# University of California 4-H Latino Initiative: Experiences of Bicultural and Bilingual Staff

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## Abstract

*We report data from the first year of an initiative to engage Latino youth and families in the 4-H Youth Development Program, managed by the University of California. Through qualitative questionnaires and focus group interviews, we analyzed experiences of 6 new bilingual and bicultural program staff, hired specifically to implement youth development programming to reach Latino youth. Staff reported a steep learning curve, with competing demands to build relationships, engage youth, and show results. Lessons learned may help shape activities that other youth development programs may consider in similar efforts.*


*Key words*: Latino youth development, diversity initiative

## Introduction

Youth participation in community-based youth development programs (YDP) is a prevailing cultural norm in the United States. Participation in YDPs has been shown to improve self-esteem, academic performance, empathy and caring, leadership skills, and civic engagement (Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2002). However, many YDPs that formed at the turn of the 20th century have primarily served youth from dominant social groups and been less successful serving marginalized youth, youth of color, or youth from non-dominant social groups (Russell & Van Campen, 2011). The United States will become more racially and ethnically diverse, particularly with an increase in Latino population over the next 50 years (Panzar, 2015). Engaging Latino youth in YDPs will require institutional changes and professional support in order to provide culturally relevant programs. One strategy to accelerate successful change may be hiring bilingual and bicultural staff who are able to involve Latino youth in YDPs.

## Latino Youth Development

The research-based literature on Latino participation in YDPs is limited. Erbstein and Fabionar (2014) argued, "the emergent state of the research and the complexity of the U.S. Latin@ populations present challenges to assembling a cohesive, fully assessed set of practices in relationship to outcomes" (p. 23). There is a small body of empirical work to identify promising practices in Cooperative Extension, a partnership among the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), land grant universities, and local governments (USDA, 2016), rooted in strengthening intercultural competence and confronting institutionalized racism.

Gregory et al. (2006) reasoned that youth organizations could not expect "their traditional volunteer models to work well with Latino populations, particularly where those models depend on tightly defined roles or formal organizational structures." They found more success with organizations that had flexible and informal roles, organized collectively, and emphasized "helping out" rather than "leading." Relationship building was critical, and "nurturing a sense of connectedness" did not have shortcuts. When initiating new programs, Gregory et al. recommended working closely with potential program participants to determine needs, emphasizing collective and personal benefits, and designing programs with multiple entry points.

One of the first statewide 4-H Latino outreach efforts was Oregon State University's 4-H Latino Outreach Project (Hobbs & Sawer, 2009). University personnel provided professional development and technical assistance to local staff who engaged the Latino community through 4-H programming. One significant factor contributing to success was having bilingual and bicultural 4-H staff in local communities for at least three years. Lessons learned with regard to staff included (a) difficulty finding individuals with skills in youth development willing to work for the pay typically offered by large Universities, (b) mismatch between staff's professional goals and the goals of 4-H, (c) supporting staff in learning about 4-H and the design and implementation of youth development programs, and (d) establishing a respectful and accepting office environment. The final report summarizes lessons learned from the organizational perspective from state staff, but not necessarily from the voices of the staff hired to do the work. The report is unclear on its data sources; however, it appears that while state staff may have spoken with local staff throughout the project, there was not a systematic method to collect and analyze local staff experiences.

Overall, while reports containing research and practical wisdom offer recommendations of promising practices for engagement of Latino youth in YDPs (e.g., Gregory et al., 2006; Hobbs & Sawer, 2009), there is less written about the experience of onboarding new staff and tasking them with program development. YDPs rely on the skills of youth professionals and volunteers who design and deliver programs for young people (Walter & Grant, 2011). Thus, as Walter and Grant (2011) affirm, "staff performance of youth professionals is a key component in the success of youth programs." In order to be successful in increasing Latino participation in YDPs, staff must rethink recruiting processes, adapt their programs, and approach the Latino community with a holistic cultural perspective (Fábregas Janeiro & Horrillo, 2017).

The purpose of our qualitative case study was to learn what six new bilingual and bicultural staff reported contributed to successes and challenges of navigating the organization, initiating relationships with the community, and implementing youth development programming.

