

**Culturally Responsive Practice:
The Key to Engaging Latinos as Adult Volunteers**

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Abstract

To successfully engage volunteers from a culturally diverse audience, volunteer administrators must adopt a culturally responsive approach, that is, one that reflects an acknowledgement, appreciation, and acceptance of the differences associated with the culture. This article presents elements of culturally responsive volunteer practice based on the Oregon 4-H program's efforts to increase the involvement of Latino adults as 4-H volunteers.

Keywords:

volunteers, Latino, Hispanic, 4-H, culture, culturally responsive

Introduction

The changing cultural make-up of the United States requires that many volunteer-based organizations reassess their current volunteer administration practices, asking the question, Do our practices continue to serve us well in face of the increasing diversity of our communities (Rodriguez, 1997; Merrill, 2006)? Over the past ten years, the Oregon 4-H program through the 4-H Oregon Outreach Project, has mounted a targeted effort to increase the involvement of Latino youth and adult volunteers in 4-H. During that time, experience demonstrated that it is critical to employ culturally responsive practices if youth participation is to be gained and if Latino adults are to be successfully recruited as 4-H volunteers.

Culturally responsive practices may be defined as those practices that reflect acknowledgement, appreciation, and acceptance of the differences presented by a culture, including differences of cultural

traditions, beliefs, and values (Koss-Chioino & Vargas, 1999). It means moving beyond respect and acceptance of those differences to taking actions that capitalize on them (Klump & McNeir, 2005). In most cases this requires adjusting current practices or creating new practices.

As a result of its experience with Latino outreach, the Oregon 4-H program broadened its approach to volunteer administration to include new or modified strategies. This article is written to share elements of culturally responsive practice related to recruiting and supporting adult Latino 4-H volunteers, practices that were learned through the 4-H Oregon Outreach Project.

The 4-H Oregon Outreach Project is an effort undertaken to increase access to community-based programs for Latino youth and families and to increase the statewide capacity of 4-H to design and deliver such programs. The project began in 1997 with

Latino outreach programs in three counties, and today involves 4-H outreach programs in 13 of Oregon's 36 counties. Through local programs, Latino youth engage in 4-H clubs, camps, and after school programs in which they learn about subjects as varied as technology-based videography and pod casting, cultural dance, and stream restoration. Latino volunteers are recruited to lead many of the program activities.

Methods

At the end of its second year, the 4-H Oregon Outreach Project found that while its Latino youth membership had grown significantly, it had much less success in recruiting Latino adults as 4-H volunteers. It was apparent that a different approach to recruiting Latino volunteers was needed. Turning to the literature on volunteerism, little was found on this topic. Thus it was decided that an exploratory research study (Marshall & Rossman, 1995) was needed to provide the understanding that was required to better design volunteer recruitment practices.

This article reports the findings of a study based on focus groups conducted in 1999 and also provides examples of subsequent experience drawn from the 4-H Oregon Outreach Project in reference to those findings. The focus group study was conducted by the 4-H Oregon Outreach Project to learn more about the Latino culture as it relates to volunteerism and to identify practices that would encourage Latino adults to become volunteers in community-based organizations. A total of eighteen adults with experience in recruiting and working with Latino adult volunteers participated in three focus groups. Thirteen of the participants were Latino and five were Anglo. Sixteen were female, and two were male. Four key questions were used with the focus groups:

- How do Latino adults volunteer within their cultural community?
- What motivates Latino adults to volunteer?
- What factors hinder participation of Latino adults as volunteers in the greater community?
- What steps might mainstream organizations take to encourage the involvement of Latino adults as volunteers?

The focus group discussions were audio-taped and transcribed. The analysis and interpretation of the data proceeded inductively using a content analysis strategy whereby the data were organized and scrutinized through the development of a coding scheme and data displays (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Initially 20 patterns or themes were identified from the data. These were later subsumed into eight overriding themes. Conclusions were drawn and verified based on a preponderance of evidence.

The 1999 study provided a framework to guide the Project's work with current and potential Latino volunteers. Examples of how the findings were applied are included in the findings section to illustrate their impact on subsequent field practice.

It is important to note that the 4-H Oregon Outreach Project largely works with Latinos of the first or second generation whose country of origin is Mexico. Although much of the information shared here would be applicable in many Latino communities, the great variability that exists within any particular population, including Latinos, must be recognized. Knowing the community well is critical to choosing strategies for engaging Latino adults.

