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LEARNING FROM LATINO COMMUNITY EFFORTS

Recommendations for Working in Partnership with Latino Communities

A Guide for Public Agencies and Other Social Service Practitioners

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OVERVIEW

This publication is intended for staff of agencies, organizations, and others who desire to strengthen their partnerships with Latino communities. It speaks to issues that concern many public agencies and nonprofit, community-based organizations that wish to provide services or develop programs in local communities.

The recommendations presented here highlight the need to build relationships with the community, collaborate with its trusted leaders and organizations, and motivate resident participation by creating easy points of access into community involvement. Specific insights stem from a multiyear research project, “Learning from Latino Community Efforts,” conducted by a workgroup of the University of California Cooperative Extension (UCCE). County-based staff of the 4-H Youth Development Program initiated the research with assistance from campus-based faculty in Community Development at the University of California, Davis. The purpose was to determine why and under what circumstances Latinos in California do or do not become involved in community projects; why they stay involved; what they like and do not like about their involvement; and what advice they have for organizations interested in starting programs in Latino communities.

During the course of the project, bilingual interviewers spoke with a total of 101 Latino community residents in five California communities. After learning about the subjects’ personal experiences with community involvement, the interviewers asked respondents to make recommendations to organizations or agencies interested in working in Latino communities. This publication presents an analysis of those recommendations along with findings from other research reviewed for this project.

In each of the five communities studied, researchers chose a focal project by identifying one community-based program in which Latinos volunteer their time. Ten people from each project were interviewed as well as ten people in the same community who were not involved in the focal project. Three of the five cases involved volunteers with dance and cultural programs to benefit youth. This included a Mariachi



Locations of Learning from Latino Community Efforts Case Studies



music festival, a Mexican folkloric dance group, and a Brazilian rhythm and dance group. One case involved parents affiliated with a local, school-based Healthy Start program; the other engaged volunteers in a neighborhood council that sponsored community service activities.

Certain individuals in each community were identified as key advocates, or *promotoras* (see “Implication 2” below), to assist the research team in recruiting interviewers and subjects and in establishing credibility for the project in the community. The respondents included 85 women and 16 men. Of the 101 people interviewed, 90% were between 20 and 50 years of age, 64% had been born in Mexico, and only 24% had been both born and raised in the United States. The household income of 76% of the subjects was below the median for California families.

Participants in the study repeatedly voiced a common message: relationship building is essential. This finding implies that there must be a commitment of time on the part of individuals, organizations, and institutions. This essential investment

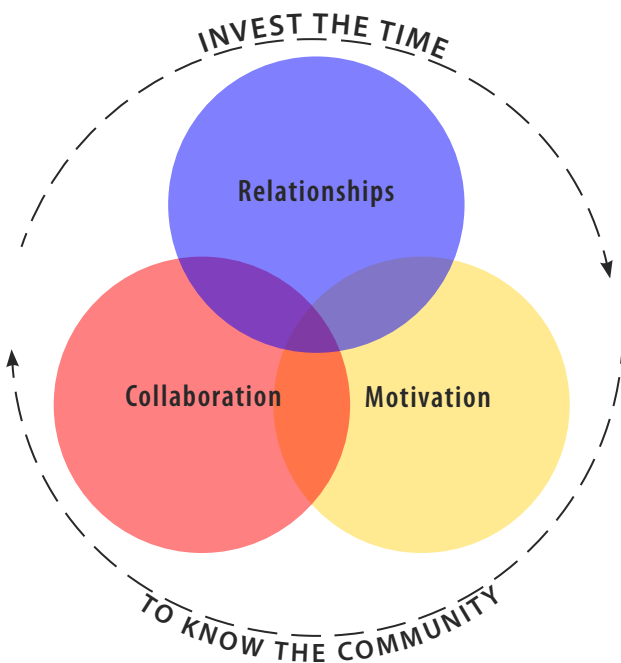
of time cannot be overstated. It is necessary for building initial relationships with the community, for developing ongoing collaborations with other entities, and for nurturing and sustaining the enthusiasm and commitment of participants. Finally, although this research was focused on Latino communities, its conclusions may well apply to other ethnic groups. More detailed information about the methods and

findings of the “Learning from Latino Community Efforts” project is available at the UC Youth, Families, and Communities Web site, <http://groups.ucanr.org/yfc>.

The diagram to the left illustrates the major implications of the research findings. It demonstrates the interdependence of building relationships, collaborating, and motivating, guided by the over-arching principle of amply investing time in getting to know the community.

IMPLICATION 1: Relate

Relationships come first; take the time to know the community and let its members know you. Work closely and consistently with residents to understand their concerns, issues, and desires. This means a reciprocal engagement with the Latino community, not a one-way attempt to sell a prepackaged program.



“Get them involved in the process. Don’t just come up with a program. Don’t just come up with an activity. You have an idea, yes, but solicit their ideas, their input.”

