

# “Why don’t they come?” Professional Education on Working with the Latino Community

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## Abstract

This article discusses eight in-depth institutes on Latino cultural competency conducted in Washington State responding to an Extension educator’s survey. It also addresses implications for Cooperative Extension, since Extension educators and other service providers need to work with ever diverse audiences. Cultural competency training has increasingly received attention by Extension and many disciplines and efforts exist to help professionals effectively serve Latino/diverse audiences. The survey shows the need of training in Washington, the trainings show the participant’s change of knowledge and plans, and the conclusions address the need to evaluate the impact on the audiences served, conduct institutional self-assessment, and support and require diversity training.

**Keywords:** Latino, Hispanic, cultural competency training, diversity, Washington State

## Conceptual Framework

“I am at wit’s end for why (Latino/a) parents aren’t coming” (participant’s quote in a

“Strategies for Reaching Out to Latinos” training). As in many states, urban and rural communities in Washington are experiencing a rapid demographic change of which Latinos/as are the main driving force. Service providers and educators face increasing challenges to reach out to, and work with, those audiences; thus cultural proficiency in working with Latino/a families is crucial for professionals to accomplish their objectives of serving ever changing communities. Many practitioners in Washington State still lack the tools, skills and confidence to reach out to Latino/a families. This reality leads to the need to acquire the tools and skills to work with Latinos/as, connect with other like-minded people and potential partners, and receive clear and strong support from their institutions.

Responding to the challenge of ever increasing diversity in cities, towns and neighborhoods, models and training have been developed and much has been published on how to reach out and provide culturally appropriate services to Latino/a audiences (Bean, Perry, & Bedell, 2001; Behnke, 2008; DeBord & Ferrer, 2000; Delgadillo, 2003; Escott, Mincemoyer, Nauman, Rodgers, & Sigman-Grant, 1996; Farner, Rhoads, Cutz, & Farner, 2005; Hobbs, 2004; Hobbs, 2008; Martinez-Espinoza, Fonseca, & Chance, 2003; Sousa, Gregory, Campbell, Dasher, & Snell, 2007;). Further, university Extension systems have devoted staff and resources to develop diversity plans, generate materials on reaching out to Latino/a audiences, create positions with specific Latino/a-related responsibilities, and develop training workshops and other educational opportunities for Extension professionals and other service providers; all in order to help those professionals increase their skills to work with Latino/a audiences. Just as Extension is concerned with cultural competency training, so are social work, nursing, psychology, public

health and other helping professions as evidenced by the rapidly growing body of literature on this topic (Weaver, 2008; Masselink, 2008).

Unfortunately, assessing and evaluating the impacts of that kind of training have not received similar attention; not only in terms of measuring knowledge increase and attitude change by Extension and other professionals but also how the improvements of their skills and behavior change may have benefited Latinos/as and other underserved audiences. Van de Vijver & Breugelmans (2008) summarize this gap as follows: “while theoretical tools [of cultural competency training] are rapidly catching up with the development of training procedures, the evaluative tools still seem to be lagging behind”.

This article discusses the experience, lessons-learned, and implications for Extension and other service providers from a survey and the resulting training program developed to help them reach out and work effectively with Latinos/as in Washington State.

## **Survey of Extension Educators**

A survey was conducted in 2008 to identify the training needs of WSU Extension educators. Out of 250 surveys there were 60 valid responses (24 percent). This low percentage of responses only allows an analysis with a 10 percent margin of error and a 90 percent confidence level. Nevertheless, the analysis does provide some sense of the training needs and interests of WSU Extension faculty.

The survey questionnaire was divided into two sections. The first section pertained to the kind of Latino/a-related *knowledge* held by Extension professionals and the *support* they felt they needed. The six questions in this section included: Latino/a demographics in rural and urban areas, how to locate and reach Latino/a audiences, cultural concerns when working with Latinos/as, the diversity within the Latino/a community, and other socio-economic data. The second section focused on access to, and availability of, *resources and programs* with five questions covering topics such as access to a list of resource persons on Latino/a issues, access to a person who could assist extension educators, the establishment of a support network of extension educators working with or interested in working with Latinos/as, and participation in short workshops and longer in-depth trainings. All questions had four answer options: high interest, moderate interest, low interest and no interest. Other questions included what other topics respondents may be interested in, their area of expertise, and the county/region they cover.

