

10-1-2008

## Expanding the Latino Market Niche: Developing Capacity and Meeting Critical Needs

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### Recommended Citation

Behnke, A. (2008). Expanding the Latino Market Niche: Developing Capacity and Meeting Critical Needs. *The Journal of Extension*, 46(5), Article 15. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol46/iss5/15>

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October 2008 // Volume 46 // Number 5 // Research in Brief // 5RIB5



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## Expanding the Latino Market Niche: Developing Capacity and Meeting Critical Needs

### Abstract

As Extension competes to secure a place in serving Latino populations across the nation, it is critical to assess its overall capacity to serve Spanish-speaking clients. Extension must also evaluate how well current educational programming is meeting the needs of this population. This article describes a statewide assessment of 97 North Carolina counties via online surveys and 12 Spanish-language focus groups. Survey respondents noted the need for bilingual staff in their county offices, and specific types of Spanish-language materials. Focus groups with Spanish-speaking clients, demonstrated the need for hands-on training, collaboration, marketing, and improved delivery of critical information.

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## Introduction

Between 1990 and 2007, North Carolina experienced one of the largest growth in the Latino population in the United States--increasing from 69,020 to 643,333--a nearly 10-fold increase (US Census, 2008). In fact in the 1990s, 12 rural counties in North Carolina had increases in their Latino populations that exceeded 1000%. The rapid growth of the Latino population in this state has caught entire communities off guard, resulting in isolated Latino communities and meager efforts to educate and serve this population.

This situation of course is not unique to North Carolina. Many communities throughout the U.S. find themselves lacking resources and information to truly understand and meet the needs of Latino immigrants and their families. Service agencies (e.g., Extension centers) and educators within these communities need to be able to assess what Latinos within their communities need and want in terms of services (Farner, Rhoads, Cutz, & Farner, 2005). Research has also shown that educators should understand their own capacity to provide services and use these assets to develop effective and engaging Spanish-language resources and curriculum for this new market niche (Ayala et al., 2007).

A niche market is defined as a discrete target audience in need of a product or service that is not being addressed by other organizations. In business terms, the key to engaging a new market niche is finding clients who are accessible, growing fast enough, and not firmly engaged by any one entity already (Chan & Mauborgne, 2005). In recent years, much has been written about how Extension can reach out and serve Latino clientele. Topics have included financial resource management, nutrition, 4-H clubs & camps, parent workshops, green industry, and agriculture. This research has echoed key themes like:

- Assessing what Latino clientele need (Farner et al., 2005; Malek, 2002),
- Overcoming the challenges of language barriers (Farner, Cutz, Farner, Seibold, & Abuchar, 2006; Fidalgo & Chapman-Novakofski, 2001),
- Developing cultural competency and literacy (Delgadillo, 2003; Hobbs, 2004),

- Creating innovative programs: Using a "promotora" model (Robinson, Anding, Garza, & Hinojosa, 2003), Latino day camps (Farner et al., 2006), Family events (Viramontez Anguiano, 2001), and Spanish-language radio programs (Cudaback, Marshall, & Knox, 1994).

Despite all of this effort, some important questions remain unanswered. First, we know very little about Cooperative Extension's resource needs and overall capacity to serve this population (asset assessment). Second, little has been done to assess how Spanish-speaking clients feel Extension is meeting their educational programming needs.

## Methods

Partners within NC State University Extension collaborated to assess each county's capacity to serve the burgeoning Latino population of the state. Two principle methods were used: online surveys and Spanish-language focus groups.

Online surveys were used to assess Extension staff's assets and needs for serving Latinos across the state. Each county Extension director was asked to work with their county staff (e.g., agents, assistants, etc.) to answer 16 questions (nine multiple choice and seven short answer). An email with a hyperlink to the survey was sent to all county Extension staff members with instructions to fill it out as a team in a staff meeting. The survey was intentionally brief to allow for completion in 10-15 minutes. Questions included: types of programs and services for Latinos currently offered by staff in their county, specific needs for Spanish-language resources, comfort level of cultural literacy, availability of Spanish-speakers in their office, collaborations with other Latino serving groups, and numbers of Latino adults and youth served via Extension. The survey used in this part of the study can be found at <<http://ceres.cals.ncsu.edu/surveybuilder/Form.cfm?testID=2526>>.

