

"Attitudes for Success" - The Hispanic Youth Leadership Program

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Abstract

It is predicted that by 2005 Hispanics will become the largest ethnic youth population in the country. As Hispanic youth populations continue to grow, so does the potential for significant Hispanic youth contribution to schools, communities, and other places of leadership. Despite this potential, little has been done to prepare Hispanic youth to take active and contributing leadership roles. In response to these dramatic demographic changes, and as a direct response to facilitating the leadership potential of Hispanic youth, a coalition of school officials, county agencies, and concerned citizens met with two Oregon State University Extension county 4-H agents to review the needs of area Hispanics and develop strategies to provide positive leadership experiences for Hispanic youth. "Attitudes for Success" Hispanic Youth Leadership Program helps Hispanic youth develop the skills and confidence necessary to become committed and involved in their schools and community.

Like many states, Oregon has experienced a dramatic increase in Hispanic population in recent years. In two counties in Eastern Oregon, the Hispanic population has doubled, and Hispanic students currently make up nearly 40 percent of the school district's student population in both counties. Furthermore, it is predicted that by 2005 Hispanics will become the largest ethnic youth population in the country (McPherson 2001). As Hispanic youth populations continue to grow, so does the potential for significant Hispanic youth contribution to schools, communities, and other places of leadership.

Despite this potential, little has been done to prepare Hispanic youth to take active and contributing leadership roles. In fact, studies have shown that Hispanic youth experience a 30 percent school dropout rate (Franklin and Soto 2002), few are involved in school or community

leadership opportunities, and more than 20 percent live at or below the poverty level (National Center for Educational Statistics 1999). Language barriers, high dropout rates, low school attendance rates, poor grades, gang involvement, and low income are just a few of the challenges that face Hispanic youth and their families.

In response to these dramatic demographic changes, and as a direct response to facilitating the leadership potential of Hispanic youth, a coalition of school officials, county agencies, and concerned citizens met with two Oregon State University Extension county 4-H agents to review the needs of area Hispanics and develop strategies to provide positive leadership experiences for Hispanic youth. The result was the development of "Attitudes for Success: The Hispanic Youth Leadership Program," designed for youth in grades 6-12. The program consists of two separate parts: an annual daylong conference for Hispanic youth and a youth leadership team experience that provides intensive leadership opportunities for a smaller number of program participants.

Program goals and objectives

The overall goal of the Hispanic Youth Leadership Conference is to encourage participants to complete their education, become involved in their school and community, and enhance communication skills. Specific program objectives include

- encouraging Hispanic youth to complete high school and further their education;
- improving social relations;
- enhancing self-esteem, communication skills and leadership abilities;
- building an awareness of Hispanic history and heritage;
- increasing awareness of scholarship and career opportunities;
- building a coalition of community advocates for Hispanic youth; and
- assisting Hispanic youth in developing the skills and confidence to become committed and involved in their schools and community.

The Leadership Conference

The Hispanic Youth Leadership Conference is a daylong event held each spring. More than 280 Hispanic youth participate annually in the conference, which provides a series of educational workshops addressing leadership and community action, communication skills, college life,

study skills, career exploration, refusal skills, and self-esteem. In addition to the workshops, college recruiters, area technical training schools, military branches, and other agencies provide seminars and educational booths during the conference.

Held at a local convention center, the overall atmosphere of the conference is one of celebration, with Hispanic music and cultural celebrations, an inspirational keynote speaker, and conference alumni returning to share and celebrate with the students. A dominant emphasis throughout the conference is helping Hispanic youths recognize the importance of completing their education. The tone of the conference encourages participants to understand the importance of completing high school and college, as well as foster an awareness that Hispanics can and should become involved in their community.

The Hispanic Youth Leadership Conference theme "Attitudes for Success" embraces the challenge of meeting the educational and leadership needs of Hispanic students. An important factor for the program success has been the strong level of support outside of the conference. In addition to the Oregon State University Extension Service, program partners have included school officials, migrant education staff, social service professionals, area business leaders, and Hispanic students and parents. School counselors in each of the participating schools play a critical role in identifying and recruiting Hispanic youths to participate in the conference.

Students as young as 6th grade are eligible to participate, and many return to the conference several times before graduating from high school. While the focus of the program is a one-day conference, the annual conference itself is really a culmination of a process that takes place throughout the year. In addition, numerous Hispanic professionals volunteer their time to serve as workshop instructors and guest speakers, and each year city and county officials are invited to discuss the importance of leadership and community involvement. The multi-agency collaborations help the students understand the opportunities available to them, and provide assistance in accessing the opportunities, both important keys for ensuring the success of Hispanic youth (Kaplan 1999).

Youth Leadership Board

An important part of the success of the annual conference is the ongoing work that takes place during the school year leading up to the conference. In addition to the work of school counselors and advisors, the Youth Leadership Board plays a large role in ensuring the success of the conference as well as helping to integrate the facilitation of Hispanic youths as leaders in their schools and communities. Members of the board include two to three youth from each of 14 area schools, area school professionals, migrant education staff, social service agencies, area business leaders, and the 4-H Extension agents. Youth are nominated to the board by their school counselors. Youth board members are nominated based on their potential for leadership, growth,

and contribution to the program. Some members begin on the board as early as 6th grade, and many stay, grow, and find their own voice and unique contribution through ongoing participation on the board.