## 4-H Youth Development Program

The 4-H Youth Development Program is administered by Cooperative Extension. Extension's purpose is to cultivate University–community partnerships using community based research, collaborative problem solving, and stewarding community coalitions (Maley, Chen, & McCarthy, 2014). The University of California 4-H YDP's mission is to engage youth in reaching their fullest potential while advancing the field of youth development (4-H Mission and Direction Committee,

2003). Until recently, 4-H programs did not represent the racial and ethnic diversity found in California's population of young people, aged 5 to 18; nonetheless, serving marginalized youth in 4-H youth development programs is vital to growth of Cooperative Extension programming (Fábregas Janeiro, 2017). As Smith and Soule (2016) noted, "as a program designed for and by those rooted in European American culture, the 4-H YDP was not founded in the culture-specific knowledge of diverse individuals and groups currently living in areas that these programs serve" (p. 30). For example, in the 2014-2015 school year, University of California 4-H served 73,246 youth, with 24,042 youth identifying as Hispanic/Latino (State 4-H Office, 2017). Thus, only 33% of participating youth members identified as Hispanic/Latino while 54% of K-12 youth in California identified as Hispanic/Latino (Ed-Data, 2017). Additionally, state and local staff did not represent the population served with more than 90% of staff identifying as non-Hispanic White. Recognizing these disparities as the result of institutionalized systems, California 4-H initiated efforts to better serve and engage Latino youth and families (Moncloa et al., 2018).

## University of California 4-H Latino Initiative

In 2015, California 4-H YDP initiated a pilot effort to develop culturally relevant and responsive youth development programs (built on work from Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2014) to welcome Latino youth, families, and volunteers to 4-H. Six counties were identified as having high need to reach Latino youth with 4-H (see Table 1). While these six counties were new to this work, a seventh (Santa Barbara) had ongoing efforts and served in a support role, thus we only report on the experiences of the new staff hired in the six selected counties. Six new 4-H staff were recruited and oriented to the organization. These staff were primarily responsible for assessing interests, resources, and needs within their counties; offering training for new volunteers; implementing new programs; and marketing and public relations targeting new audiences. All six staff identified as Latino, and all but one of the supervisors for these new staff were non-Hispanic White (4 White male, 2 White female, 1 Latina female) with a secondary supervisor, the state 4-H assistant director for diversity and expansion (Latina female).

**Table 1. University of California 4-H Latino Initiative: Latino Participants in 4-H Before and After Year 1**

| County | New staff | Youth population | Percentage of Latino youth | Latinos in 4-H before Year 1 | Latinos in 4-H after Year 1 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Kern | Latina | 181,393 | 65% | 20% | 55% |
| Merced | Latino | 57,477 | 72% | 23% | 29% |
| Monterey | Latina | 76,768 | 78% | 25% | 37% |
| Orange | Latina | 493,030 | 49% | 33% | 45% |
| Riverside | Latina | 427,537 | 63% | 20% | 47% |
| Sonoma | Latino | 71,131 | 45% | 13% | 23% |
| Statewide |  | 6,226,737 | 54% | 33% | 45% |

*Note*. Youth population and Latino population numbers from the 2015-2016 school year obtained from Ed-Data, 2017. 4-H Youth numbers from the 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 school years obtained from California State 4-H office, 2017.

## Methodology

We utilized a multiple methods qualitative study involving a qualitative monthly effort reporting questionnaire and a year-end focus group interview. Participants were the six new staff, two who identified as Latino and four who identified as Latina; all were bilingual in English and Spanish, bicultural, and familiar with Latino cultures. Five were young professionals and one was mid-career.

Data collection was designed to elicit information relevant to the goals of the University of California 4-H Latino Initiative, including efforts to assess community needs, practices in program implementation, and program effectiveness. The first data source was a qualitative questionnaire to collect staff reports on their monthly efforts (Qualtrics, 2017). The questionnaire contained seven open-ended text box questions; e.g., "Report on your efforts to initiate, develop, establish, and strengthen relationships." From February to June 2017, 25 responses were collected from the six participants. The second data source was a focus group interview conducted at the end of the first year (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The protocol contained six primary stems with several sub-questions; e.g., "We will now focus on practices in program implementation that reaches Latino youth, families, and volunteers; How did you go about selecting, designing, and adapting programs? How did you make the decision regarding program models or delivery modes?" Five of the six staff participated in the focus group

interview. An academic colleague not associated with the Latino Initiative facilitated the focus group interview; it was recorded (147 minutes), and transcribed.