The study also used Spanish-language focus groups, which provide a collectivistic group environment that fits well with Latino sociocentric orientations (Umaña-Taylor & Bámaca, 2004). This helped participants feel comfortable sharing information without feeling obligated to respond a certain way and thus provided potentially richer data (Malek, 2002). Focus group participants were asked about how Cooperative Extension meets their educational needs; their major areas of concern; their desires for further information; and factors that would improve their likelihood of attending educational programs.

Twelve focus groups (83 individuals) were conducted in six diverse NC counties (three rural and three urban settings). Latino adults (67% female; 81% first generation immigrants) were recruited from a number of audiences (e.g., farmworkers, church groups, school programs, ESL classes) in order to invoke a variety of potential experiences with Extension. These focus groups were led and recorded by two bilingual educators, who followed the focus group protocol outlined by Umaña-Taylor and Bámaca (2004). Transcripts of focus groups were back-translated (Spanish to English) and analyzed using Patton's (2002) inductive approach for extracting themes from qualitative data.

## Results

### Survey Results

Ninety-seven of North Carolina's 101 county centers responded to the online survey, providing a rather complete snapshot of Latino services within NC Extension. Data was downloaded into SPSS, and all of the personal information about respondents was deleted. Chi-square tests ( $p \leq 0.05$ ) were used to explore the basic relationships and percentages detailed below.

Cooperative Extension staff reported challenges in their capacity to serve Latinos, as can be seen in the following responses. For example, only 29% of the counties related that they had a Latino Advisory Council or Latino members on their Extension Advisory Council. About 56% of counties in this study reported that they had no bilingual staff or interpreters on staff, 14% had bilingual staff or interpreters on staff, and 30% knew of offsite translators they could call upon if needed. Forty-one percent of the counties reported they were not currently serving Latino audiences in a focused way. Sixty-seven percent of NC counties indicated that their Extension center would be highly interested in collaborating with other Latino-serving organizations (serving primarily Latinos) in their area to reach out to Latinos, whereas only 29% would be somewhat interested, and 4% were not interested. However, only 36% of all counties were currently collaborating with another Latino serving agency. Counties were asked how many Latino adults and children they served via regular programming and annual/specialty events (Tables 1 & 2).

**Table 1.**  
Reports of the Percentage of Latino Adults and Children Served via Regular Programming (n = 96)

	Numbers of Latinos Served Via Regular Programming					
	1-10	11-25	26-50	51-75	76-100	More Than 101

Percent of counties serving Latino adults	44%	20%	14%	11%	4%	12%
Percent of counties serving Latino children	40%	21%	14%	11%	7%	6%

**Table 2.**  
Reports of the Percentage of Latino Adults and Children Served via Annual/Specialty Events (n = 96)

	<b>Numbers of Latinos Served Via Annual/Specialty Events</b>					
	<b>1-30</b>	<b>31-60</b>	<b>61-100</b>	<b>101-150</b>	<b>151-200</b>	<b>More Than 201</b>
Percent of counties serving Latino adults	57%	16%	9%	6%	4%	8%
Percent of counties serving Latino children	50%	17%	14%	7%	4%	8%

These data show that many areas are struggling to reach out to Latino audiences. Most counties (especially rural counties and smaller county offices) reported having served only a small numbers of Latinos. A few counties commented that they saw little need in their county due to low numbers of Latinos. For example: "There is a limited number of Latinos in [our] County. Mostly seasonal farm workers. . . . There is not a need at this time to target the population for special programming due to limited numbers."