## Survey Results

Half of the survey responses came from extension educators in agriculture, forestry and natural resource areas; about 37 percent came from professionals in youth, family, health and nutrition areas, and the rest (13 percent) came from people involved in community development, learning centers, and communications. More importantly, the responses showed an overwhelming need to increase Extension professionals' skills to work effectively with Latinos/as. In section one of the survey, *knowledge and support* (table 1):

- Ninety five percent of the respondents expressed moderate to high interest about how to reach out to Latinos/as

- Cultural concerns working with Latinos/as showed the second highest interest (92 percent)

**Table 1. WSU Extension educators interest in Latino/a topics.**

N=60

<b>Topic of interest</b>	High/moderate Interest	Low/no interest	Total
Information on Latinos in rural and urban areas	70%	30%	100%
How to locate Latino audiences	82%	18%	100%
How to reach Latino audiences	95%	5%	100%
Cultural concerns when working with Latino audiences	92%	8%	100%
A better understanding of the Latino diversity	87%	13%	100%

Responses to the second section—*resources and programs* —showed similar high levels of interest (table 2):

- Ninety two percent of the respondents indicated a high to moderate interest in a list of resource persons with knowledge and experience.
- Direct access to a person able to assist you and a half-day training received the same number of high/moderate interest rankings (83 percent)

**Table 2. WSU Extension educators interest in resources and programs on Latinos/as.**

N=60

<b>Resources and programs</b>	High/moderate interest	Low/no interest	Total
A list of resource persons with knowledge/experience	92%	8%	100%
Access to a person who could assist you developing Latino programs	83%	17%	100%
A network of educators working with or interested in Latinos	73%	27%	100%
3-4 hour workshop to design and implement Latino programming	83%	17%	100%
Two-day training institute to improve ability to work with Latino audiences	65%	35%	100%

Respondents answered the open-ended question of “other topic of interest” with a rich variety of answers that were sometimes very specific to their individual needs. Some of them included the need for translation of materials, learning Spanish, web resources on pesticide management targeting Latino/a agricultural workers, use of organic agriculture by Latino/a farmers, evaluating Latino/a acceptance and usage of programs, facilitating Latino/a groups to solve problems and get involved in their communities, etc. A good portion of respondents also expressed excitement and the need of receiving training with statements like “it was about time”, “thank goodness this is finally being done. Keep at it”, “thank you for doing work in this area. I believe we will benefit greatly”, and “this sounds like a great idea. Reaching this segment of the population is something I’ve been trying to do for years”.

## **Training for Educators and Service Providers**

In an effort to meet the needs expressed in the survey, eight in-depth seminars titled “*But They Don’t Come*”: *Strategies to increase Latino/a participation in outreach programs* took place in various parts of the state between October 2008 and May 2011 and with a total participation of close to 300 individuals. All, except one, lasted two full days (the exception was a one-day condensed version). Attendees came from a wide range of entities including WSU Extension, state and federal agencies, non-profit organizations, health services, educational institutions, and private companies. The seminars were planned keeping the findings of the Extension survey in mind. All had the same content and used the same evaluation form. The training was structured to provide participants an understanding of the diversity of the Latino/a community, cultural traits and values, demographics and the origins of the Latino/a population in the US and the

Pacific Northwest. It also contained hands-on practical elements such as panel discussions with panelists with extensive experience working with Latinos/as, role plays, case studies, and simulated situations. There was also a specific youth component since many participants were teachers or people dealing with Latino/a youth. In addition, an immigration attorney provided insight into the complexity of the US immigration system. Finally, as a key element of the training, participants were divided into small groups to develop an action plan to reach out to, or increase, Latinos/as in their programs.

As is common in Extension programs, the seminars had an evaluation component. Participants were requested to fill out a form designed to measure changes in knowledge, attitudes and behavior/skills. Among the almost 300 participants, 85% filled out an evaluation at the end of the training sessions. The evaluation questionnaire measured the *event outcomes* by including questions related to if and to what extent

- their understanding of the Latino/a community increased,
- their knowledge of Latino/a culture and values improved
- new practices and ways to increase Latino/a involvement would be used and
- how and when they would implement the things they had learned

The questionnaire also collected information about *participant reactions* in terms of

- whether their expectations were met
- how much seminar information was pertinent to their needs
- if they would recommend the training to others and
- which information provided at the seminar was most and least useful.

# Training Results

Participants showed high levels of satisfaction in their evaluation responses and comments. The results for the *outcomes* section were:

- Among all respondents, 68 percent indicated they had highly or substantially increased their understanding of Latinos/as in general (demographics, diversity)
- Another 73 percent stated they had also highly or substantially increased their understanding of the Latino/a “culture and values”
- Seventy-six percent felt highly or substantially confident that they have the knowledge to increase the involvement of Latinos/as in their programs
- The vast majority (85 percent) indicated they plan to use the methods and practices learned at the training to reach out to Latinos/as
- Sixty-three percent were more specific conveying that they have concrete plans to deliver from 1 to 4 Latino/a oriented programs within 12 months after the workshop. The remainder respondents indicated they need more tools and information or they need more institutional support.