We four authors supervised one staff member each. We strove to navigate this dual-role as researcher and supervisor carefully and with transparency. The study was conducted under the purview of the University of California, Davis Institutional Review Board. From the hire date, staff were informed that they would be asked to provide information helpful in identifying promising practices to reach Latino communities and advance the research base on culturally-responsive youth development. The monthly questionnaires and focus group interview were voluntary. Additionally, supervisors responded to staff's concerns and challenges, as well as acknowledged their successes. Nonetheless, this situation was a limitation because participants may have responded knowing their immediate supervisor was involved in this study.

We analyzed data with deductive thematic analysis, a qualitative method used to identify patterns in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first and second authors analyzed the focus group interview transcript while the third and fourth authors analyzed data collected from the monthly questionnaires. Each researcher individually coded their respective data source, segmenting data into one of the three pre-determined categories (learning the organization, building relationships, and implementing programming). In pairs, we utilized consensus to identify emergent patterns within the segmented text within each category. The use of multiple analysts for each data source strengthened the rigor of our analysis (Patton, 2015). Once all data was analyzed, the first and second authors cross checked and organized emerging themes between the two qualitative data sources (Patton, 2015). We conducted member checks (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and staff indicated that the thematic summaries accurately reflected their experiences.

## Findings

Findings were organized into three categories. Staff from each of the counties reported learning about the organization, initiating and/or strengthening partnerships with the community, and implementing new youth development programming. The Initiative permitted flexibility in program models and curriculum, within organizational frameworks, to meet the needs of local Latino youth and families. By the end of the program year, every county 4-H YDP demonstrated an increase in Latino youth involvement in their respective 4-H programs, and an increase in the proportion of Latino 4-H youth (see Table 1).

## Learning About 4-H: Orienting New Bilingual, Bicultural Staff

Staff reported a steep learning curve both in learning about the 4-H YDP and about their new communities. Four of the six had moved to a new geographic area for their new position. New staff, even those with previous youth development experience, experienced a steep learning curve with regards to navigating the 4-H YDP, its history, multiple levels of oversight (U.S.D.A., U.C., county government), and emphasis on program model flexibility. Asked about her initial approach to the work, one participant said, "My approach to reaching out to the Latino community has been primarily, well first to learn about the 4-H program, since it was new to me, and second, to partner with existing youth serving organizations in the county." The program model options and multiple content areas and curricula hindered new staff in understanding the core emphasis of the 4-H YDP, let alone initiating conversations with community partners about what 4-H has to offer them. Staff reported needing training in 4-H program delivery options, 4-H's model of positive youth development, and training specific to bridging dominant-cultural program models and adapting programs to fit Latino youth and families. On top of learning job functions, organizational culture, four staff were new to their area and had a dual task of integrating with the community. During the year-end focus group interview, when asked about their first-year experience one staff said: "I'm still seeing what works and what doesn't. . . . I'm new to the county, and I don't know, well, I especially [when I] started out I didn't know anyone."

While the position descriptions for each of the staff were identical on paper, we found variance across the counties in how each job functioned. Part of this may have been due to varying community needs as well as priorities emphasized by the staff members' respective supervisor. This variance, however, also made it more challenging for staff to support one another in learning about the 4-H YDP. For example, the use of specific program models varied; some staff implemented 4-H after-school clubs, others started SPIN (special interest) clubs, and one relied on a partner organization to reach youth. Three staff had existing funds to support new programs, while the others had to initiate early fundraising activities to support their programs.

## Learning About the Community and Developing Relationships

Staff emphasized the value of their bilingual and bicultural nature in developing relationships, and engaging youth, families, and community organizations. Staff reported targeting locations (and organizations) that served predominately Latino youth in areas where the 4-H YDP had little or no existing presence. However, not having a presence made early connections difficult. In early efforts, staff found barriers for 4-H to enter these spaces. "People have never heard of

us, they don't even know we exist. . . . People are going to just say, 'Oh no, we have enough programming here. We have an after-school program.'"

