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Creating Programs to Help Latino Youth Thrive at School: The Influence of Latino Parent Involvement Programs

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Abstract: Parent involvement programs can play an essential role in the academic success of Latino youth. This article reports the effectiveness and evaluation of two new Extension programs that help Latino parents become more involved in their youths' academics. The Latino Parent and Family Advocacy and Support Training (LPFAST) targets parents of K- 8th grade students, and the Juntos Para Una Mejor Educaci3n (Together for a Better Education) program was created to serve 6th-12th grade Latino students and their parents. These two programs demonstrate innovative approaches to involve communities and schools in Extension programming.

Introduction

Between 1990 and 2008, there was nearly a ten-fold increase in North Carolina's (NC) Latino population, which grew from 69,020 to 682,516 (U.S. Census, 2009). From school years 2001 - 2005, Hispanic students accounted for 57% of total growth in NC public schools (Kasarda & Johnson, 2006). In fact, in NC, the Latino high school senior population is expected to increase from the current number of 4,483 in 2008 to over 27,000 in the year 2020 (WICHE, 2003).

Despite the fact that Latino students are the fastest growing ethnic group in NC schools, they also have the highest dropout rates and face great risk for academic underachievement (Hess, 2000; Laird, DeBell, & Chapman, 2006). For example, 2009 statistics indicate that Latino youth are dropping out of school at a higher rate than any other ethnic group in the state, with only 59% of Latino youth in North Carolina graduating from high school in 4 years (NCDPI, 2009). Hence, substantial numbers of Latinos risk challenges in their future economic quality of life, including decreased job prospects and future poverty (Glennie & Stearns, 2002; Martinez, DeGarmo, & Eddy, 2004).

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The economic impact of high school dropouts in NC is staggering. In 2006, dropout cost the state seven and a half billion dollars in lost income (Gottlob, 2007). These statistics point to the need for the development of programs that support Latino families and help to promote school success and retention for Latino students.

A key factor associated with academic success and dropout prevention is parent involvement (Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems, & Holbein, 2005) and parental academic motivation (Alfaro, Umaña-Taylor, & Bámaca, 2006). Therefore, it is critical that programs be developed that promote these two factors in Latino families. A recent survey, administered during a workshop for 90 Latino-serving Extension professionals from around NC, indicated that "education on how to help Latinos navigate the US school system" was the number one issue of interest (Behnke, 2008). Another study administered to 501 Latino youth in North Carolina found that parents play an essential role in dropout prevention, and that schools that work closely with Latino parents can be much more effective in reducing the dropout rate (Behnke & Gonzalez, 2010).

Research and experience have indicated that family-oriented educational delivery modes, rather than child-only ones, are more culturally appropriate among Latino communities (Hobbs, 2004). The programs described below use this "family approach" to encourage Latino families to work together in making academic success a reality. This article outlines two unique efforts currently taking place in NC: the LPFAST program, which helps parents of K through 8th grade children, and the Juntos program, which serves youth and their parents in the 6th through 12th grades.

The LPFAST Program

In 2001 a coalition of community partners came together with Durham County's Cooperative Extension Center in an effort to improve the quality of life for families through education, training, skill building, and school and community involvement. The Strengthening Families Coalition of Durham (SFC) is composed of a diverse group of individuals whose goal is to close the academic achievement gap through strengthening parental involvement and leadership. The Latino Parent and Family Advocacy and Support Training (LPFAST) was developed as a parental advocacy training program to support Spanish-speaking parents of school age children and increase their school involvement.

LPFAST Program Overview

LPFAST is a six-session workshop series for parents, family members, or other involved adults of students of K- 8th grade students who want to learn how to help their child(ren) achieve success in school. LPFAST took a collaborative approach to determine what would be covered in the program by acknowledging that the members of SFC were not experts on parent/family involvement and advocacy, and instead looked to parents for input and expertise. Each 2-hour session addresses a different topic related to academic success (Table 1).

Table 1.
Overview of the LPFAST and Juntos Programs

Session	LPFAST Program	Juntos Program
1	Parent Involvement and Advocacy	Parent Involvement: Making Education a Family Goal
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Develop rapport with facilitators and other parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Develop rapport with facilitators and other parents

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a shared and individual understanding of parent advocacy and involvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a shared and individual understanding of parent involvement • Identify barriers to getting to graduation/college and ways to eliminate these barriers
2	School Communication	School Communication
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase knowledge about how to improve contact with school personnel • Increase understanding of school structure and roles of school personnel • Gain skills and knowledge to have more effective parent/teacher conferences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase understanding of school structure and roles of school personnel • Increase knowledge about how to improve contact with school personnel • Gain skills and knowledge to have better parent/teacher conferences
3	Effectively Communicating with your School	Knowing the School System: Standards and Testing
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop an understanding of the pros and cons of different communication styles • Understand barriers to effective communication and how they may prevent positive communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand NC graduation requirements: Required courses, End of Course (EOCs) tests, attendance, Grades • Identify the courses their child needs to meet their expectations and goals • Identify successful strategies for students to score at or above grade level
4	Standards and Testing	Life After High School
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop basic knowledge of No Child Left Behind , End 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand the long term cost-benefit of obtaining a

