

2-1-2002

## Using the Focus Group Process to Assess the Needs of a Growing Latino Population

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### Recommended Citation

Malek, F. (2002). Using the Focus Group Process to Assess the Needs of a Growing Latino Population. *The Journal of Extension*, 40(1), Article 24. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol40/iss1/24>

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## Using the Focus Group Process to Assess the Needs of a Growing Latino Population

### Abstract

Five focus groups were conducted in Manitowoc County, Wisconsin, to assess the needs of the local Latino population. The assessment was conducted to determine how Manitowoc County UW-Extension could assist Latinos in their efforts to effectively assimilate into their new communities. Making the focus group process culturally appropriate improves the likelihood of obtaining useful data.

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### Introduction

The Manitowoc County Latino population grew due to an acute labor shortage in local industries and on farms. Census data revealed a 131% growth in the population from 1990 through 2000 (UW-Extension & Applied Population Laboratory, 2000). The increased numbers prompted the Manitowoc County UW-Extension Family Living Educator to initiate a needs assessment. The information would identify and prioritize educational programs to assist Latino families in successfully assimilating into their new communities. No formalized assessment data concerning the needs of the Manitowoc County Latino population existed prior to the study.

The focus group interview was determined to be the most effective process for obtaining the needed data. In November and December of 2000, 50 Latino men and women came together to voice their opinion in five separate focus groups.

### Methodology and Content Themes

The focus group process was selected as the preferred assessment tool because it involved a comfortable approach to obtaining information directly from Latinos. The process is a non-directive means by which participants share information without feeling compelled or driven to answer specific questions (Krueger, 1994). After the process was determined, participants were selected for the focus groups.

Company human resource directors and dairy farmers recommended 50 participants for five separate, hour-long focus group sessions. They were able to identify 38 men and 12 women who were single, married, with or without children, of varied ages (ranged from 18 - 60 years of age), which provided a good cross-representation of Latino employees on worksites.

Four focus groups were held at companies in Manitowoc County, Wisconsin, where the employees worked. A fifth focus group was held at Silver Lake College, located in the county and centrally located for the dairy group participants. Employers were supportive of the project as demonstrated by their offering of on-site facilities for the sessions and/or their support of no salary interruptions when employees participated during business hours.

The selection of appropriate facilitators was critical to the success of the focus group process. Two Spanish-speaking Latino facilitators were hired, one male and one female, a Franciscan Sister. Involving a male facilitator was important because Hispanics regard the male as a dominant figure in their culture. Aside from being qualified to facilitate the groups, the nun represented the

Catholic religion. Many Latinos belong to the Catholic faith. Because the participants felt the facilitators were credible and trustworthy, there was a comfort level when sharing their ideas. The facilitators used five questions as their base for discussion in each focus group (Table 1). Responses to the questions were taped, hand recorded, and later transcribed into English.

**Table 1.**  
Questions Used in the Focus Group Process

1.	What would make your life and your family's life better?
2.	Which of the ideas you shared need the most urgent attention?
3.	Please suggest what you would like agencies to do differently to be of more assistance to Latino families. If you can, name the agency and what you would like them to do differently.
4.	What do you think you or your family could do to help accomplish the suggestions you have made.
5.	What would be your preferred way or your family's preferred way of learning about the issue(s) you have mentioned?

## Results

The data analysis process was led by the researcher and included both facilitators in an effort to accurately interpret the findings. A data analysis consultant reviewed the transcripts and provided a reporting structure for the data. After the information was translated into English, the material was divided into nine common trends and patterns. The trends reflecting the most frequently discussed topics throughout the five focus groups are found in a report titled, "The Latino Focus" (Malek, 2001) and include:

- Learning the English language
- Language issues related to the worksite
- Securing proper identification
- Securing a driver's license
- The need for translator assistance at hospitals and clinics
- The perception of racism
- Public transportation difficulties
- Housing issues
- Tax issues

The qualitative research revealed that Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs (Goble, 1970) is where UW-Extension and other county agencies need to begin their outreach efforts. Without having basic needs met, including the ability to communicate in an English-speaking community, it is difficult to address other concerns. The Manitowoc County UW-Extension office will need to engage new community partners into its educational programs, including the Department of Motor Vehicles, Police Department, Social Security office, hospitals and clinics, and public transportation, to address the designated needs.

Of interest in the study were the responses from participants in the dairy focus group. There was a consensus of support, appreciation, and trust that participants experienced with their dairy farm employers. Participants commented on the employer's willingness to learn Spanish and to share meals together. They were complimentary of the opportunity to be allowed to learn more than just the milking operation.

In a January 2001 newspaper interview, Amparo Baudhuin, an immigration counselor with the Diocese of Green Bay, reinforced this sentiment when she stated, "Dairymen are true pioneers in cultural relations. They have a small employee base. They work alongside their employees. The employers and the workers need each other" (A. Baudhuin, 2001). Discussions with dairy farm employers and their employees could provide a model for others interested in helping Latinos assimilate into the workplace and the community.

## Conclusion

"The Latino Focus" research will be a foundation from which Manitowoc County UW-Extension and community partners develop action plans to address the needs of the growing Latino population. The work of the 50 Latino participants who shared their concerns will have an impact on hundreds of other Latinos in the community as well as Latinos who will settle in Manitowoc County in the future.

"It is important to actively engage newcomers in community planning meetings and other key decision-making bodies. Together, old-timers and newcomers must forge a common vision and engineer the future of their communities" (Gouveia, 2000). Manitowoc County UW-Extension did just that. Not only did the focus groups help UW-Extension hear the voice of local Latinos, but also the focus groups provided an opportunity to unite local Latinos, companies, community agencies, and other educational institutions for a common purpose.

This model can be replicated for other cultures. Pre-planning to assure the process is culturally appropriate is key to the success of the assessment. Whether the focus groups are geared toward Hmong, Native American, or another culture, inviting people of that culture to participate in the planning and facilitation process will assist the researcher in obtaining useful data for that community.

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