

Effective Engagement with Latino Youths and Communities

Abstract

California's 4-H Youth Development Program adopted an asset-based and systematic community development approach to studying successful Latino-serving youth development programs. This effort included a scan of Latino engagement resources and Latino-serving youth development settings as well as key informant interviews. Beyond generating important data, the research process itself facilitated impactful Latino community outreach, relationship building, and engagement, suggesting multiple potential benefits to using a community development approach in research.

Keywords: [4-H youth development programs](#), [Latino youth engagement](#), [underrepresented youths](#)

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Introduction

In early 2017, Erbstein, Moncloa, Schwartz Olagundoye, Diaz-Carrasco, and Hill (2017) reported in this journal on three tools developed to facilitate the study of successful Latino-serving youth development programs: (a) Latino engagement resource chart, (b) Latino organizations/associations log, and (c) key informant interviews. We used these tools and applied an asset-based community development approach to our work, which foregrounded the importance of learning, developing reciprocal relationships, and building on untapped existing resources such as Latino-serving organizations and networks to collaboratively respond to needs. To launch this effort, we began learning about the formal and informal social and institutional landscape of the three communities that served as study sites. We did so by using a systematic approach that included conducting a scan of Latino engagement resources and Latino-serving youth development settings and performing key informant interviews. Our team hypothesized that this approach to our research might also support 4-H youth development program outreach—an important concern given the underrepresentation of Latino families in 4-H programming and the need to learn how to better serve the diversity of California's Latino population.

While using the three asset-based tools (Erbstein et al., 2017) to map the landscape of Latino youth

communities, we listened and learned about the strengths, needs, and challenges of Latino populations. We engaged in reciprocal sharing of information about our respective youth programs and continued to build relationships and trust. Six months later the impacts of these community mapping activities on our engagement with Latino families and communities began to emerge.

Outreach Outcomes

The asset-based community development orientation of our community mapping resulted in several outcomes: new knowledge of area Latino populations and places, new partnerships, and expanded Latino youth and family participation in 4-H programs. What follows is a description of our efforts in three California counties.

New Knowledge of Latino Populations and Places

During an iterative discovery process, we increased our knowledge of the spaces in which Latino populations engage. We developed relationships with people from Latino-serving organizations in which we practiced active listening and mutual learning (Martenson, Newman, & Zak, 2011). At some point during semistructured interviews with key informants, we were invited to participate in community events that facilitated our learning and engagement. These invitations offered important opportunities to begin to build or strengthen trust with local Latino communities.

In Merced and Riverside Counties, 4-H participated in traditional cultural festivals, such as Day of the Dead and Day of the Child. In Santa Clara County, 4-H staff participated in an art and technology cultural festival. At these events, 4-H was represented by staff, volunteers, and youths who engaged in mutual learning with Latino participants. Through these experiences, we learned that informal interactions during cultural events help strengthen relationships with the Latino community.

The community mapping process revealed the need for additional youth programs for the Latino population in all counties. 4-H staff in Merced and Riverside Counties learned that overall the demand for youth programs exceeds the supply. In Santa Clara County, 4-H staff learned that more than 150 organizations serve elementary school-aged children, but fewer than five organizations serve Latino adolescents.

New Partnerships

The interviews with key informants fostered trust building between local 4-H and Latino leaders and access to new partnerships and networks. After study interviews, key informants typically asked 4-H staff "get to know you" questions similar to the ones we asked them, followed by questions reflecting curiosity about what programs 4-H offered. Key informants introduced staff in Merced County to two new networks. 4-H staff were invited to attend "El Cafecito" meetings, events in which public and private organizations and community members come together to share resources and respond to issues identified by youths, parents, and families. Encouraged by another key informant, 4-H joined the Merced Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. As a result of this new partnership, 4-H hosted a mixer at the Cooperative Extension office. During this event, 4-H received official recognition from state government leaders for improving its capacity to serve Latino youths in the county.

In Riverside County, Extension professionals developed new partnerships and gained access to additional networks. To strengthen new relationships, 4-H staff invited key informants to attend professional development workshops offered at the Cooperative Extension office. In response, 4-H staff were invited to attend workshops offered by a health foundation and to collaborate on outreach and health education with two local networks. Participation in these networks led to an invitation to join additional networks focused on facilitating Latino youths' college and health care access.

In Santa Clara County, 4-H staff developed two new partnerships and strengthened an existing one. The two new partnerships resulted in the implementation of new 4-H out-of-school programs. An interview with the director of a regional afterschool network deepened a preexisting relationship with 4-H staff; this enhanced relationship in turn resulted in an invitation to join two science, technology, engineering, arts, and math networks composed of public and private organizations that support capacity building for afterschool program providers.

Expanded Latino Youth Participation

As a result of new partnerships, 4-H in Riverside County partnered with a Mexican government agency to implement a program that offers Mexican-origin children the opportunity to learn Mexican cultural traditions and art. In Santa Clara County, 4-H trained teens and staff to serve as teen science teachers in out-of-school programs. In both settings, new partners provided the space and funding to support activities and recruited volunteers. 4-H coordinated the implementation, trained volunteers, and provided educational materials.

Conclusion and Implications for Extension

A unique and systematic approach to conducting community mapping for a research project resulted in effective engagement with the Latino community. This approach can serve as a model for other Extension professionals who aim to increase their engagement with Latino communities. The relationship-building process evolved over a period of time, and trust building and reciprocity were key elements of new partnerships (Smalkoski, Axtell, Zimmer, & Noor, 2016). New programmatic partnerships were cocreated by Latino-serving organizations and 4-H staff-members, resulting in the engagement of Latino youths in 4-H programs.

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