Findings

Helper vs Volunteer

The word *helper* as opposed to *volunteer* is more meaningful to the Latino audience. Describing the need for volunteers in a personal manner motivates participation. The focus groups revealed that the definition of volunteerism in Latin America, as in many other regions of the world, differs from that found in the United States. Traditionally in Latin America, it has referred to work carried out by churches or wealthy individuals, particularly women, on behalf of the poor. Latinos coming to the United States, who are often poor, do not see themselves as volunteers. Additionally, in the United States Latinos associate volunteers with mainstream organizations with which they have little or no connection. Thus being a volunteer isn't within the realm of the Latino experience.

What is characteristic of the Latino community is *helping*, first within the family and then within the church and the Latino community. One focus group member remarked, "Helping isn't so much a thing to do ... as it is, that's how we do it." Helping and caring occur spontaneously as needs arise. Whether it's giving time, money, or other resources, Latinos willingly volunteer to help family, friends, and other community members. Focus group participants recommended that outreach staff ask for helpers rather than volunteers.

Field staff also found it effective to describe the need for help through personal stories. When a group of Latino adults were asked to provide comment on a recruitment brochure written in the form of a novella, one woman responded, "This is my story. How did you know this?" Putting a face to an issue resonates with Latino audiences.

Connecting with the Community

The development of personal relationships and the establishment of trust are the foundation of work with Latino

communities. Throughout the focus groups' conversations, participants emphasized the importance of personal relationships and trust within the Latino community. They identified them as the foundation for everything that happens. Additionally they made the point that to establish a presence and build trust requires time and an unobtrusive, respectful approach. Strategies suggested by the focus groups and used by outreach staff to facilitate the process included the following.

- Be seen in the community (in restaurants, shops) and participate in events.
- Spend time learning about the community and the individuals within, understand the differences that exist and the cultural context.
- Enlist the support of elders, other community leaders (informal as well as formal), and community organizations that are respected by Latinos.
- Demonstrate respect for the Latino culture at all times.
- Be patient. Building relationships takes time and is an ongoing process.

While staff learned about the community, community members also learned about the staff and the organization. Latinos, like other potential volunteers, were found to want a volunteer experience that would help advance their children, the community in general, or their own skills. Education was one area of great concern within the community, and thus the educational opportunities presented by 4-H were emphasized by staff.

Talking about the organization's long-term commitment to the community was also very important. Focus group participants noted that many people have had the experience of placing trust in a program, only to have the program abruptly

end. They warned that potential volunteers may demonstrate a reluctance to accept a new program without the reassurance of a long-term commitment. Staff made certain to underscore the history of 4-H in local communities and the program's commitment to a long-term relationship with the Latino community.

Choosing Outreach Staff

The most important attribute of outreach staff is the ability to relate to and be accepted by the Latino audience. Project experience demonstrated that the most important characteristic of outreach personnel is that they be able to relate to the audience and earn the trust of the people they seek to engage. Additionally bilingual and bicultural skills were also seen as critical. Less important, however, was whether or not staff members were Latino. The project experienced Latino staff who were not successful and non-Latinos who were successful in being accepted by the Latino community. What made the difference was how well staff members were able to relate to the people.

Inviting Participation (Recruitment)

Successful recruitment of Latino volunteers depends on using strategies that take into account cultural characteristics, and provide information and support on an individual basis as needed. An important insight provided by the focus groups was the importance of inviting people to volunteer rather than simply announcing volunteers were needed. Inviting reflects a more personal approach; one that suggests the person is individually being hosted. Other recruitment strategies offered by the focus groups included the following.

- Extend personal invitations to volunteer through visits or phone calls. This may be done directly by the organization or with the help of

partners who have close ties with the Latino community. Project staff found most volunteers were recruited through personal visits. Flyers, posters, and other print information were used to supplement personal invitations, but they did not replace them.

- Utilize Spanish radio to issue invitations. It is very popular medium, one that conveys a certain amount of credibility to the information broadcasted. Although it was not as successful a strategy as personal visits, Spanish radio was successful in attracting a few volunteers.

- If a meeting is held for potential volunteers, expect the whole family to attend. Latinos are family oriented and often attend functions as a group. Outreach staff learned to prepare for family attendance, providing activities for children while parents attended a meeting. Staff also found it important that the male head of the household attend informational/recruitment meetings, as his endorsement was often needed if female family members were to become involved.