To overcome this challenge, staff reported having the most success with organizations that had either a pre-existing personal connection or an established relationship with the University of California or 4-H YDP. When asked about successful partnerships, one staff mentioned linking with colleagues who managed the CalFresh Healthy Living, UC program (USDA SNAP-Ed programming providing nutrition education related to healthy eating and physical activity):

> *Through UC CalFresh, we met this organization, starting summer of last year, called the Community Settlement Association. That's where we … had the first bilingual 4-H Club after-school clinic. That has been successful because they are very open to youth programming that we bring to 4-H. They already had that trust built in from UC CalFresh. We came in, sort of through the door, with an already established relationship, sort of like in addition to. We've been there since then.*

Another staff member learned about this and connected with their local UC CalFresh staff: "They'd [partner organizations] feel like they could trust me to come and speak to their parents just because they know that I work with [UC] CalFresh."

Staff reported early success in relationship-building by offering 4-H educational programs to schools, after-school programs, other traditional YDPs, and culturally-based organizations (e.g., Univision, Mexican Consulate). A staff spoke about approaching parent groups in schools: "Some of the relationships that I've established, that are very useful, are school districts. Where I'm able to get to know who the key player is for the parent organization."

There was generally more success in school-based relationships (in- or after-school) and YDPs, but less so in approaching governmental-based programs. Staff reported that some organizations were not interested; either because, as one participant said, "They're doing their own thing. They're kind of worrying about their own stuff" or they felt like they did not need anything 4-H had to offer. The staff member went on to say emails and phone calls did not garner response, that "meeting in person is where you start seeing people are following through." Multiple staff described how being patient and persistent aided in their efforts.

## Program Implementation: Serving Latino Youth

The goals for the 4-H Latino Initiative were to engage more Latino youth in the 4-H YDP so that 4-H better served all youth populations in the area. Overall, staff reported early success by adding 4-H activities to existing programs where Latino audiences are already present rather than attempting to integrate Latino youth in existing 4-H Clubs.

### Challenges Reported by Staff

There were three primary challenges reported by staff: (a) barriers to integrating Latino youth into existing 4-H Club programming, (b) organizational policies, and (c) limited funds to implement new programs. Early in the Initiative, staff began to learn about 4-H by attending existing 4-H Clubs—many of which had been in existence for decades—but generally described unwelcoming atmospheres and cultural norms. One staff said "It's like a sink or swim environment, in some of these clubs. Where somebody, a new family comes, and nobody really explains anything to them." Another staff member agreed with this assessment in their own site observations.

> I went to visit the clubs myself. So I did not feel the love, myself,
> as a [staff] going to those club meetings. I can see that the only
> Latino kid in the club, and this is the most inclusive club in ___
> County. . . it wasn't a welcoming environment . . . we struggle a
> lot with the traditional base and there's a lot of pushback on this
> Latino Initiative, because they see 4-H as their baby and how they
> have to protect it from anybody that wants to change it.

While fully integrating the 4-H YDP is an ongoing concern for 4-H program leadership, staff were expected to engage new youth immediately, and thus, found more success by implementing new program models targeted to Latino youth. In the meantime, staff reported focusing only on communicating to traditional 4-H Clubs, rather than leverage, to engage Latino youth.

Another challenge was 4-H policies acting as barriers, including establishing memorandums of understanding with partnering organizations, chartering 4-H Clubs, and the adult volunteer enrollment process. Staff described the need for policies and procedures to be streamlined and made friendly for non-White audiences. The adult volunteer enrollment process was a critical challenge, with concerns around fees, background checks, and an English-only online orientation process. A participant emphasized the volunteer enrollment process posing a barrier

to recruitment, "Working with policies, again it's been really hard. The chartering process, fingerprinting, parent, and then the fear of the volunteer process."

A third challenge was lack of funding to implement programs, purchase curriculum and supplies, and cover 4-H enrollment fees. While the University of California committed employment funds for the Initiative, there was no funding allocated for program implementation. One staff member expressed early frustration in lack of funds:

> *Where is the support for this new program that you all want to see happen? I can't just magically make it happen. That's kind of how I felt. I was told to increase the enrollment of Latinos, and starting programs for Latinos, but it was like it was going to be magic.*

While limited funds might have reduced the potential for high-quality and successful programming, one positive benefit, at least in two counties, was that it promoted partnerships to leverage resources, for example collaborating with UC CalFresh.

