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

5. Building Relationships in Latinx Communities

Introduction

Youth development programs aim to provide safe, enriching, and empowering places for young people to build a variety of competencies that foster a healthy transition from adolescence into adulthood (USDA et al. 2017). Programs that engage and sustain participation of Latinx youth recognize the powerful assets that Latinx¹ families and community networks can bring to these efforts (Erbstein and Fabionar 2019). Cultural brokers play a critical role in program success. Cultural brokers serve as a go-between, and advocate on behalf of another individual or group (Jezewski and Sotnik 2001). This brief details important considerations for building community relationships based on a study of thirteen California youth development organizations across rural, suburban, and urban communities that successfully sustain Latinx youth participation over time (Moncloa et al. 2019).

Key Practices

Get to know, build trust with, and understand the stories of local Latinx communities

The Latinx population is a highly diverse group comprised of people with different countries of origin, languages, socioeconomic status, migration stories, and educational levels. Organizations serving Latinx youth develop relationships with their community through

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.

Outreach efforts with the Latinx community are an opportunity for mutual learning and for organizations to learn of the community's assets, needs, and resources.

informal and formal interactions. Informal interactions include one-on-one conversations and unstructured community conversations. Formal interactions include assessments and town hall meetings. Through these processes, organizational staff and leaders build trusting, collaborative, mutually beneficial relationships with youth, families, community networks, key formal and informal leaders, local businesses, media, and alumni. These relationships create spaces for youth and adults to help organizations be more responsive to local needs and reduce barriers to participation.

Step outside! Be part of Latinx community networks and events

To support local Latinx community building, organizations orchestrate, co-plan, or integrate their programs with meaningful community cultural events. In the absence of community cultural events, staff, youth, and their families create public opportunities for cultural and ethnic identity development. By effectively leading these events and giving back to the community in a tangible way, organizations cultivate a positive local reputation—which helps families feel comfortable sending their children—and increase community engagement from the ground up.

Don't stop there! Be proactive, extend personal invitations to community members and leaders

Outreach efforts with the Latinx community are an opportunity for mutual learning and for organizations to learn of the community's assets, needs, and resources. Personal invitations are the most effective way to bring the voice of youth and families into an organization. Whether this process is formal or informal, staff and leaders ensure community voices are included and respected.

Conclusion

In order to successfully build and sustain community relationships, youth development organizations will benefit by intentionally approaching community building as a first step and dedicating time and resources to this effort. It is particularly important that organizational staff and any cultural brokers are committed to engaging youth and families and skilled at building authentic, trustworthy partnerships via both formal and informal community networks.

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