Interest level was another story. Sixty-seven percent of NC counties indicated that their Extension center would be highly interested in collaborating to reach out to Latinos with other organizations in their area that serve primarily Latinos (whereas only 29% would be somewhat interested and 4% were not interested).

To assess Cooperative Extension's resource needs, counties were asked in what way they were currently serving Latino families and in what specific ways would they need programming support and additional materials (Table 3). All counties reported having some Spanish-language materials, but reported these areas to be of greatest need for further Spanish-language materials.

Some counties made comments other than the strategic areas shown in Table 3. Some of the popular themes included the following

- "We need Spanish-language training for Extension staff, especially secretaries."
- "We need more low literacy publications in Spanish with English on the opposite side. Most of our clients are also trying to learn English. And we need to know what we are sharing with them."
- "We need access to publications in Spanish, and greater availability of staff that can communicate in Spanish."

**Table 3.**  
Reports of the Percentage of Counties Serving Latinos and Requesting Support Materials\* for Latinos by Strategic Area (n = 97)

<b>Strategic Areas</b>	<b>Percent of counties that serve Latino clientele in each strategic area</b>	<b>Percent of counties that requested materials and documents for serving Latino clientele in each strategic area</b>
Child educational support & school programs	29%	9%
Nutrition / exercise / healthy lifestyle programming	25%	15%
4-H clubs (either all Latino or at least in part Latino participants)	24%	24%
Farm health & safety programs	22%	17%
Collaborative efforts with other Latino serving agencies	21%	2%

Child centered nutrition programs	20%	15%
Commercial horticulture, nursery, & turf programs	20%	11%
Summer camps or summer programs	20%	7%
Parenting / child development classes	18%	20%
Food safety & processing (e.g., ServeSafe)	15%	0%
Animal agriculture programs	14%	9%
Alternative ag. programming (direct marketing, ag. tourism, valued-added)	11%	0%
Field crop programs, sustainable agriculture, & specialty crop programming	11%	2%
Community development/leadership programming	10%	7%
Cultural programming (e.g., community festivals)	9%	4%
Integrated pest management programming	8%	13%
Child centered agricultural programs	7%	2%
Disaster preparedness/response programming	6%	22%
Financial & resource management programming (e.g., credit, debt)	6%	17%
Other areas not listed	6%	15%
Housing & household safety programming	4%	13%
Water quality related programming	4%	2%
Physical health programming (e.g., asthma, diabetes)	3%	7%
Other environmental stewardship programming	3%	0%
Entrepreneurship / small business programs	1%	4%

## Focus Group Results

Comments from focus group participants showed that NC Cooperative Extension is playing a key role in meeting the educational needs of Spanish-speaking clients. Latino adults were very appreciative for classes on parenting, nutrition, health and safety around the home, farm worker safety, and classes for English as a Second Language. When participants were asked what percent of the information they received was new for them the most common response was about 70%. Four major themes emerged from the focus group interviews.

## ***Collaborating with Other Trusted Groups***

Many focus group participants commented that they would be more likely to attend Extension programming if they had heard about it from groups they trusted (e.g., churches, local Latino businesses). They wanted to know ahead of time that it would be safe and worth their time. Many respondents said they would trust an invitation from their local priest or minister, or from their boss or colleague at work. Participants suggested that programs be held in conjunction with experts from other agencies and organizations, so they could be sure that they were getting the right information.

- "I'm glad that those people from other [organizations] help with classes on what they know. They really helped get the important points across."
- "Sometimes they will say 'do it this way' but it doesn't work like that! How can you be sure that they even know [what they're talking about]."
- "I liked what was taught about correct lifting and CPR [from the red cross instructor]. I liked getting the information from the experts!"

## ***Hands-on Training***

Interviewees often commented on how they really appreciated workshops that helped them practice and work on the things they were learning. They also often suggested the use of DVDs or videos rather than handouts because they would rather watch something that was "hands on."