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	<p>of Grade (EOGs) tests, and School Improvement plans</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand what EOGs are, how to prepare children, and options for children who do not score at grade level • Understand how to interpret the NC school report card 	<p>college degree</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase knowledge of available financial aid resources and the differences between each type of financial aid • Develop knowledge and skills to increase confidence in filling out the FAFSA financial aid application form
5	Exceptional Children (EC)	Roads to Higher Education
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase knowledge regarding issues impacting EC and the role of the Individual Education Plan (IEP) • Increase knowledge of the various community resources available to families in the community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase knowledge about the PSAT/SAT/ACT tests and how to help students achieve a high score • Understand the importance of essay writing in the application process and learn tips to improve essays
6	Moving to Action	Moving to Action
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a personal action plan to help participants to focus their next steps 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a personal action plan to help participants to focus their next steps

Sessions are held in a variety of community locations including, Cooperative Extension centers, public schools, and after-school centers, and are facilitated by two Spanish-speaking co-facilitators, some of whom are past LPFAST graduates. Several efforts are made to support parent participation in the program and include providing onsite childcare and dinner to all participants as well as providing transportation on a case-by-case basis.

Unique characteristics of the program that have contributed to the success of LPFAST include the provision of ongoing support and information to graduates, an annual family gathering for graduates, the option for graduates to participate in a more intensive leadership training program, the opportunity for graduates to participate in the SFC, and a newly developed ongoing Latino support group.

LPFAST Program Evaluation

At the beginning of the LPFAST program workshop series a 20-question baseline survey is collected, which takes valuated participants less than 10 minutes to fill out. A parallel 20-question survey is then administered at the end of the sixth session. These paper-and-pencil surveys were used to measure the changes in participants' knowledge and attitudes about the principles discussed in the program. Response choices used a four-point Likert-type scale (from strongly agree to strongly disagree). LPFAST has served 212 Latino parents in the last 3 years. Ninety percent of parents reported increased confidence in working with their child(ren)'s school. Results from these evaluations have revealed several successes, including the mean differences from pre- to post-test (significant T-values at $p < .01$):

- Parents report increased knowledge of how and when to call for a parent-teacher conference (mean difference = 1.3)
- Parents report greater comfort at being able to find out what they need to know and knowing who to ask (mean difference = 2.1)
- Parents develop a positive change in style or approach to school concerns (mean difference = 1.8)
- Parents develop knowledge about new resources that are available to them (mean difference = 1.7)

In addition to these successes, the LPFAST program has done well in retaining families in the program and encouraging parents to take on leadership roles within the community after graduation. Ninety percent of the families who attend the first session of LPFAST complete the entire six-session program, a particularly impressive number considering this population has historically been hard to engage and retain in programming (Dumka, Garza, Roosa, & Stoerzinger, 1997). Among the 212 parents who have completed the LPFAST program, several have gone on to engage in leadership roles, including participation in school site-based decision-making teams, Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs), local special needs organizations, school district committees, and statewide parent councils.

Juntos Para Una Mejor Educación Program

In an effort to build on the work and success of the LPFAST program, a sister program was developed to address the needs of older Latino youth and their parents and to increase academic success and college enrollment for Latino youth. The program entitled, Juntos Para Una Mejor Educación (Together for a Better Education), is a collaborative effort between North Carolina State University Cooperative Extension and 14 school districts in NC. While the LPFAST program targets parents of elementary school age children, the Juntos (pronounced who-n-toes) program was created to serve 6th-12th grade Latino students and their parents. The goals of the Juntos program are to reduce the levels of Latino youth dropping out of school, improve academic success, and promote interest in higher education. Ultimately, upon completion of the program, it is intended that parents and youth will have the knowledge and skills necessary for youth to bridge the gap from high school to college.

Juntos Program Overview

The Juntos program adopts many of the components of the LPAST program, including educating parents

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about the school system and encouraging communication between home and school, while adding additional information pertinent specifically to middle and high school students and their parents. Some of the adaptations that made to the program consist of including both parents and youth in each of the six workshop sessions, involving more experiential activities and games, involving school staff (e.g., guidance counselors, English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers, and representatives from community colleges) and using college age peer mentors to serve as role models (Table 1).

