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Exploring Beginning Latino Farmers and Ranchers' Willingness to Become Involved in Community Activities in Rural Missouri

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Abstract

In 2013, we conducted two workshop series, each consisting of 10 sessions, focused on how to improve financial capacity of agribusiness and to gain access to community resources. As part of the workshops, eighteen Latino farmers and ranchers in Southwest Missouri completed a survey that analyzed their disposition towards becoming involved in community activities over the upcoming six months. The willingness of the Latino farmers and ranchers to become involved in community activities was explored across five indicators: 1. "to be more engaged in community leadership roles," 2. "to form new connections in the community," 3. "to display more tolerance when working with others," 4. "to develop a community action plan," and 5. "to implement a community project." A total of 140 answers to each indicator were collected from participants and were analyzed using symmetric responses, where 1 was coded as "not willing," 2 was coded as "reluctant," 3 as "neutral," 4 as "moderate willing," and 5 as "very willing." Participants' responses to each of those five indicators showed that many (46%, 43%, 51%, 53% and 48%) beginning farmers and ranchers were "very willing" to involve themselves with community projects and activities during the upcoming six months. The willingness of participants to become involved in community activities helped us to know their predisposition to integrate and assimilate into the communities where they lived. It is argued that Latino immigrants have trouble assimilating into mainstream US culture (Huntington, 2004), and those who do assimilate, belong to a cluster with the following characteristics: spatial concentration, high incomes, intermarriage, English fluency and high levels of embeddedness in Anglo-social contexts (South et al. 2005, Waters & Jimenez, 2005). The predisposition to participate in community activities is positively related with Waters and Jimenez's perception (2005) that US communities have evolved in absorbing new immigrants and continual immigrant replenishment makes assimilation less visible. Other factors influencing positive integration and assimilation may be attributed to the population size of that immigrant group in the community and the population size of the rural community where they immigrated.

Key words: beginning Latino farmers and ranchers, immigrant integration, rural communities.

Introduction

Many Latinos who have immigrated to new destination US communities over the last 40 years have become the first generation of immigrant farmers and ranchers in the communities where they settled. In Missouri, most Latino farmers and ranchers are considered beginning farmers. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) characterizes “beginning” producers as those farmers and ranchers who have 10 years or less of farming and ranching activities earning at least \$1000 gross income a year (Economic Research Center, 2006). According to the United States Census of Agriculture, Latino farm operations in Missouri fell by 37% from 2002 to 2007 (U.S. Census of Agriculture, 2007), but then increased by 26% from 2007 to 2012 (U.S. Census of Agriculture, 2012). These fluctuations in the population of Latino farmers and ranchers in Missouri may reflect a sector of farmers that start and go out of business quickly or that are hard to be identified during Census activities. To understand these changes, we interviewed thirty Latino farmers and ranchers in Southwest Missouri; 83 percent had been farming and ranching for 10 years or less (Gonzalez & Jeanetta, 2013). From the Latino farmers’ viewpoint, they are concerned with the lack of profitability for the hard work of farming and ranching, which might underlie those ups and downs in the data.

The end goal of this study is to start documenting the leadership influences on Latino producers that lead them to become involved in different programs within their communities. Latino farmers willing to get involved in community activities are explored from a cultural integration and a cultural assimilation theoretical approach. On the one hand, cultural integration theoretical approach in this paper refers to Emile Durkheim’s perception of integration: “people’s norms, beliefs, and values make up a collective consciousness, or a shared way of understanding and behaving in the world. The collective consciousness binds individuals together and creates social integration (Boundless, 2014).” It is generally assumed that these bonds allow new immigrants to maintain some of their customs and values while adopting

others from the receiving society. On the other hand, a cultural assimilation theoretical approach in this paper refers to Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess’s explanation: “the process of interpretation and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of other persons or groups, and, by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated with them in a common cultural life (cited by Gordon, 1964).” It is “[...] the gradual process whereby cultural differences tend to disappear (Gordon, 1964).”

In this context, this paper’s objectives are to discuss the extent Latino farmers and ranchers in Southwest Missouri are willing to lead and become involved in future community projects, as well as the farmers’ willingness to hold leadership roles in their communities. Discussion of these objectives on the basis of cultural integration and assimilation theories help us to respond to the question: To what extent do Latino farmers face a cultural integration and cultural assimilation process when willing to involve themselves with projects in their rural communities?

Methods

A series of workshops consisting of 10 sessions lasting 2.5 hours each were developed and implemented twice in Southwest Missouri to improve capacity and access to financial and community resources among beginning Latino farmers and ranchers in Missouri. During the first six sessions, Latino farmers and ranchers were instructed with a curriculum to develop their financial skills and increase their farm management knowledge. In the second four sessions, the curriculum focused on improving their capacity to access community resources.

