes we make often cause concern among our traditional audiences and even some Extension staff. They question the need for these changes and to a certain extent feel threatened by them. Is Extension creating a new identity? What will be the cost to existing programs? For Extension staff, what new skills are needed?

As Extension seeks to diversify its audience, it must work to bring traditional audiences along. (Schauber & Castania, 2001). An important step in that process is to help them better understand the cultural characteristics of diverse community participants and how they relate to a nontraditional design and delivery of educational programs. Knowledge of cultural differences will help explain the need for change and will reassure existing audiences that the addition of new approaches does not mean the mission and goals of Extension are changing, only that Extension is becoming more capable of addressing the needs of a diverse population.

An Example of Change

The experience of the Oregon 4-H program provides a good example of what kinds of program modifications may be made in outreach programs targeted to Latinos. Although outreach 4-H programs share many of the characteristics of the traditional 4-H program (the same goals, delivery modes, member and leader application processes, use of the 4-H symbol and pledge, etc.) there are differences. These differences include the following:

- Spanish is often used in 4-H settings;
- New content is introduced, like soccer, mural painting, and traditional dance;

- Latino youth are usually enrolled in clubs that have predominantly Latino members;
- Volunteer training may be held separately; and
- Staff time is specifically dedicated to Latino support.

There is sound rationale for each of these practices.

Spanish or Bilingual Communication

Although Latinos overwhelmingly believe learning to speak English is key to success in the United States, many Latino adults, and some youth, have limited proficiency in English (Pew Hispanic Center, 2002; Tse, 2001). While youth quickly learn English in school, adults have less opportunity to gain English skills. They often work long hours and have irregular work schedules, and ESL classes either may not be available or only offer basic English instruction (Portes & Rumbaut, 1990). If Latino adults are going to be involved with 4-H as parents and/or as volunteers, it may well be necessary to communicate with them in Spanish, both in oral and written formats. Additionally, it also means that 4-H activities led by monolingual Spanish speakers will be delivered in Spanish.

There is another consideration that supports the use of Spanish. Language and culture are closely intertwined (LAB at Brown University, 2002). Even when Latino adults are fluent in English, they appreciate the respect for their culture that is conveyed when Spanish is used. The Spanish language affirms their culture; therefore, programs that support Latino families incorporate the Spanish language as warranted (Family Support America, 2003).

Nontraditional Projects and Program Delivery

In 4-H, youth and their leaders are able to explore any topic that sparks their curiosity and interest. While 4-H project areas found nationwide, such as foods, horticulture, and computer technology, appeal to many Latino youth, Latino members have also expressed an interest in nontraditional projects such as soccer and cultural dance. The latter project areas fall under the 4-H umbrella just as a new project in fishing or softball would.

The goal of 4-H is positive youth development through experiential learning, not mastery of particular subject matter. Including projects that affirm the Latino culture help Latino youth develop an understanding and acceptance of their ethnicity and thus contribute to the development of a positive self-concept (Phinney, 1997). It also addresses parents' desires that their children learn about and take pride in their culture.

Latino outreach programs may also introduce a family approach to program delivery. More than Euro-Americans, Latinos often participate in activities as a family (National Latino Children's Institute, 2003). Thus some 4-H programs may involve youth and adults in the same activities or there may be an adult component that occurs at the same time as the youth program (Bairstow, Berry, & Driscoll, 2002).

Predominantly Latino Club Membership

Initially, 4-H clubs that involve Latinos are largely made up of just Latino youth. This may lead some to conclude that there is a separate 4-H program for Latinos. There is not. The emergence of clubs that serve a majority of Latino youth is an expected outcome of outreach. Latino families often have limited understanding of the expectations of the majority culture, including the expectations of the 4-H program, and many have experienced discrimination in largely Euro-American settings (Pew Hispanic Center, 2002). They are uncertain how they will fit in, whether or not they will be accepted.

Therefore it is hard to bring families into the existing 4-H framework. They need to be in a supportive, comfortable environment that reflects their culture while they build understanding and skills that will allow them to successfully interact in the greater mainstream program (Cortes, 1999). As confidence and skills develop, youth and families should be encouraged to participate in other parts of the 4-H program that include members from across groups. The ultimate goal is the establishment of a fully inclusive county and state 4-H program.

Separate Training for Latino Volunteers

The lack of both fluency in English and a deep understanding of Euro-American culture make it necessary in many cases to provide separate training for Latino volunteers. Other contributing factors may include a lack of understanding of youth development organizations and the role of volunteers and low literacy levels in both English and Spanish. Volunteers may also need more support in completing paperwork. As a result, training for Latino volunteers may need to be conducted in Spanish, may require incorporating more demonstration and oral presentation as teaching methods, needs to be set within the cultural context of participants, and will require more information about the organization and how volunteers contribute.

Dedicated Staff Support

Gaining the involvement of Latino families in 4-H often takes dedicated staff time. Latino

involvement is premised on establishing personal relationships with Latino community members and developing a level of trust, two very time consuming tasks (Hobbs, 2000). Once Latino families are interested in 4-H, it is often necessary for staff to be very involved in program delivery. Before adults will volunteer, they have to see programs in action so they know 4-H is a worthwhile use of their family's time and so they will understand how they can contribute. Staff may deliver programs alone or, as time passes, they may co-teach with volunteers or otherwise provide them with direct support. Staff support is facilitated if staff members are bilingual/bicultural.

Conclusion

There are good reasons why Latino outreach programs may look different and be conducted separately. This does not make them less a part of the Extension program. They simply represent an expansion of the ways Extension uses to fulfill its mission. In the case of 4-H, for example, all 4-H members, whether Latino or not, belong to the same county and state 4-H programs and share equally the privilege of participating in 4-H activities or events.

As the United States increasingly becomes more multi-cultural, Extension must continue to expand its ability to serve people from culturally diverse groups. Extension staff as well as the audiences they serve must be ready to entertain new perspectives and new ways of doing.

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Discussion