Juntos Program Evaluation

The Juntos program has been piloted with Spanish-speaking families in 20 locations (including: Cary, Columbia, Chapel Hill, Durham, Garner, Carrboro, Hillsborough, Newton Grove, Oxford, Robins, Siler City, Selma, Wilson, Winston Salem, Yadkinville, and Yancyville) around NC and has served over 450 parents and youth. The 6-week program generally has from 40-80 participants during each of the weekly sessions.

Currently the program conducts self-report pre- and post-test surveys at the beginning and end of the workshop series. Parents and youth take separate tests, but questions on both surveys are designed to examine changes in participants': 1) awareness that attending college is a realistic goal, 2) understanding about the requirements for graduation and success in high school, 3) skills and knowledge of the college application process, 4) awareness of options for financing college expenses, 5) understanding about the importance of positive communication between parents, youths and school personnel, 6) frequencies of such communication, and 7) understanding about the importance of having peers who plan to go to college.

Pre- and post-test surveys were collected from 176 Latino parents and 134 Latino youth who had participated in all six sessions of the program. Each question was answered on a four-point Likert-type scale (from strongly agree to strongly disagree), and a Wilcoxon sign test was used to assess the change from pre- to post-test. Additionally, post-tests include open-end questions for use as formative evaluation, to determine participants' impression of the program, their satisfaction with the program, and perceived strengths and weaknesses of the program.

Results from these evaluations using a Wilcoxon sign test have revealed significant mean differences from pre- to post-tests (Table 2). Parents and youth reported an increased understanding of NC graduation requirements, classes needed, higher education options, financial aid options, and necessary tests. Parents report a significant increase in their monitoring their child's homework, meeting with school staff, and increased skills and knowledge about the college application process. Youth reported significant increase in their planning for after high school and sharing those goals with their parents.

Table 2.
Wilcoxon Pre- and Post-Test Mean Differences for the Juntos Program

Parent Questions	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Mean Difference	
My teenager and I have started talking and planning for his/her future after high school	2.54	3.48	0.94	**
I understand how to prepare for an effective parent/teacher conference	2.31	3.36	1.05	**
I know exactly what my teenager's goals are for after high school	2.59	3.35	0.76	**

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I understand what is required to graduate from high school in North Carolina	2.21	3.42	1.21	**
I know what classes will help my child meet his/her goals after high school	2.01	3.20	1.19	**
I understand what higher education options are available to my teenager after graduation	2.05	3.29	1.25	**
I have the skills and knowledge necessary to help my teenager apply for financial aid	1.75	3.12	1.37	**
I am aware of the different tests that are required for entrance into four year colleges	1.74	3.25	1.50	**
I feel that I have the skills and knowledge necessary to help my teenager complete the college application process	1.72	3.21	1.48	**
I know who to contact at my teenager's school with questions about my teenager's education	2.25	3.48	1.23	**
I feel comfortable contacting school personnel to request help regarding my teenager's education	2.36	3.42	1.06	**
I feel I have the information needed to help my teenager successfully complete high school	2.05	2.86	0.81	**
Monitored my teenagers homework	2.12	3.25	1.13	**
Met with school counselors when I had questions about my teenager's future	1.36	2.52	1.17	**
Student Questions	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Mean Difference	
I feel that I receive the support I need from my parent(s) to successfully complete high school	3.17	3.53	0.36	
My parent(s) and I have started talking and planning for my future after high school	2.76	3.28	0.52	*
I help my parent(s) remember to attend parent-teacher conferences at school	2.58	3.10	0.51	*
My parent(s) know what my goals are for after high school	2.67	3.43	0.75	**
I understand what is required to graduate from high school in North Carolina	2.84	3.38	0.55	*
I know what classes will help me meet my goals after high school	2.64	3.21	0.57	*

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I understand what higher education options are available to me after high school graduation	2.60	3.34	0.74	**
I have the skills and knowledge necessary to apply for financial aid	2.48	3.14	0.66	**
I am aware of the different tests that I am required to take if I choose to apply to a four year institution	2.48	3.28	0.80	**
I feel I have the skills and knowledge necessary to complete the college application process	2.66	3.13	0.47	
Talked about going to college with my friends	2.07	3.22	1.15	**
Discussed my progress in school with my teachers	2.39	2.71	0.32	
Thought about my goals for after graduating from high school	2.75	3.72	0.98	**
*p < .05. **p < .01.				

In addition to statistics found in Table 2, increased confidence in working with their child's school was reported by 92% of participating parents. Ninety-three percent of parents reported that they felt they had the information they needed to help their teenager successfully complete high school. One Latino father reported: "This course was very good because it informed us about a lot of things we didn't have any idea about and other things we had concerns about." In addition, 72% of participants attended all of the workshop sessions, and more than 60% of the families had a father present. A team of four bilingual educators (with the input of school guidance counselors, school administrators, university recruiters, and other partners) used the results from in-depth pre- and post-test surveys to improve the program content and methodology with each iteration of the program.

