Journal of Extension
www.joe.org

SHARE

Learning from Latino Community Efforts

Abstract
The study described here documents interviews with 101 Latino adults identified as either participants or non-participants in specific activities in five California communities. Both groups were asked to recommend strategies for organizations that seek to provide programs for youth and families. Results indicate that the approach to recruiting adults needs to be reframed in ways that de-emphasize the traditional concept of a volunteer leader. Findings also indicate that there can be no short cuts to investing time in building relationships that create trust and a level of comfort essential to many residents for their participation.

Peggy Gregory
4-H Youth Development Advisor
University of California Cooperative Extension
Hanford, California
pfgregory@ucdavis.edu

Joe Camarillo
4-H Youth Development Advisor
University of California Cooperative Extension
Madera, California
jdcamarillo@ucdavis.edu

Dave Campbell
Director, California Communities Program
Human & Community Development
University of California
Davis, California
dave.c.campbell@ucdavis.edu

Steve Dasher
4-H Youth Development Advisor
University of California Cooperative Extension
San Diego, California
hsdasher@ucdavis.edu

Nicelma King
CE Specialist, Youth and Family Development
University of California
Davis, California
njking@ucdavis.edu

Michael Mann
4-H Youth Development Advisor, Retired
University of California Cooperative Extension
Costa Mesa, California

David Snell
4-H Youth Development Advisor
University of California Cooperative Extension
Fresno. California
desnell@ucdavis.edu

Carla M. Sousa
4-H Youth Development Advisor
University of California Cooperative Extension
Tulare, California
cmsousa@ucdavis.edu

Yvonne Steinbring
Family & Consumer Science Advisor, Retired
University of California Cooperative Extension
Yreka, California
yjsteinbring@ucdavis.edu

Kenneth Willmarth
4-H Youth Development Advisor
University of California Cooperative Extension
Modesto California
kmwillmarth@ucdavis.edu

Introduction

Youth-serving programs in the United States rely on the willingness of parents and other community members to serve as volunteer leaders, mentors, and teachers. This article concerns if and how this volunteer model can be adapted to the needs and interests of California's rapidly growing Latino community. Persons of Spanish-speaking origin from Mexico and various Central and South American countries comprise at least 32% of the state's population (2000 census), with some communities having Latino populations as high as 80%. Understanding the dynamics of Latino community involvement is a high priority for program development and delivery among youth-serving agencies.

The research project described here was initiated in response to the growing understanding among a set of 4-H Youth Development professionals that Anglo-centered approaches to recruiting volunteers were not working in the Latino community. Given substantial evidence that Latino residents are interested in and willing to be involved with efforts to improve community life, the difficulties are somewhat puzzling. A research team was formed to investigate alternative approaches. Their findings speak to how institutions and organizations serving all Californians can build on the rich history and deep caring about community among the state's Latino residents.

Specifically, we wanted to find out:

- Why and under what circumstances Latinos in California do or do not get involved in community projects;

- Why they stay involved;

- What they like and don't like about their involvement;

- Their perceptions of others' willingness to be involved; and

- Their advice to groups interested in starting new programs in Latino communities.

Literature Review

Established community service organizations across the nation need adult volunteers (Hobbs, 2001). As the state and nation become culturally and ethnically more diverse, administrators in service agencies and organizations have worked to expand the pool of non-white volunteers (Chambré, 1982). While some have speculated that volunteerism is less valued in Latino cultures, Kristin Goss (1999) notes that "Most evidence suggests that gender, race and marital status do not predict voluntary participation once the variables of education, income and employment are statistically controlled."

In her review of the literature on the recruitment, training, and retention of volunteers in youth serving organizations, Barbara Sitrin (2000) concludes that the existing research is scant and largely inconclusive, particularly regarding cultural differences. A recent study in Oregon (Hobbs, 2001) sought to bridge this gap by conducting three focus groups with 18 individuals (13 of whom were Latino) who were involved in working with Latino adult volunteers.

Results of this study indicate that while Latinos have a strong ethic of "helping out," their volunteer activities often take place in the context of family, neighborhood, and church, rather than in community-based organizations that serve a broader cross section of the community. Further, Hobbs found that the concept of volunteering brings with it significant baggage, since in many Latin-American countries it refers specifically to activities carried out by the wealthy on behalf of the poor. Thus, for many immigrants coming to the United States, volunteering is not part of their tradition, and once here, it tends to be associated with mainstream organizations with which they have weak connections.

