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Toward Guiding Principles for Engaging Latinx Youth in Youth Development Programs: Practitioner Briefs

4. Program Elements for Engaging Latinx Youth and Families

Introduction

Youth development programs provide a safe environment and a routine or structure that allows for positive relationships among peers and between youth and adults in support of youth engagement (Gambone and Connell 2004; Zeldin et al. 2012). Programs also respect social norms and provide opportunities for skill building and youth leadership through a variety of activities that respond to youth's interests and needs (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine 2002; Connell et al. 2001). In addition, Latinx¹ youth development programs embrace an integrated understanding of youth development. They

- include the role of culture, ethnicity, and immigration status in youth's development,
- build culturally nuanced programs,
- support youth to contend with the physiological and social effects of discrimination,
- support positive ethnic identity development,
- respond to economic poverty, and
- act on the diversity of the Latinx youth experience (Erbstein and Fabionar 2019).

This brief details important dimensions of practice based on a study of thirteen California youth development organizations

¹ Latinx: A person who lives in the United States who comes from, or whose parents, grandparents, or earlier ancestors came from, Latin America; may be mono-, bi-, or multilingual in Spanish, English, Brazilian Portuguese, or an indigenous language (e.g., Mixtec). This term dismantles the default masculine of romance languages; it's a gender-inclusive and gender-neutral term.

Successful programs offer a safe space and staff that enable Latinx youth to talk about issues they face in their communities, including topics such as poverty, discrimination, violence, immigration, etc.

across rural, suburban, and urban communities that successfully sustain Latinx youth participation over time. To learn more about the study, see Moncloa et al. 2019.

Key Practices

Activities are inclusive and responsive to youth and family's needs

To foster inclusive programs, staff and leadership are aware of the different cultures in their communities², as well as the literacy level of the youth and families the program targets. Program activities are adapted so everyone can participate (not only youth, but also families). Responsive organizations engage youth and families in the design, implementation, and evaluation of program activities to tailor programs to each community.

Support academic persistence and achievement

While Latinx students disproportionately face barriers to school persistence and achievement, they and their families often hold high aspirations. Programs support academic learning in various ways, and include tutoring, and fostering self-esteem and a sense of empowerment. Programs offer economic incentives to motivate youth's participation, such as bus passes, prom tickets, etc.

Provide safe space, support identity development and healing

Successful programs offer a safe space and staff that enable Latinx youth to talk about issues they face in their communities, including topics such as poverty, discrimination, violence, immigration, etc. When culturally relevant curricula is not available or accessible to address these topics, programs create a safe space through relationship building to engage in formal or informal conversations with youth individually, in groups, or in workshops. These conversations contribute to the development of youth identity and healing. Programs host or create cultural events for youth and their families to explore their culture and develop a sense of belonging to their cultural or ethnic group. Organizations support the use of multiple languages (English, Spanish, Spanglish, Mixtec) so that youth feel comfortable communicating and helping each other bridge language barriers.

² For tools to facilitate your understanding of Latinx youth populations and places in your community, visit <http://ucanr.edu/latinoydp>.

Scaffold opportunities for “giving back”

Cultivate ladders of opportunity where young people are scaffolded to continue to give back to their community after graduating from the program, or after college, to lead social change. This scaffolding enables youth to address inequities in their community and supports them to mentor younger youth, or serve as a volunteer. Be aware that “giving back” often goes beyond mainstream youth development’s understanding of community service.

Integrate fun in programs

Having fun is essential to all youth development programming. Youth enjoy opportunities to learn about themselves and their culture in fun and engaging ways. Having fun is also key to relationship building and healing.

Conclusion

To sustain Latinx youth participation over time, program leaders listen to Latinx youth and family voices, and their experiences inform all aspects of programming. This allows leaders to determine appropriate incentives, tap Latinx community strengths, create meaningful ladders of opportunity, and, most importantly, ensure participants are safe and having fun.

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