Key Research Findings

- When Latino residents were asked for their suggestions to organizations desiring to start new community programs, the most frequent response (N = 44) was: “Get community input and a broad base of support.”
- In reference to youth programs, respondents felt that involving parents in the community would be essential to success.
- Other advice included asking for ideas from youth, visiting homes, and inviting in people to discussions of proposed programs.
- Previous research (Hobbs 2001) also concludes that building relationships is critical to establishing credibility in the community. Nurturing relationships creates trust and a level of comfort that encourages community residents to help.

Program Recommendations

- Plan with the community, not for it. Entering a community and offering a pre-packaged program is not conducive to garnering community involvement.
- Build trust and rapport. This crucial task takes time and commitment. The need to invest time in becoming familiar with the community and in building relationships cannot be overstated.
- Encourage discussion from a broad base of support and involve youth in order to be more effective. Ideally, a group of adults and youth from the community would develop their own plan, drawing on locally based organizations that could put them in touch with resources and support to help carry out their project.

Sequence of Possible Action Steps

1. Identify existing organizations where community leaders are working.
2. Talk to these leaders and start to develop relationships.
3. Invite the community leaders to meet as a group to identify needs of community residents.
4. After needs are identified, investigate existing programs to meet needs.
5. Present needs and possible programs to an open community forum.
6. Bring group together after forum to customize a community program.
7. Present the revised community program in another open forum.
8. Make the open forums fun events where people network.
9. Have the group identify and recruit community residents for various roles in the program.

IMPLICATION 2: Collaborate

Don’t hold back; share your resources and learn what others have to offer. Collaborate with community groups and organizations that are strong in the Latino community. To be credible, information should come from sources the community understands and trusts. This involves familiar language, people, institutions, and media.

“It’s going to take a lot of public presentations. You go to the churches again, you go to the schools. You go to whatever sports activity...”

Key Research Findings

- When the participants of the focal projects were asked how they found out about the project, 66% said they heard from others involved in the project and through community groups.
- When the interviewees were asked about the best ways to publicize and promote a new program in the community, 57% suggested the local media used by residents and 48% recommended sending information via locally frequented businesses and in the schools, local agencies, and churches.
- Latino residents from all socioeconomic levels were found to be involved in their communities. The residents are most likely to be involved when they are invited by someone they know, trust, and respect.
- *Promotoras* are increasingly recognized as critical community resources that can provide informal counseling and appropriate cultural and linguistic mediation between community residents and human service systems and programs (Maurana and Siefer 2000).

Program Recommendations

- Make contacts in the community through schools, community leaders, agencies, city government, chambers of commerce, and churches.
- Find out what the community organizations are and discuss ways you might work together.
- Consider using a *promotora* model to build collaborative relationships with key community groups and organizations.
- Work with community groups and media to assist with promoting the program.

Tips for Working with *Promotoras*

A *promotora* (either male or female) is someone who lives in the community and who residents trust, listen to, and go to for advice. With or without compensation and regardless of their formal role (e.g., parent, health worker, recognized community leader), *promotoras* serve as advocates for the individual’s and the community’s needs. *Promotoras* have credibility with the members of the community and they can enhance your own credibility, making your program or activity more attractive to potential helpers and participants. Because of their language and cultural connections, *promotoras* have knowledge of and access to a variety of individuals and groups in the community.

- Consider the ways a *promotora* can assist your work with the community before recruiting someone to fill that role.
- Look for “natural” *promotoras*. Identify local residents who would be effective in this role. Do not focus your search on decision makers or people in high places, but on individuals who residents listen to and go to for advice.
- Those selected to serve as *promotoras* need to be culturally and linguistically competent in order to connect with the community members you hope to reach.
- Involve the *promotora* at the beginning in shaping program design and in recruiting residents or groups to provide you with advice and assistance.
- Provide the *promotora* with solid information on your purpose and the resources available to the community so that he or she can represent you honestly without generating unrealistic expectations.

“You need to work with people already connected in the community. You need people who understand the community’s needs. Groups like to plan things without asking the community for their input. That’s why a lot of people don’t join...It’s important to ask people to help.”

“You have to talk to them and bring them to the meetings. If they like it, then they stay.”

“...Tell my neighbor there’s a meeting...”

- Engage *promotoras* in the recruitment and management of residents who can help implement and participate in the program.
- Actively demonstrate that you are depending on the knowledge of community residents to inform your choices.
- Show the *promotora* the respect and recognition due a coworker and someone of value to the community.
- Allow and encourage *promotoras* to provide residents with crossover service information about other programs.
- Provide the *promotora* with opportunities for personal growth and development.
- Stipends or gifts for *promotoras* may or may not be appropriate, depending on the situation.

“I’ve gained a lot of confidence. I feel more secure. I think that somehow we’ve received various treatments, and here we talk about everything. They’ve helped us most of all to strengthen ourselves, not to listen to negative things, but to be positive at all times, and that helps us a lot in our self-confidence.”