The broader social science literature makes it clear that Latinos have a strong history of creating organizations to improve community conditions (Camarillo, 1991; Cortés, 1998; Gallegos & O'Neill, 1991; Santiestevan, 1975; Guzman, 1966; Tirado, 1970). Generally, the organizations they founded served multiple purposes--economic, social, cultural, and political--and started in response to immediate problems. Most were membership organizations in which a few charismatic leaders activated the help of members in what can be viewed as mutual aid societies rather than volunteer organizations. The question that concerns us is how this spirit of community service can best be tapped or channeled by youth serving agencies or organizations.

Methods

Recognizing the need to rethink traditional approaches, a University of California Cooperative Extension (UCCE) workgroup undertook a study to examine the voluntary participation of Latino adults in community activities benefiting youth and families. The group chose to learn from actual community cases in which Latino adults were involved on a voluntary basis. UCCE staff members throughout the state were requested to identify local programs in which Latino adults participated as volunteers.

Five case studies representing different parts of the state and centering on a community-based project were selected based on their success in involving Latinos, their willingness to be studied, and the commitment of the local UCCE staff to facilitate research. The projects selected represent a variety of settings and activities, and were all initiated or led by Latinos. For each case the nominating UCCE advisor agreed to serve as the local project coordinator; in only one case was the advisor personally involved with the operation of the project.

Three of the five cases involve adult volunteers with dance and cultural programs to benefit youth. One was a Mariachi festival, celebrating Mexican dance and music held in Orange County in urban southern California and involving residents of several communities. One was a youth Mexican folkloric dance group named "Sol Naciente" in the small community of Avenal in rural central California. And the third was a youth Brazilian rhythm and dance team named Bloco in the small town of Windsor in northern California.

Another case located in the City of Modesto in central California involved parents affiliated with a local school-based Healthy Start program, and the final program engaged volunteers in a neighborhood council that sponsored community service activities that include youth-related projects in urban Chula Vista near the Mexican border. All five proved to be useful cases for gathering evidence related to our research questions.

In each of the five case studies a bi-lingual "promotora" familiar with the local project and the community was identified. The use of promotoras (community liaisons) to validate and promote a new idea is familiar in Latino communities and used in a number of programs (Pramanik, 1998; Savinar, n.d.). The UCCE staff in each host county identified and recruited the promotoras, who were respected members of the community and involved in the projects being studied. Two were teachers, and the others were staff or volunteers of the projects.

The promotoras facilitated the research by briefing the research team on their assigned community, recruiting project participants to be interviewed, and helping to identify persons who had not been involved. In Avenal, for example, the promotora organized a mini-fiesta where the Sol Naciente dance group performed. After food

was served, the promotora introduced the interviewer to participating parents and helped set up interview appointments.

A bilingual interviewer was employed in each case to make appointments, conduct the interviews, prepare a transcript of the interview in English, and brief the research team on the experience. The interview protocols-- one for participants in the focal project, and one for persons who had not been involved--asked common questions regarding community volunteerism and solicited suggestions for groups interested in starting new programs. The protocols were piloted in a sixth community and revised after consultation with one of the promotoras.

In each community, we recruited 10 adults participating in the focal project and 10 adults not involved with that project. Participants identified friends and neighbors who did not participate in the project as potential non-participant respondents, and the promotoras assisted in identifying additional non-participants. At the end of the interviews, respondents were given a $10 gift card to a local store as a token of appreciation for their participation.

In all, 101 interviews were conducted, 50 with participants and 51 with non-participants. (One person had been identified inaccurately as a participant, so after that interview an additional participant was interviewed in order to have 10 participants for the sample.) Nearly 60 of the 101 interviews were conducted in Spanish. Table 1 summarizes demographic characteristics of those interviewed.