As to the participant’s *reactions*, the evaluation showed that:

- Seventy-three percent indicated that their training expectations were fully met or exceeded.
- Another big majority (63 percent) felt that more than 60 percent of the information provided was useful to them



- Ninety 90 percent of the responses stated they would recommend the training to others; whereas the remaining 10 percent were equally split in not answering and answering “no”

## The “so what?” Question

The number of Latinos/as in Washington State has continued increasing in this decade.

Latinos/as grew from 7.5 percent to 10.2 percent (or over 684,000 individuals) of the total population between 2000 and 2010 (Washington State Office of Financial Management, 2010).

This article discusses the experiences, learning and implications for Extension of the training program with regard to strategies to increase Latino/a participation in outreach programs in Washington State. The survey results clearly showed the interest Extension educators have in receiving training related to reaching out and working with Latinos/as. The large and enthusiastic turnout at the trainings also demonstrated the commitment of organizations, institutions, agencies, and staff to spend time acquiring the tools and skills to work effectively with Latino/a communities.

Although the majority of participants felt very positive about their experience at the training, there is much more that can and should be done to effectively reach out to Latino/a families in Washington and beyond. One significant deficiency in current cultural competency training, including with regard to the Latino/a population, is the gap between the implementation of new/learned skills and measuring the impact on the served populations. Initiatives and programs to provide support to Extension and other service providers on Latino/a related outreach strategies have increased noticeably, but apparently evaluation that goes beyond the awareness

and knowledge level of practitioners is lagging behind. As Weaver (2008) puts it, “a particularly significant limitation is that most of these studies [on the effectiveness of cultural competence training] only measured changes in provider attitude and knowledge, not changes in provider behavior or client outcome”.

Our effort to provide the skills to Extension and other professionals in Washington to reach out more effectively to Latino/a families has helped them increase their understanding of the local Latino/a community and their readiness to go ahead with new programs and activities. However, we do not know if those increases in awareness and understanding have resulted or are resulting in actual increases in recruiting and retaining Latinos/as. One follow-up survey, several follow-up calls and even a follow-up workshop were conducted but the response rates and participation were far smaller and cooler than the participation at the trainings. It is beyond the scope of this article to analyze the reasons behind the low participation in the follow up activities.

However, one aspect that clearly came up at the follow-up activities, the need to differentiate the training needs of specific groups. Teachers and school counselors may be more inclined to learn issues and approaches related to youth, graduation success, and family involvement; whereas nurses, physicians, mental health providers, nutritionists, and other health related providers might be more interested in understanding Latino/a family attitudes toward illness prevention, expectations of health providers, cultural approaches to medicine (including home and popular treatments) and others. In addition, participants brought up another important idea related to training on the topic: the need for tailored training for people with different levels of knowledge and experience; that is people with a better understanding and more experience working with

Latinos/as would attend a more advanced training; and people at the early stages of cultural competency would attend a corresponding training.

What are the implications for Extension?

- First, it is clear that Extension educators and other professionals have to (re)shape their programming keeping in mind the changes in demographics.
- Second, cultural competency training regarding working with Latinos/as and other underserved populations cannot be just an option for Extension faculty and other service providers; it has to be required so that they will be equipped to carry out programs with diverse audiences.
- Third, Extension needs to develop or find tools to assess the impact of its cultural competency training on the Latino/a and other underserved populations.
- Fourth, the efforts of Extension educators to reach out and work with Latinos/as need to receive substantive support from the University's central administration including leaders at the highest levels. The support should be tangible, that is beyond just encouragement and applause, and on an on-going basis.
- Fifth, Extension (and other agencies and organizations) should conduct a periodic self-assessment to measure the cultural competency of the institution. This will result in a better understanding of institutional strengths and weaknesses in serving diverse communities (including Latinos/as); and will serve to change and/or develop new policies, long term goals, and daily practices to reflect more clearly the commitment to serving non-traditional communities.

New or revised strategies to help Extension professionals be better prepared to reach out to Latinos/as could include:

- the availability—on a regular basis—of training and assistance for extension educators on Latino/a cultural competency and other diversity related aspects
- a cultural competence component in the hiring process of new extension educators
- training for researchers and administrators on Latino/a cultural competency
- resources to make sure that Latino/a communities are an integral part of Extension programs

In these economically challenging times, this may sound unrealistic, but low- or no-cost steps can make a big difference. Some examples would be encouraging extension personnel, researchers, and administrators to attend and participate in Latino/a related activities (e.g., cultural events, lectures, meetings and conferences); revising/creating policies and goals; connecting and partnering with Latino/a-serving entities and Latino/a research centers; and understanding and publicly acknowledging the importance of working with Latino/a communities.

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