Voices from College Student Mentors: Implications for Extension Programming with Latino Youth

Byron L. Zamboanga
University of Nebraska- Lincoln, axisi@yahoo.com

Lisa Knoche
University of Nebraska- Lincoln, lknoche@unlserve.unl.edu

Voices from College Student Mentors: Implications for Extension Programming with Latino Youth

Abstract
Changing demographics and unique cultural factors relevant to Latinos have prompted the need for culture-specific programming. This article draws on a qualitative study of six college student mentors (M age = 22; four women) and serves as a basis for discussing improved programming with Latino youth. Mentors' comments are presented, followed by recommended practices for Extension staff.

Byron L. Zamboanga
Internet Address: axisi@yahoo.com

Lisa Knoche
LAMP Program Evaluation Coordinator
Internet Address: lknoche@unlserve.unl.edu

Department of Psychology
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Lincoln, Nebraska

Statement of Need

Understanding and addressing the needs of the Latino population is becoming increasingly important as the demographics of many communities in the United States are changing. Specifically, between 1990 and 2000, the Latino population grew 57.9%, while the total U.S. population climbed 13.2% (Census Scope, 2000). In Nebraska, the Latino population rose 155% during this same period. Furthermore, reports suggest that many Latinos undergo unique educational and language challenges (Carlo, Carranza, & Zamboanga, 2002). For example, compared to non-Hispanic Whites, Latinos are less likely to complete high school and obtain a college degree (Therrien & Ramirez, 2000).

Changing demographics and distinct cultural factors relevant to Latinos have prompted the necessity for culture-specific programming. To address the needs of Latino youth in the Lincoln community, the Latino Research Initiative (LRI) at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) developed the Latino Achievement Mentoring Program (LAMP). The LRI works collaboratively with the Lincoln Hispanic Community Center and Lincoln Public Schools to implement LAMP. (See Gonzalez-Kruger et al., 2000, for information on the LRI.)

Brief Program Description of LAMP

LAMP is a culture-specific mentoring program designed to promote school success and post-secondary opportunities. College student mentors serve as positive role models and provide information and guidance about academic life. Mentor-mentee pairs meet weekly and engage in activities such as doing homework, going to museums, and spending time with family.

LAMP also aims to develop future community leaders. Community professionals (including LAMP staff and academic faculty) provide weekly training in general developmental and culturally relevant issues that confront Latino youth (e.g., acculturation, school retention, and success).

A unique element of LAMP is the inclusion of the mentees' family. For example, program staff and mentors plan family activities and provide information to mentees' families about educational opportunities and community resources.

Program evaluation personnel utilize qualitative and quantitative methods to assess mentors' and mentees' experiences in LAMP (Zamboanga, Roy, Knoche, & Snyder, 2001).

Overview of Study

We conducted a qualitative study to better understand the mentoring relationship from the mentors' perspective, using participants' voices to illuminate their experiences. Individual interviews were conducted with six mentors (*M* age = 22 years, four women) involved in the program for 18 to 24 months. Interviews included open-ended questions designed to uncover their understanding of the mentoring relationship. Responses were audiotaped and transcribed.

In-depth analysis of the transcripts revealed key statements that described the mentoring relationship, and themes were derived from them. Themes were coded independently, and discrepancies were resolved by discussion (Knoche & Zamboanga, 2003). Three main clusters of themes emerged that best depicted the meaningfulness of the mentoring relationship:

- Cluster 1: Mentor-mentee relationship
- Cluster 2: Mentor-family relationship
- Cluster 3: Mentor development

Results and Implications for Extension and Programming Staff

We carefully analyzed transcripts from each cluster to uncover implications for future programming. Mentors' comments are presented below, followed by recommended practices for Extension staff and/or youth program developers.

Mentor-Mentee Relationship

> Our relationship has evolved . . . It's going to make a much bigger impact . . . [the] second year with her . . . we've [become] more comfortable with each other . . . I got to know [her family] a little better. To see how it's become better has been really encouraging for me.

> [My mentee] does not talk very much, and it's like pulling teeth, 'cause I'll ask her questions and everything is yes or no, and even if I ask her non-yes or no questions, she still doesn't respond very much. She doesn't show her emotions very much, she does not get very excited about things.