- Choose meeting spaces that are familiar to the people and where all will be comfortable. Don't assume, for instance, that the Catholic Church is the church all attend. Cultural centers and schools were most often used by project staff for community meetings.

- Make meetings social events. Social interaction is important within the Latino community. Allow time for people to visit. Offer beverages and/or food, music, and door prizes if funds allow.

- Be prepared to deliver information in Spanish if the people are Spanish speakers. Spanish-only speakers will participate more actively in a meeting conducted in Spanish rather than translated into Spanish. Those who are bilingual will appreciate the use of Spanish as an acknowledgement of their culture. There were times when project activities required that communication occur through English-Spanish translation. Although more time consuming and cumbersome, it did work to convey information.

- Talk to potential volunteers about how their skills and talents will make a difference in the community. Most Latinos are quite modest and feel they have nothing to offer as a volunteer, but upon discussion they can be helped to identify their talents and ways they can contribute. Staff worked individually with adults to learn of their interests and skills and to show them how they could make a valuable contribution.

- Initially recruit for short-term assignments. Within the Latino community, help is usually offered in response to immediate needs. Short-term assistance is a familiar pattern. Also, rather than wait for someone to step forward and volunteer, go to people and ask them directly to carry out a particular task.

- Simplify paperwork and explain why it is needed, who will read it, and how the information will be used. Many Latinos are unfamiliar with and intimidated by filling out forms. Staff found it helpful to go through the forms with volunteers, having them complete the forms section by section.

- Don't become discouraged by limited response. Keep asking. All focus group participants and outreach project staff struggled to recruit Latino adult volunteers.

Supporting Volunteers

As with strategies for recruitment, focus groups noted that the support provided to volunteers must take into account their daily life experience and the influence of culture. They stressed that organizations must take steps to make the environment welcoming, to address personal needs that might keep the volunteers from carrying out their responsibilities, and to help volunteers gain any needed knowledge and skills. Specifically they recommended the following steps.

To create a welcoming environment:

- Be sure to greet volunteers when they arrive to help and thank them when they depart. Find time to visit with volunteers on a regular basis. This is especially important for volunteers working independently. Continue to build and reinforce personal relationships through social interaction.

- Offer food, even if it is only a beverage, at all meetings. Extending hospitality increases the volunteers' feelings of acceptance.

- Create a multi-cultural office/program environment by displaying a mix of artifacts, posters, and written language. Someone who speaks Spanish always should be available to talk with Spanish speakers. Extension 4-H offices struggled with the latter. If front office personnel were not fluent in Spanish, most offices had one or more persons trained to tell the caller/visitor in Spanish how to reach outreach staff.

- Review program policies and practices to identify any that might discourage Latino participation. For instance, Latino culture stresses cooperative rather than independent work styles. Are there opportunities to volunteer as part of a team? Make any needed changes and inform all current volunteers of the changes and why they are being made.

To help with personal challenges:

- Be prepared to provide child care as needed. Parents usually prefer to bring their children with them wherever they go. 4-H activities for children, held concurrently with volunteer meetings, was one way programs addressed child care needs.
- Be prepared to help with transportation. Many families have only one car, and it may not be available when the volunteer needs it. Programs arranged car pools or had staff pick up participants as ways to overcome transportation barriers.
- Avoid out-of-pocket expenses. Many families struggle economically.
- Take into consideration work schedules when planning meetings for volunteers and scheduling volunteer hours. Often adults work long hours with little flexibility for schedule changes. Indeed, project staff reported the need to work as a major barrier for those who wanted to volunteer.

To improve skills:

- Provide quality training that builds on the knowledge and experience of volunteers. Be specific about what volunteers are asked to do and how to do it. Recognize that many prefer to learn through listening, demonstration, and group

interaction rather than by reading handouts. Most project staff found it best to provide separate training for those volunteers who had limited English language skills, low literacy levels, or a minimal understanding of the organization and its programs. Providing a separate training offered protected space for volunteers to gain knowledge and skills and encouraged them to persist.

- Consider a mentoring approach to training. Staff found that initially adults readily agreed to help, but many actually followed through only if the person perceived as *in charge* was present. A mentoring approach between a staff member and a volunteer was one way staff helped volunteers build confidence in their skills and ability to work with youth independent of staff.