The program was conducted with a total of 18 Latino farmers and ranchers in Southwest Missouri comprised mostly of immigrants from Mexico. At the end of each session, a survey instrument was used to collect data among those producers to analyze their disposition towards becoming involved in community activities over the following six months. Community involvement indicators were explored with a survey where Latino farmer and rancher participants were

asked about their willingness: 1. “to be more engaged in community leadership roles,” 2. “form new connections in the community,” 3. “display more tolerance when working with others,” 4. “develop a community action plan,” and 5. “implement a community project.” A total of 140 answers to each indicator were collected from participants and were analyzed using symmetric ordinal responses where 1 was coded as “not willing,” 2 was coded as “reluctant,” 3 as “neutral,” 4 was coded as “moderate willing,” and 5 as “very willing.” Data was collected, gathered and analyzed using a statistical software package. Cross tabulation analysis of those indicators were analyzed to know to what extent Latino farmers and ranchers were willing to become involved in community activities in the upcoming six months.

Results

The demographic profile of Latino farmers who participated in the workshops showed that all participants in the workshops were US permanent residents or citizens, with ages ranging from 30 to 65 years old, and an average age of 48 years. Their average number of years of formal education was 6.5 and most had been living in the US for more than 30 years. Many moved from large metropolitan areas onto small farms in Southwest Missouri. All participants reported having full-time jobs and practicing farming as a part-time job. They were mainly employed at meat packing plants and local businesses, and there were no full-time, self-employed farmers. All participants practiced livestock activities. Some

of them mixed livestock with agricultural activities. Their farms ranged in size from 10 to 148 acres of land. Nobody had a membership in a community organization; however, during the workshop, we helped them to subscribe to a local monthly livestock magazine. Only three farmers could read, write, and speak fluent English out of the 18 participants in the workshops. The responses of Latino farmers and ranchers to each community indicator are listed in Table 1.

Discussion

Latino community involvement indicators showed that almost half (48%) of the participating Latino farmers and ranchers indicated having a high predisposition to become involved in community activities in the upcoming six months. Five indicators explored their willingness to be more engaged in community leadership roles, to form new connections in their community, to display more tolerance when working with other, to develop a community action plan, and to implement a community project. The high rate of the participants’ responses to the “very willing” category might be interpreted as a need to develop programs that would help them to connect with community resources. The predisposition to participate in community activities among Latino farmers is positively related and aligned with Waters and Jimenez’s argument (2005) that US communities have changed to a pattern that has absorbed new immigrants and continually replenished immigrants making assimilation less visible. However, the so-

Table 1. Latino farmers and ranchers responses to community involvement indicators

Latino community involvement indicators	Percent of farmer responses as “very willing”
To be more engaged in community leadership roles	46
To form new connections in my community	43
To display more tolerance when working with others	51
To develop a community action plan	53
To implement a community project	48

cio-economic profile of Latino farmers and ranchers in the workshop is not aligned with the socioeconomic profile of those immigrants who might be able to assimilate into other cultures as described by South (South et al, 2005).

The positive response to the two indicators; ‘to display more tolerance when working with others’ (51%) and ‘to develop a community action plan’ (53%), could be interpreted as a high predisposition of the participants to engage in collective action initiatives. Their willingness to participate in collective action is a positive sign that might be linked to a cultural integration or a cultural assimilation approach. Currently, the Latino farmers’ involvement with the broader community is not significant and is still influenced by the challenges of communicating in a language that is secondary. In regards to Latino farmers taking leadership roles, Latino farmers in Southwest Missouri who are willing to take leadership roles are also challenged by cultural and English communication constraints which limit their interaction with the mainstream or broader community. Potential and real involvement in community projects among Latinos is observed through secular organizations, which also facilitate community involvement.

Latino farmer and rancher willingness to improve civic participation is consistent with the idea of “building in the cultural definition of civic participation” to develop strategies that better fit with the values of the immigrant community (Association for the Study and Development of Community, 2002). A common goal might help facilitate community involvement and civic participation for this Latino farmer community. One example that created community involvement is cited by DeSipio (2002) when immigrants reacted to Proposition 187 in California by creating the San Antonio Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition.

Responses to our survey in regards to producers’ willingness to become involved in community activities might be biased by factors such as having sessions in Spanish, evaluations written in Spanish, and the perception that their involvement in community activities were linked to Latino community activities. Answers to many questions

regarding why most producers provided a high rate of responses to the ‘very willing’ option might remain unanswered at this stage of the beginning farmer and rancher program.

Conclusions

Latino farmers and ranchers in Southwest MO are far from becoming assimilated into the broader community. Latino farmers and ranchers are still in an integration process. Their survey responses about their motivations to participate in community activities might be tied to the way the survey was presented to them, as well as to the influence of the workshops, which were conducted in the Spanish language. In this context, their willingness to participate in local community projects might show a need for an organizational structure that fits with the Latino farmer and ranchers’ current levels of cultural integration.

An integration approach with an accurate fit to the Latino farmers and ranchers’ socio-demographic profile linked to their English language communication skills and networks to formal institutions might help them to bridge their willingness to participate into actual participation in community activities. Building bridges in the form of non-secular organizations to fill the formal gap between Latino farmers and ranchers and the broader community will help Latino farmers and ranchers to integrate better, and to eventually culturally assimilate future generations of Latino farmers.

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