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## Integrating the Latino Population in Extension and Community Youth Programs

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The United States is becoming culturally more diverse with the Hispanic/Latino population being the largest and fastest growing minority group (Pew Research Center, 2005). As this growth continues, there will be an increasing need for youth leaders and community leaders to provide culturally appropriate programming for families and youth. Currently, few youth become involved in community programs. Because much of the information and programming for Latinos is not culturally relevant, there is a need for research to be conducted within a cultural context to improve programming for the Latino population and thus, increase participation (DeMaria, 2005; Ooms & Wilson, 2004).

To gain a better understanding of how Latino families made choices regarding involvement in community and youth programs, 12 Latino parents who had at least one youth between the ages of 10 to 14, were interviewed. Half of the families had youth currently involved in community or youth programs and the other half did not. Their responses were recorded, transcribed and translated and grouped according to themes.

### Findings

We asked parents why their youth become involved in community programs. They identified four reasons. First, parents said they wanted to keep their youth out of trouble. One parent said, “[Latino parents] don’t want their children focused on other things like television. It’s better that they are involved in educational programs.” Second, parents said their children were involved in activities that the children enjoyed. A parent described the importance of enjoying the activities and feeling good about what they were

doing: “The important thing is that they like it and they participate and they feel good. It won’t do any good if I say I want them to do this. If they don’t like it, they aren’t going to feel good and they aren’t going to do it.”

In addition to wanting to keep their children out of trouble and finding activities the children enjoyed, the third reason parents involved their youth in various programs related to the desire for their children to gain valuable skills. Specifically, parents mentioned the importance of gaining social skills and being able to interact with other people. They also appreciated the academic skills gained through participation. One parent said: “Because my child didn’t like to read much [his mentor] taught him how to reach the goal of reading so many minutes every day. My child started to read, it helped him a lot.” Finally, parents appreciated opportunities for their children to be around adults they viewed as role models. One parent said: “I have liked the mentors that my children have had. I have liked that they spend time together, that they see each other, that they are with people who are studying, that they motivate my children to continue studying.” Another parent added: “[My son’s] mentor worried about him. He called the teacher at the school to see how he was doing, or to see what he was doing poorly in. He was always there for him. And that mentor helped him a lot, a lot, a lot (mucho, mucho, mucho).” As a final bonus to finding a good role model for their son or daughter, parents found that mentors who worked with their youth helped them gain good self-esteem pointing out “I think that someone always needs a mentor.”

When asked how to overcome barriers and appeal to Latino families to increase participation in community and youth development programs, the suggestions included some very basic approaches like

posting advertisements in both English and Spanish as well as posting in locations frequented by Latino families such as schools, large discount stores, Laundromats, and Latino-owned businesses. Overall, poor advertising and visibility of programming was a problem in informing these families: “Well, I didn’t know about you. You need to advertise yourselves more. For example, you can put fliers in the stores, because a lot of people don’t know.” Also, “We’ve heard about the mentors on TV but we don’t have information from you.” Other suggestions for improving participation in programs included extending personal invitations through phone calls or personal visit: “The children are more motivated when a person comes to the house for them and takes them. For me, of course, I would love for someone to come, but a call is fine.”

Families feel more welcome when they participate; they want to be in the loop for information, to feel included at activities, and to be accepted socially. They also want to be asked to share their skills and cultural knowledge.

## Summary of Conclusions

As a result of this study, Latinos included in this study indicated that the main reasons they choose to participate in youth development and/or community type programming is that they want their children to stay out of trouble, learn social skills, be successful in school and have fun while learning new skills. They also shared that they are more apt to participate in activities that involve the entire family and enjoy programs where there are adults viewed as mentors that provide positive behaviors for their children to model.

One important way that was identified to get Latinos to participate in programs was to extend personal invitations through phone calls or home visits. A one-to-one contact was seen as very important to Latinos.



4-H Cooking Club.

On the other hand, Latinos who were interviewed said that they do not participate in programs when they are not aware of available opportunities, if there are communication/language barriers or do not feel welcome in some other way into the community.

## Implications for Extension Programming

Taking into account the responses from the families who participated in this study, there are specific implications for Extension programming to be considered. Since families expressed an interest in being involved in programs if they were simply invited, it is a call to Extension professionals to reach out and if necessary get out of their comfort zone long enough to extend the invitation. Focusing more on the people and creating a relationship was more important than language skills to these families.

However, to make families aware of community opportunities, advertising should be done in both English and Spanish which may necessitate the hiring of a resource person to create fliers and news releases in Spanish. Programs should also be family friendly since most Latinos have a strong sense of family and wish to participate as a family. This is a good opportunity to invite families to be part of the program by asking them to share their culture, foods or other talents.

The common thread among all the interviews was that parents want their children to be successful. By providing opportunities for their youth to be successful socially and academically, the entire family is apt to become involved in offered programming.

## Final Observations

- Lack of Language Skills
  - Don’t let the lack of Spanish-speaking skills be a deterrent. Latinos are trying to learn English and will be patient with those not fluent in their primary language.
  - Attempts to learn some Spanish phrases and attempts to communicate even a little bit, you will be endearing to the Latino people.
  - Find someone who can speak the language and hire them!
- Know the Facts–Avoid Stereotyping
  - Most Latinos are very friendly and polite, but a bit shy.
  - They are trying, through their children, to be integrated into American society.
  - They want to be involved with other ethnicities and share cultures.

- They are hard-working and love their families.

## Top Recommendations

- Advertise and provide program information in Spanish—especially in locations frequented by Latinos (schools, Laundromats, Latino-owned businesses, etc.).
- Offer personal invitations to participate (phone calls or home visits).
- Help families feel welcome (include them in activities at the event).
- Invite parents to participate in their youth’s activities.
- Encourage parents to share their skills and cultural knowledge.

Bottom line: “If you invite the Latino community, then yes, we participate.”



**Youth and his mentor digging holes to plant trees at City Park**

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