Discussion

Research indicates a clear need for programs that help to promote parental involvement in schools and promote academic achievement within Latino families. Extension can play a role in meeting these needs by implementing programs like the LPFAST and the Juntos program. Our findings demonstrate that these two promising programs have at least short-term impacts on the parents and youth who participate in them. Parents in both programs indicate gains in knowledge and skills that will help their children achieve academically. By implementing programs such as these, Extension can help to educate and empower Latino parents and improve the academic outcomes of Latino children. These types of programs also help Latino parents learn that Extension staff are trustworthy and will provide them with safe and reliable resources for their families.

These programs are models for other programs that wish to serve Latino youth and their families because they were developed in Spanish for the Latino parents and older teens of North Carolina. Rather than simply a translation of a program developed for English-speaking families, these programs use culturally appropriate activities and specially crafted concepts that were specifically designed to meet the needs of Spanish-speaking parents and youth.

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During the development of these programs we learned some lessons that are worth sharing that can help Extension professionals effectively work with Latino families, their communities, and their schools. We are often asked how we do so much Latino programming with so few Spanish speakers on staff, and our short answer is: We have the best partners. The key to the success of programs like these is true collaboration with key partners. These collaborations include ESL teachers/coordinators, guidance counselors, family involvement coordinators, principals, school administrators, community college representatives, members of local faith and business communities, university college student mentors, community center staff, local Extension FCS and 4-H agents, Extension staff, community family strengthening groups, and so on. To engage partners there must be a real benefit for the partner, and a real commitment to the program. Though many of our partners speak Spanish, just as many do not, and have instead a special place in their heart for Spanish-speaking families. Having the heart for this kind of work is what really matters most!

However, to make programs like this successful, collaborations also require commitment. We suggest requiring all partners to volunteer in a substantial way to ensure positive outcomes for the families being served. This echoes the saying "give them a responsibility, and they will act responsibly." For example, we have found that it is not enough to simply have the permission of school officials or the blessing of district administrators. We suggest having an initial partners meeting and leaving this meeting with a signed letter of commitment and scope of work for all key partners to make it clear who will be contributing in what way to the programming. Most partners want to be involved in a meaningful way. But most feel they don't have a lot of time and thus need direction and support to understand where they can contribute usefully. We split up task like meals for each session (we often have potlucks when permissible), transportation, child activities, teaching, scheduling, materials for families, participant recruitment, and so on.

We find the importance of sharing responsibilities to hold just as true for the parents and youth in the program as for the professionals and partners putting it on. All parties benefit by literally "bringing something to the table." For example, trusted parents and partners are essential to the effective recruitment and retention of Latino families. Though flyers and phone calls can help, the face-to-face invitation is what really makes the difference for some of the hardest to reach families.

One of the innovative approaches we have used to engage hard-to-reach parents is working with the children or youth to prepare dances, videos, presentations, skits, and other talents to share at the first workshop night. Parents generally come to see their youths' presentations and are usually inclined to continue to attend because of the fun and interactive activities in the workshops. We have also had success with hosting student led "telethons," where students call and invite their parents and the parents of their classmates to attend the workshops. We also suggest sending home colorful calendars, magnets, or other items in Spanish that can be both informative and also a reminder of the benefits of participating.

Another innovation involves inviting key school and community partners to attend a daylong training on the program curriculum where they learn how to conduct the workshop series and are then provided with free materials and resources. Participants commit to either co-teach or "shadow" with the program staff as they deliver the workshops and programs in their community during the first year. This enables partners in each community to gain the experience and "know how" to facilitate the program in subsequent years.

Due to the initial success in these communities of programs like LPFAST and the Juntos program, it is the intention of the program developers that these programs be replicated by Extension agents and other partners to support and educate Latino families and youth across the United States. For example, all of the curriculum resources for the Juntos program are available online at <<http://ncfamilies.com/spanish/juntos>>. The free Juntos program resources include: a 332-page curriculum (how to conduct the program on a week-by-week basis, handouts for parents and youth, teaching aids, etc.); promotional videos; DVDs with successful practices for parents; PPTs for each session; double-sided posters (Spanish/English) on how to get to college;

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and various games and activities (e.g., The Quest for Success family board game specially created for this program).

The dilemma surrounding Latino dropout will not be resolved quickly without concerted effort. As prominent scholars of the dropout crisis, Velez and Saenz have commented that "improving educational opportunities for Latino youth will require significant cooperation among different key players including students, families, teachers, administrators, policymakers, community and business leaders, researchers, and governmental officials" (2001, p. 465).

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