IMPLICATION 3: Motivate

Make it inviting, beneficial, and easy for them, not for you! Emphasize the personal benefits of community programs to adults and their children. Design opportunities with easy entry points that allow adults to help without having to take on a prestructured role or a formal, long-term commitment.

Key Research Findings

- 76% of participants in this study cited personal benefit as the primary reason they got involved with the focal projects.
- 52% said they simply help where needed, mostly working on special community events.
- When asked what skills were needed to help, 54% said just a willingness and desire to help and 30% said no skills were needed.
- Many of the participants were more comfortable with informal methods of helping and did not find a need for specialized skills or formal training.
- A majority (66%) were invited informally to participate by individuals or groups already familiar to them.
- Participants in the study reported that community members were more willing to get involved if there was a specific event or task that needed to be accomplished rather than an ongoing commitment.
- Respondents liked the fact that participation was an opportunity for each person to help as much as she or he could in whatever needed to be done to help their community. People did not participate if it was difficult for them to get involved. 61% of the respondents felt that a lack of time or obligations to work and family were the reasons that some people did not get involved in community projects. For those with familial or job-related obligations, the ideal situations are ones that allow people to move in and out of experiences without feeling guilty about their level of participation.
- Certain individuals also attributed their noninvolvement to the fact that they had not been informed about the project, or that they felt intimidated by the prospect of becoming involved. Previous research (Hobbs 2000) finds that Latinos are interested in activities that provide a personal challenge, opportunities to learn skills and gain experience, an occasion to pass on traditions

“I help the same way the others do. In any way I can.”

“I like it because they allow you to be how you are. You don’t have to do what you don’t want to do, but what you like. You give your opinion, they make you feel like you’re worth a lot.”

“Asking people to do something that had specific tasks got them involved.”

to children, a chance to meet people, and the sense of pride that comes from making a worthwhile contribution.

- Adults are more likely to participate in community activities if their child is involved or if the activity involves the whole family (Safrit and Lopez 2001).

Program Recommendations

- Plan programs that provide benefits for family members.
- Organize programs and activities that allow family involvement.
- Stress a wide range of ways to invite people to come and help with a project or event.
- Rely as much as possible on informal invitations and requests by current members of the project.
- Develop a mentoring system by partnering new people who come to help with someone in the program they may know and who has experience with the program.
- Listen to what people want to do to help, then identify a task that best fits their needs. Matching jobs or roles with the individual interested in helping increases that person's opportunity to have a successful and enjoyable experience.
- Identify specific tasks that people can come in and accomplish in a specific amount of time, allowing them to feel successful and giving them the sense that they are making a contribution to their community.
- Develop a system where helpers can participate for a period of time, and then come and go from the program at later dates.
- If there is an approval process for people who want to help, make it simple and nonthreatening.
- Take into consideration the range of factors that might determine when and where community members can help, such as weather, work schedules, transportation availability, cultural practices, and family responsibilities. For example, someone may be able to do certain things in their home to help support the community but may not be able to come to a central location to do the work.
- Maintain a warm and nurturing environment in the community project or event, and allow helpers time to socialize and build relationships.

“I go when they need me. It depends what they or we are doing.”

SELF-ASSESSMENT GUIDE: ORGANIZATIONAL READINESS TO PARTNER WITH LATINO COMMUNITIES

Drawing on our research findings, the following questions have been designed to prompt your thinking about how ready your organization is to partner with Latino communities. It is intended to help you identify existing strengths and weaknesses and provide food for thought as you develop action steps toward greater cultural competency. Mark your organization’s readiness on the continuum below.

Issue	Does not exist 0	Need to improve 1	Average 2	Better than average 3	Ready 4
Relationships					
organizational experience in Latino communities					
relationships with leaders in the target community					
plan for involving community members of all ages in program determination and direction					
extent of staff time devoted to relationship building before initiation of planning process					
adequate resources or plan to address language and cultural barriers					
knowledge of local and/or cultural holiday celebrations					
knowledge of cultural values and customs that may shape program development					
Collaboration					
identification of key community contacts who can validate the program					
knowledge of current programs in the community					
ability and willingness to share resources, including staff time, funding, materials, etc.					
collaborative relationships with other organizations or agencies in the community					
plan for sustaining staff or organizational support for program and participants within the community					
Motivation and design					
organizational structure that allows individuals to participate in short-term support roles without making a long-term commitment to the program					
knowledge of effective media strategies for target community					
familiarity, contact, and relationships with local businesses frequented by target audience					
assessment of economic barriers that may limit participation					
opportunities for involvement of entire families and diverse ages					
opportunities for celebrations and recognition of group achievements					
understanding of the importance of interpersonal relationships and interactions prior to conducting organizational business					

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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Additional information about this project can be found at the UC Youth, Families, and Communities Web site, <http://groups.ucanr.org/yfc>.

The California Communities Program at the University of California, Davis Web site is <http://www.ccp.ucdavis.edu/>.

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