- Involve volunteers in planning as well as carrying out plans. The experience will build additional skills and help them feel part of the organizational team. Also, it was observed by staff that in instances where volunteers came up with an idea or a plan for an activity, they went on to mobilize additional support in the community. As a result, far more people turned out to volunteer than would have otherwise.

Recognizing Volunteers

Some typical recognition strategies may not be the most appropriate for Latino volunteers. Volunteer recognition is an essential component of good volunteer administration practice, and it can be carried out in many ways. One focus group member pointed out that for some Latinos, individual recognition in front of a large group would create an awkward situation. In the Mexican

culture people tend to be quite modest and want to minimize individual attention. She recommended that before choosing this option, staff members ask the volunteers if they will be comfortable before a large group. Otherwise, many less dramatic ways can convey heartfelt thanks. Project sites provided framed certificates or plaques and found ways to convey thanks in day-to-day interactions. Small celebrations for volunteers and their families (picnic, camping trip) were especially meaningful. Other forms of recognition cited by focus group participants included providing opportunities for additional training and moving a volunteer to a position of greater responsibility.

Discussion and Implications

Latino adults are a significant source of potential volunteers in a time when the Latino population is increasing rapidly and in a time when it is a constant challenge to find volunteers generally. To tap this resource, organizations need to critically assess their current volunteer practices and make adjustments to create an inviting environment, one that reflects the cultural background and experience of Latino adults. The findings presented above detail some of the specific strategies that may be used in recruiting and supporting Latino volunteers. They also suggest three topics that need consideration before recruitment begins: the amount of time needed to recruit Latino adult volunteers, the cultural competency of staff who will recruit and support Latino volunteers, and ways the organization can create a supportive organizational environment for the new volunteers.

Time Commitment

The organization must make a long-term commitment to Latino outreach. The relationships and trust that need to be

developed before Latinos will engage with the organization cannot be hurried. Rather, they require time for potential volunteers to get to know staff, to understand the goals of the organization, and to learn what difference a volunteer's efforts will make. Latino adults must also be convinced that the organization intends to have a presence in the Latino community for the long term. Initially, recruitment may go very slowly, but over time with consistent effort, the Latino volunteer base will build.

Staff Competency

The focus groups and project experience identified bilingual and bicultural skills as key characteristics of staff working to recruit and support Latino volunteers. An additional benefit is generated if staff are members of the local Latino community. Above all else, the ability of staff to relate to Latino adults and be accepted by them is critical. When deciding to target Latino adults as volunteers, the organization must assess the competency of existing staff to do so. If the needed competencies are lacking, training should be made available or additional staff hired.

When hiring for Latino outreach, include the voice of the local Latino community in the selection process. To invite applications for the position, networks that provide access to the Latino community must be used. These include Spanish language newspapers, Spanish radio, and talking with community leaders and with organizations that serve the Latino community. Often candidates are best reached by word of mouth.

Supportive Environment

Just as recruiting Latino volunteers requires an understanding of the Latino culture and the local Latino community and

a willingness to reflect that understanding in practice, so does retaining the involvement of volunteers. Volunteers will not persist if they do not feel comfortable. Organizations must look at current practices in light of what we know about creating supportive environments for Latinos and take quick action as needed. One area that should not be overlooked is helping non-Latino volunteers to understand any organizational changes in policies and practices that are made and the reasons for them. If the organization has a long tradition of standard practices, changes can be difficult for current volunteers to willingly accept (Schauber & Castania, 2001), spurring resentment of newcomers for whom the changes are made.

Generalization of Findings

Throughout this article the information shared has been based on research and experience with Latinos whose country of origin is predominantly Mexico and who are of first or second generations. While this information may be used with Latinos of different origins, generalization of the findings should always be considered in light of the specific information known about an individual or group.

Conclusions

Gaining the participation of Latino volunteers increases the overall volunteer base. In turn, it strengthens programs the organization provides, expands the audience programs reach, and provides a personal growth experience for all volunteers and staff. The success of efforts to recruit and support Latino volunteers depends on awareness of and sensitivity to the cultural differences that will be introduced and how willing the organization is to accommodate those differences. Through it all, patience is key. Building relationships with the Latino

community, developing trust, and learning how to work together all take time. Progress will be incremental. The outcomes, however, justify all the hard work.

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