Table 1.
Demographic Profile of Respondents

	Total (N=101)
Gender	
Male	16
Female	85
Age Group	
< 20 years	1
20-35 years	44
36-50 years	46
> 50 years	10
Annual Household Income	
< $20,000	33

$20,000 to $35,000	29
$36,000 to $50,000	14
> $50,000	18
Missing	7
Years of Residence in the Community	
< 4 years	24
4 to 8 years	25
9 to 20 years	29
> 20 years	23
Number of Children Under 18	
None	19
1	17
2	31
3 or more	34
Duration of US Residence	
Born & raised outside of US	52
Born in one, raised in the other	25
Born & raised in US	24

Duration of Parents' US Residence	
Born & raised outside US	164
Born Mexico, raised partly in US	7
Born & raised in US	30
Missing, other	1

The research team analyzed data from each case separately, reading aloud the different answers to each open-ended question and agreeing on appropriate codes for that case. With each subsequent case, we added additional coding categories as appropriate, resolving any uncertainties through group discussion. Individual case reports were written, and two team members conducted a cross-case analysis after recoding all 101 interviews using a final revision of the codebook. As a further check on our work, we presented preliminary findings in two of the five communities; the resulting feedback affirmed our results.

Findings

Findings from Participant Interviews (N=50)

Best Things That Happened in the Local Project

More than half of the respondents (52%) mentioned benefits for children (e.g., children having fun, children learning new things, positive experience for children). Almost half (44%), identified personal benefits (learning new things, enjoyment of team work, meeting new people, feeling good to be involved, feeling useful), and 25% focused on being of service to the community. One-fourth of the respondents also mentioned the success of project events. Two-thirds of the respondents were totally positive, reporting no problems with the project. However, some participants wished more parents would help or that funding to support the program would continue or recognized that some problems were inevitable, but solvable.

How They Found Out About the Project

The most frequent ways participants had found out about the project were from others who were involved (33%), from the schools (27%) and from other community groups with which they were associated (33%). A few (9%) had heard about it from their children, who were interested in joining.

Why They Got Involved and Remained Involved

The single most frequent reason for getting involved was to be of service to the community (30%). More than three in four respondents cited personal benefits from participating (e.g., it looked interesting, to learn, need to be involved, enjoy being with others), and 29% mentioned benefits for their children (the child wanted to participate, or children need more opportunities for development).

Getting Others Involved

The interviewer asked whether it was hard to get others to help in the local projects. The 40 persons who had an opinion were pretty evenly divided. Twenty-one said it was hard mostly because people don't have time (71%), they are not interested (25%), or they have family responsibilities (14%). On the other hand, 19 said it was not hard to get others to help if they are familiar with the program and its reputation (79%) and if you ask them to do a specific job (14%).

What Skills It Takes to Help

More than half (54%) of the 46 persons who answered said that it takes only willingness, effort, and the desire to help, and 30% said no skills were needed. Nine persons cited people skills (good communication, teamwork) as desirable, and four others identified a particular skill like teaching, fundraising, or translation.

Findings from Interviews with Non-Participants (N=51)

Current or Previous Community Involvement

Two-thirds of the interviewees not involved in the local project were engaged in other community activities at some points in their lives. Only 17 had no history of community involvement. Of the 34 who had, 53% had been involved in church-related activities, 47% in child- or school-related activities, and 50% in other activities.

Reasons for Involvement

When the interviewer asked why they had become involved in their communities, 65% gave reasons related to personal benefits (they like to help, feel good and gain a sense of accomplishment, like to know what's going on, and make friends), and 11 said for their children.

Reasons for Not Getting Involved

Forty-one or 80% of the 51 non-participants interviewed gave reasons for why they were not involved in the particular project being studied in their community. The most frequent reason (54%) was lack of time, followed by lack of awareness of and information about opportunities (34%). Less frequently mentioned reasons included their need to take care of their families first (22%) and not knowing anyone who was involved (12%). Expected responses such as the cost of activities and lack of transportation were seldom mentioned.

What Would Motivate Them to Get Involved?

The interviewer asked non-participants what would motivate them to join with others on an activity in their communities. The most frequent theme in their responses was if it was a good cause that helped the community (28%), followed by if it benefits their children and families (26%) and if they had more information about it (19%).

Findings from All Subjects (N=101)

No significant differences were found in how the "participants" and "non-participants" in the local projects answered our common questions about community involvement. This section summarizes the combined responses.

Kinds of Activities People in Their Communities Like to Do

When asked what people in their communities liked to do, the only activity for which responses were similar across cases was sports (Table 2). The popularity of church-related activities and general youth-related activities varied across the case study sites. In one community, six of the 20 persons who responded to this question did not know what people in the community like to do. This was not surprising because it was a community with many recent arrivals to the United States.