Staff emphasized that getting to know the community and building relationships were the most important parts of starting a new 4-H program. Staff identified several 4-H program models they utilized to engage Latino youth in 4-H; these included after-school clubs, SPIN clubs, in-school clubs, day camps, and short-term/special interest programs. Within each, content and curriculum varied around science/engineering, health/nutrition, and civic engagement; all implemented using culturally responsive practices. When asked how they made decisions about which program model to implement, most replied that they used data such as parent or youth surveys and let the community decide. As one staff member explained: "We gather people together, refresh their minds on the [4-H] delivery modes and let them decide which is best for their community. They know the community better than I would."

Additionally, while some staff reported challenges recruiting adults to serve as volunteer leaders, others utilized teenagers to facilitate programming and act as role models. Utilizing teenagers in this way reduced the number of adult volunteers needed while also engaging Latino adolescents in the 4-H YDP in a developmentally appropriate role. Three counties employing the teenagers-as-teachers model found that this strategy met 4-H learning objectives and reduced the number of adult volunteers they needed to recruit, screen, and orient. Another approach was to identify organizations that already had volunteers and provide 4-H training. Overall, staff implemented new programming, using a variety of program models reaching

Latino youth. All six counties were able to increase the number of Latino youth served by the end of the year.

## Discussion

### Lessons Learned

The 4-H YDP has a long history in the United States providing youth development and experiential education to young people. While serving predominately non-Hispanic White youth, our University of California 4-H Latino Initiative was an attempt to design, implement, and adapt programming to serve Latino youth and families in six California counties. Specific to 4-H, we learned that multiple delivery modes (e.g., after-school 4-H clubs, special interest [SPIN] clubs) were successful in engaging Latino youth and not just the traditional 4-H community club model. Additionally, we learned that staff needed support to learn and navigate the 4-H culture. Furthermore, 4-H around the United States has the potential to leverage relationships with other Cooperative Extension programs to expand its reach.

The experiences shared by our six new bilingual and bicultural staff demonstrated positive benefits of being able to speak the language of the population the initiative sought to reach. These benefits included improved ability to form relationships, communicate more easily with parents, and navigate community norms. Additionally, the staff who had previously lived in the communities in which they then served realized earlier success in understanding the community's values and interests; e.g., celebrating Mexican Independence Day,  using soccer to attract youth. Furthermore, as supervisors, we observed anecdotal evidence for the advantages of hiring staff who understood the culture and the language of the communities they were tasked to serve; e.g., staff's ability to form relationships with the Latino community more quickly than those of us who were non-Hispanic White had experienced previously.

### Recommendations

The experiences shared from the bicultural and bilingual program staff can help shape activities that other YDPs and institutions may consider in similar efforts. First, supervisors and leadership should be prepared to support new staff in learning both the organizational culture and developing a realistic plan-of-work in order to balance staff time developing knowledge of the target community and knowledge of the organization. Additionally, although program model

flexibility aids in being responsive to unique community needs, supervisors should be intentional in agreeing on initiative-wide priorities so that staff can build a community of practice. Second, supervisors should recognize that building social capital is as important as skill development when staff are tasked with increasing diversity. Developing relationships and trust takes time, so organizational leadership should plan for personnel to spend significant time building relationships before expecting to see significant increases in youth numbers reached.

Third, leverage collaborations with internal and external programs that have successful relationships with target populations. Supervisors should work intentionally with their staff to map the local ecosystem of Latino YDPs, including identifying gatekeepers, in order to help establish priorities. Overall, staff found easier and faster success bringing new education or curriculum to schools and other YDPs that serve Latino youth than trying to bring Latino youth into existing programming. To assist in these efforts, staff would likely benefit from training in how to engage gatekeepers (i.e., an elevator speech, know the why, understand resources your organization can bring).

Finally, staff should be empowered to suggest ways to overcome organizational procedures that may serve as barriers to participation by targeted youth populations. The process of increasing diversity takes time and commitment to building new relationships, support for developing meaningful programs, and a willingness to change as an organization.

### Limitations

Our study has several limitations. First, our data set relied on the perceptions from staff themselves, without triangulation from others, such as supervisors, colleagues, or youth participants. Second, since supervisors were also researchers, participants may not have felt comfortable sharing all challenges. Third, the six counties included in our study were selected for their readiness to expand programming, and thus, there may be additional opportunities or challenges in locations that were not included in the pilot project. Fourth, we did not assess differing types of institutional support within each county. This could have had a mediating effect on staff success. Fifth, our analysis was conducted only in relation to 4-H programming and did not include a broader look at institutional settings.

## Acknowledgements

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