Themes

Mentors indicated challenges in establishing and maintaining rapport with their mentee. Once rapport developed, mentors felt successful, and the relationship progressed. Another issue that emerged entailed appropriate mentor-mentee expectations for communication. In some cases, the mentors' expectations for mentee-initiated contact was too high, considering the developmental level of the mentee.

Recommendations

Establishing clear mentor-mentee expectations could help reduce mentors' relationship frustrations and therefore facilitate the initial rapport-building process. Extension staff can address these issues in the following ways:

1. Recruit committed college mentors willing to serve at least 1 academic year to allow the rapport building process to unfold.

2. Provide mentor training in rapport building, specifically in developmentally appropriate communication strategies for youth. Focus should be placed on assisting mentors in developing realistic expectations for mentee-initiated contact and may include encouraging experienced mentors to discuss the course of their mentoring relationships.

Mentor-Family Relationship

> I wish I really knew her family better. Her parents don't speak English, or at least they don't really speak to me. But I just wish I had more interaction with the family.

> I really wish. . . a LAMP staff member would have met the family with me when I met them for the first time, that way there can be more of a formal introduction 'cause the first time it was just kind of "Hi, how are you," and it was sudden I'm there--this person.

Themes

Mentors encountered some obstacles in the mentor-family relationship due to language differences. Many of the mentees' families spoke primarily Spanish, while the majority of mentors spoke primarily English. The rapport-building process between mentors and families was often more challenging when language differences existed. However, in most cases, this did not preclude mentor-family communication and trust from developing.

Recommendations

Extension staff need to be mindful of these potential obstacles and can intervene by considering the following:

1. When implementing a mentoring program for Latino youth that involves family, if possible, identify and recruit bilingual mentors. Mentors can be identified by contacting culture-specific campus groups, students enrolled in language and relevant academic content courses (e.g., Spanish, International Business), and community agencies.

2. Understanding that there might be limited resources, one alternative involves enlisting an experienced bilingual program staff member to attend initial family visits with the mentor to facilitate rapport building with parents. Such efforts can help reduce perceived rapport-building challenges related to cultural and language differences among program participants.

Mentor Development

> [It's] good to know the problems that other mentors are facing, that way I'm like, "Okay, I'm not the only one having problems," and also to problem solve. Problems do come up and you get other people's feedback, or you can help other people.

Themes

Mentors reported that LAMP enabled them to develop constructive relationships with other mentors. These relationships provided an element of social support that mentors found helpful.

Recommendations

Hire a skilled-moderator to provide mentors constructive and supportive workshops. Workshops should facilitate problem solving and address issues related to mentoring, as well as promote mentor cohesiveness. Programmers should consider utilizing community professionals (including university faculty) to assist mentors in problem solving and provide social gatherings outside of formal trainings to help facilitate rapport among mentors.

Acknowledgements

References

Carlo, G., Carranza, M, & Zamboanga, B. L. (2002). Culture and ecology of Latinos on the Great Plains: An introduction. *Great Plains Research: A Journal of the Natural and Social Sciences, 12, 3-12.*

CensusScope (2000). *Your Portal to Census 2000 Data* [Data file]. Social Science Data Analysis Network. Available at: http://www.censusscope.org/

Gonzalez-Kruger, G. E., Zamboanga, B. L., Carlo, G., Raffaelli, M., Carranza, M., Hansen, D. J., et al. (2000). The Latino Research Initiative: A multidisciplinary and collaborative community-university outreach and scholarship model. *Great Plains Research: A Journal of the Natural and Social Sciences, 10, 359-385.*

Knoche, L., & Zamboanga, B. L. (2003). *The meaning of the mentoring relationship from the mentors' perspectives: A phenomenological investigation*. Manuscript submitted for publication.

Therrien, M., & Ramirez, R. R. (2000). *The Hispanic population in the United States: March 2000, current population reports, P20-535.* U.S. Census Bureau: Washington DC.

Zamboanga, B. L., Roy, L. A., Knoche, L., & Snyder, A. (2001). LAMP: The Latino achievement mentoring program. *Hispanic Outlook in Higher Education,* 11, 18-21.