Table 2.
Activities Respondents Identified as Things People in Their Communities Like to Do

Activity	N=95
Sports	56 (58.9%)
Church, church-related	31 (32.6%)

Youth-related (organizations, school activities, teen programs, after-school programs, etc)	28 (29.5%)
Special community events (holidays, parades, festivals, cultural events, civic events, etc.)	21 (22.1%)
Other	26 (27%)
Don't know	9 (9%)
Not much	3 (3%)
Percents and totals based on 95 valid cases; 6 respondents did not respond to this question.	

Why People in Their Communities Do Not Participate

At least half of the respondents in each case (61% total) said that lots of people did participate in the activities they had mentioned. The interviewer then asked why people did NOT participate (Table 3). Lack of time and lack of information were most frequently mentioned, but not by the same proportion of subjects in each case. The non-participant group mentioned the need for Spanish-language information and activities, and several said there was a lack of inclusivity in the community. The participants in the neighborhood council had made it their business to let other residents know about services and activities and had first-hand experience to support their belief that lack of information kept people from participating.

Table 3.
Reasons Respondents Believe People in Their Communities Do Not Participate

Reason	(Total N=96)
Lack of time	34 (35%)
Lack of information	28 (29%)
Work & family obligations	25 (26%)
Not interested	24 (25%)
Not familiar/comfortable	20 (21%)
Lack of money	13 (14%)

Other	16 (17%)
Don't know	6 (6%)
Percents and totals based on 96 valid cases; 5 were missing.	

Suggestions for Starting New Programs

The interviewer asked each person interviewed "to imagine that a group or organization wanted to work with people here on a program for children and their families. Knowing what you know about this community, what suggestions would you have?" Their answers fell into three major categories.

Community Contacts: One set of suggestions (56 persons) was to make contacts in the community. Overall, schools represent the most frequently mentioned point of contact, followed by community leaders and other agencies. Local government, civic organizations, and churches were among other contacts mentioned.

Table 4.
Suggestions for Starting New Programs by Community Contacts

Contacts Mentioned	Total (N=56)
Schools	24 (42.9%)
Community leaders	13 (23.2%)
Agencies (resource centers, health care, etc.)	12 (21.4%)
City Government	12 (21.4%)
Chamber of Commerce, other civic organizations	8 (14.3%)
Churches	7 (12.5%)
Parks & Recreation	3 (5.4%)
Mexican Consul	3 (5.4%)
Local Business	3 (5.4%)
School-community service projects	1 (1.8%)
Percents and totals based on 56 valid cases; 45 were missing.	

Involve the Community: Forty-four persons suggested some form of involving the community when starting a new program, and those who did were vocal about getting community input from a broad base of potential support.

Table 5.
Suggestions for Methods of Involving the Community in New Programs

Involvement Suggested	Total (N=44)
Get community input, broad base of support	18 (40.9%)
Get parents involved	13 (29.5%)
Get input from youth	8 (18.2%)
Invite people to discussions of proposed program	8 (18.2%)
Establish trust & rapport with community	6 (13.6%)
Visit homes	5 (11.4%)
Be sensitive to culture	4 (9.1%)
Plan **with** community, not **for** the community	4 (9.1%)
Form advisory group	4 (9.1%)
Percents and totals based on 44 valid respondents; 57 cases missing.	

Promotion/publicity: Suggestions for publicizing and promoting a new program were offered by 70 respondents. The most frequent form of publicity suggested was distributing information (orally and through flyers and other written forms--in Spanish and English) through schools, businesses, and other likely places for Latino interaction. Also frequently suggested were the media (radio, TV, newspapers) that Latinos were likely to listen to and/or view. Word of mouth is also important, and was frequently mentioned in connection with making contacts in the community.

Summary and Implications

Contrary to some speculation, we find significant evidence that people living in Latino communities are taking on significant volunteer roles in community projects beyond their homes and families. Significantly, even two-thirds of the persons identified as "non-participants" in the local projects we studied told us they were volunteering currently or had at some point in the past. The primary motivations of Latino participants appear

to be quite similar to those of other groups: to benefit their children, themselves, and the community.

It does not follow, however, that established youth-serving organizations can expect their traditional volunteer models to work well with Latino populations, particularly where those models depend on tightly defined roles or formal organizational structures. The majority of the local projects we studied engaged adult volunteers by creating multiple, flexible opportunities for individuals to participate in projects, "doing whatever needs to be done, when it needs to be done," as one of our respondents told us. Another noted, "We have different positions, but when it comes time to do the work we are all equal."