- "What we need is training, training in the field. To go and cut down a pine tree, like take me with the powersaw and have someone tell me 'you do it like this' and feel the pressure of the machine, like this... but the thing is making it practical. Practice, practice, practice makes perfect."
- "We have to meet with other parents to learn and practice our English because the rest of the world out there speaks it, we have to know what to say to the teachers if our kid is struggling in school. How can we let [administration] know our complaints if we can't talk to them."
- "You have to go out and learn where to buy the foods, who carries what, what they're called, what they look like... to make some of the things the kids should be eating."
- "When you've learned something you got to practice it little by little, it takes a while sometimes."

## ***Marketing's Minimal Reach into the Latino Community***

Interviewees also shared that programs were limited in scope and often times were not reaching the large majority of Latinos within their communities. The number one reason given was that their friends just hadn't heard that Extension programs existed or they did not know where to go for them. Others commented that educational programs should be conducted on Saturday afternoons and Sundays, when most people could attend. Participants stressed that arrangements needed to be made to either include their children in the learning or have children's activities to allow the entire family to come.

- "I liked what was shared, but there are so many Latinos that need the information that was shared."
- "A lot of the people we've invited don't show up."
- "I guess that a lot of my friends had to work, that's why they didn't come"

## ***Lack of Critical Information***

Many participants expressed that some of their biggest needs for information were not being met. Among these needs were information about pesticide use, immigration, English language classes, how to help their children succeed in school, how to get skills to get a better job, how to avoid getting in trouble with the law, and what to do about drugs, guns, and gangs.

- "Like those of us that handle pesticides, there's all kinds of pesticides, but they've never explained the labels that list the risks, how to use them right."
- "We need the skills to get better jobs — like how to become a chef, carpenter, or painter, or learn skills to do other jobs that pay better."
- "Help us learn what is really happening with regards to immigration."
- "I want to know how to be safer. I've been stalked by man in the grocery store parking lot, it's scary. Sometimes you're scared to open the door when you're by yourself."

- "We don't know how to help our kids in school, how to do the homework with them, if you don't know English how are you supposed to help them."
- "I didn't know that mixing chlorine and other chemicals like ammonia together produced toxic fumes. I do cleaning for a living, in a lot of homes, now I know how bad it is."

## Implications and Conclusion

The study reported here reinforces the notion that Cooperative Extension needs to build resources and overall capacity to serve Latinos. Most counties noted the need for bilingual staff in their county offices and a desire to collaborate with other Latino serving groups. Many also desired to see their administrators make serving Latino clientele a higher priority.

Counties in the study requested more program materials in the key areas of: 4-H, disaster preparedness, parenting, farm and health safety, and financial resource management. Currently, some Spanish-language resources are available on parenting, 4-H, financial resource management, and farm health and safety at <<http://extensionenespanol.net/publications.cfm>>. And information about natural disasters is available at <<http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/disaster/factsheets/spanish/>>.

While many needs assessments have been conducted in the past to assess what is really desired by Latino clientele, the study reported here has gone the extra step of exploring how well we are doing at meeting those needs. Focus group results showed that Spanish-speaking clients feel Extension is making a difference in their lives, but could also do a few things to improve. They emphasized that other Latinos in their communities face significant challenges in terms of finding critical information and access to services and programs. They suggested that educational activities be held in collaboration with other agencies and organizations, so they could be sure that they were getting the right information from the experts.

A simple statewide asset and needs assessment (a tool like the one shared here that assesses both the needs and the positive assets/resources found in the community) is a powerful first step to organizing more effective and strategic programming for Latinos. By learning where the gaps are in terms of capacity to serve and actually program for Latinos, more effective efforts can be undertaken. Bringing together both those individuals in need of information and those who hope to serve them, Extension can help to effectively narrow these gaps.

Because the participants for both the survey and focus groups in the study were not randomly selected and comprised only of North Carolinians, suggestions offered here may play out differently in other parts of the United States. However, these results provide rich insights into what we can do to improve services to Latinos via Cooperative Extension.

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