Youth who participate on the board receive a more intensive leadership experience than youth who attend the conference only. A large part of their responsibility as board members is to help ensure that Hispanic youth in their schools are encouraged to attend the conference. In addition, board members also find ways to facilitate leadership contributions outside the conference itself (e.g., fundraising and establishing school clubs). Student officers manage the board with the 4-H agents serving as advisors. During the year, the 4-H agents work with the student leaders and community members to shape the program's educational design, teach meeting management and leadership skills, recruit class instructors, write grants, conduct evaluations, and provide overall program management support.

The involvement of Hispanic students in the leadership of the program has been a critical key to success. Youth Board members are charged with the responsibility of obtaining program input from the communities they represent and encouraging classroom participation. It is important to note that neither 4-H agents involved in the program are bilingual. The Hispanic Youth Leadership Program demonstrates Extension's ability to be successful in providing educational opportunities regardless of language or cultural differences.

Program evaluation

A formal evaluation was conducted following the 2002 conference with a total of 198 youth participating. An end-of-program survey containing 16 questions relating to the learning outcomes for the conference was developed. A likert scale of 1-5 was used, with "1" indicating "not true at all" and "5" indicating "very true." Paired *t*-tests were used to analyze the change in scores from before the conference to after. In all cases the mean score was significantly greater after the conference ($p < .05$). The results indicate that participants felt they were leaving the conference with more knowledge and understanding of the subjects presented at the conference than they had prior to attending.

The survey also included seven questions to measure the impact of the program on the student's knowledge and awareness of what it takes to successfully enroll in college. Again, a paired *t*-test was used to analyze the difference in scores from before the conference to after, and again, in all cases the mean score was significantly greater after the conference ($p < .05$).

In addition, a final question asked how much the conference had helped the student to be more likely to attend college. The question was accompanied by a 1-5 scale where "1" indicated "not

very much help" and "5" indicated a "great deal of help." The mean score was 4.50, with 88 percent of respondents answering a 4 or 5 to this question.

When asked what college information the conference offers that the students don't receive elsewhere one respondent replied:

We don't have many places where we can see a bunch of colleges all at once. If you want to go visit a college (from) out here in Eastern Oregon you really have to travel, down to the Portland area or down to Corvallis, Eugene, or up to Idaho, and it is a long drive. And if you go you might be able to pick up one, two, three colleges maybe. But to have all these all at once and have that contact is really great.

Another noted the benefit of having multiple contacts with college recruiters:

And one thing I have noticed about the colleges is that they are not just talking to juniors and seniors. I have been going to HYLIC since 8th grade, and even when I was in 8th grade I was visiting with colleges, you know, and they were giving me all the information they could, and they were doing it with a smile on their face. (They would say) you know, come back when you are a junior or senior, and then we will talk again. Even if just an 8th grader or a freshman in high school talked to them they will tell them what they need to do to prepare once they are a junior or they are a senior. That way they are kinda prepared on what to expect when they do have to fill out the applications and do the scholarship stuff.

In addition to the survey, a focus group was conducted with three members of the Youth Leadership Board. The analysis of the transcript revealed three main themes about the benefits of the conference. One of the major benefits that the conference provides is information about, and help with, the college application process. A second benefit is the important role that the conference plays in helping Hispanic youth maintain and celebrate their own heritage(s) while at the same time prepare for success in the larger society. A third benefit is the encouragement and support the conference provides for the students, and the self-confidence that the students gain through this support. One student put it this way:

I think that the Hispanic Leadership has given me the self-assurance which I have. I really feel I'm really positive about myself and I always carry it around with me. And I don't care what people say. It's just like I'm going to do what I want to do. And I'm going to do it! You have to have that motivation. You have to have that positive attitude to carry on.

Program impact

In total, more than 3,300 Hispanic youth have participated in the program, and more than 420 Hispanic students have served as committee officers, workshop facilitators, and board members. Although the program was originally designed for Hispanic youth, it has had a strong impact on the total region. Hispanic parents are more aware of the benefits of completing an education, and not only are they encouraging their children to stay in school, they also are participating in educational programs to learn English, job skills, and more about community opportunities. This change is crucial as gaining parental support for their children's educational future appears to be one of the key factors involved in the likelihood of Hispanic youth completing high school and college (Franklin and Soto 2002).

Furthermore, the Hispanic Youth Leadership program has helped established community residents become more aware of Hispanic needs and has created dialogue in how to embrace Hispanic residents in a positive and supportive manner. In addition, conference participants in three communities have developed multi-cultural leadership clubs in their schools in an effort to enhance diversity efforts. And finally, many of the past students that have participated in the conference are now in college and return to speak to their younger peers about the impact of the program and the importance of education.

Conclusion

"Attitudes for Success" Hispanic Youth Leadership Program helps Hispanic youth develop the skills and confidence necessary to become committed and involved in their schools and community. The program demonstrates a successful coalition model designed to reach at-risk clientele. The program has been successfully conducted for 13 years with continued support from area schools and businesses within the two county areas. As the Hispanic population continues to grow in the nation, similar outreach programs will meet a critical need for many of our communities.

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