The term "leader" was seldom used by our respondents when discussing volunteers, but this does not mean that leadership is not being exercised. Our evidence suggests a more complicated reality in which volunteer leadership within Latino communities is most energized when it is organized collectively, as a set of tasks that everyone can pitch in to accomplish. "We are united as a group, working with one voice," said one respondent. By contrast, more formal structures that parcel out titles or roles to individual committee heads seem to engender less participation and more strife.

Our findings are consistent with what Hobbs (2000, 2001) found in Oregon. She noted that "Latinos do not think of their contributions as volunteering . . . 'Helping' others, on the other hand, was noted as being second nature to Latinos. It isn't viewed as something you do at a particular time, for a particular group."

These findings pose a challenge to the traditional volunteer models used by many youth-serving organizations, including Extension. The approach to recruiting adults needs to be reframed in ways that de-emphasize the traditional concept of a volunteer "leader" and instead structure multiple ways for adults to participate as helpers and to become part of a leadership team. Offering opportunities for new participants to assist with special events, be part of a small group of friends and family working together, or simply coming to observe and learn without a commitment may be more effective ways of promoting participation.

Building relationships is critical--with other organizations, with community leaders, with Latino families. Relationships are essential for establishing credibility in the community, and there are no short cuts to investing the time required to build those relationships. Nurturing a sense of connectedness creates trust and a level of comfort that encourage community residents to help. A focus on building relationships requires patience, but is a necessary first step in developing programs that are accepted in the Latino community and in which Latinos are likely to be involved. Specifically, our findings suggest that 4-H Youth Development personnel should:

- Work closely with residents to determine program needs, options, and design. This means reciprocal engagement with the Latino community, not trying to sell a pre-packaged program.

- Collaborate with community groups and organizations that are strong in the Latino community. To be credible, information about a new program should come from sources the community understands and trusts. This involves familiar language, people, institutions, and media.

- Emphasize personal benefits of community programs to adults and their children.

- Design programs with easy entry points and that allow adults to help without taking on a pre-structured role or a formal, long-term commitment.

- Consider using the "promotora" model to identify key community structures and leadership.

References

Camarillo, A. (1991). Mexican Americans and nonprofit organizations. In H.E. Gallegos & M. O'Neill (Eds.), *Hispanics and the nonprofit sector* (pp.15-32). New York: The Foundation Center.

Chambré, S. M.I, Odum, J., Brown, W., & Schwartz, F.S. (1982). Recruiting Black and Hispanic volunteers: A qualitative study of organizations' experiences, *Journal of Volunteer Administration*, 1 (1), 3-9.

Cortés, M. (1998). Counting Latino nonprofits: A new strategy for finding data. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 27(4), 437-458.

Gallegos, H.E., & O'Neill, M. (1991). Hispanics and the nonprofit sector. In H.E. Gallegos & M. O'Neill (Eds.), *Hispanics and the nonprofit sector* (pp 1-14). New York: The Foundation Center.

Goss, K.A. (1999). Volunteering and the long civic generation. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*,

28(4), 378-415.

Guzman, R. (1966). Politics and policies of the Mexican American community. In E. P. Dvorin & Arthur J. Misner (Eds.) California politics and policies: Original essays (pp 350, 367). Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Hobbs, B.B. (2000). Recruiting and supporting Latino volunteers. Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University.

Hobbs, B.B. (2001, August). Diversifying the volunteer base: Latinos and volunteerism. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 39(4). Available at: http://www.joe.org/joe/2001august/a1.html

Pramanik, P. (1998, Summer). Promotoras--breaking barriers of isolation. Border Community Development News. Center for Housing and Urban Development.

Santiestevan, H. (1975). A perspective on Mexican-American organizations. In G. Tyler (Ed.), *Mexican American tomorrow: educational & economic perspectives* (pp.164-202). Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press.

Savinar, R. (n.d.). California take on promotora model of community outreach a success. Proyecto Vision. Available at: http://www.proyectovision.net/english/news/13/promotoras.html

Sitrin, B. (2000, August). Recruitment, training, and retention of volunteers in youth-serving organizations: a review of the literature. (ERIC Microfilms ED451900). Working paper from Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago.

Tirado M.D. (1970). Mexican American political organization, the key to Chicano political power. *Chicano Journal of the Social Sciences and the Arts*, 1(1), 33-78.