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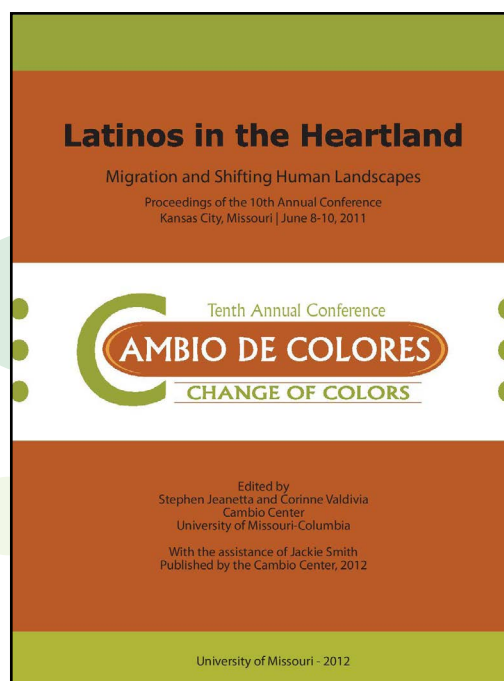
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### Dropout Prevention with Latino Families: The Juntos Program

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*Keywords:* Latino education, dropout prevention, educational support systems

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## ► Dropout Prevention with Latino Families: The Juntos Program

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### **Abstract**

Attendees will learn about the educational challenges and opportunities of Latino youth. They will be introduced to the program *Juntos para una Mejor Educación/Together for a Better Education*: an experiential program that provides Latino parents and youth with knowledge and resources to prevent students from dropping out and to encourage families to work together to gain access to postsecondary education. This workshop will share the free curriculum with participants and allow them to experience the research and some of the activities that make *Juntos Program* effective.

The educational challenges of Latino youth are popularly associated with language and cultural differences while research has shown that there are many other factors involved. The *Juntos Program* was created three years ago to address the educational challenges of Latino youth while providing Latino parents and youth in the 8th through 12th grades with knowledge and resources to prevent students from dropping out and to encourage families to work together to gain access to postsecondary education. The program brings together families with partners from schools, local community agencies, college-age mentors, and Cooperative Extension staff to make graduation a reality. *Juntos* also uses success coaches and college-age mentors to provide weekly afterschool clubs and activities with the target students before and after the 6-week program.

The 2-hour workshops meet once a week for six weeks and focus on experiential activities that help the parents and youth work towards their educational goals. Weekly topics covered are: making education a family goal, communicating with teachers and guidance counselors, knowing how to succeed in the current school system, financing college and money matters, getting ready for the college application process, and being an advocate for your teen.

The program has been held in 30 schools around North Carolina and is being piloted in ten schools in Nevada. *Juntos* has served over 700 Latino parents and youth and pre- and post-test evaluation data from Latino youth and parents that have completed the program showed significant increases in learning, attitudes, and skills gained. Results from these evaluations using a Wilcoxon sign test have revealed significant mean differences from pre- to post-tests. Parents and youth reported an increased understanding of NC graduation requirements, classes needed, higher education options, financial aid options, and necessary tests. Parents report a significant increase in their monitoring their child's homework, meeting with school staff, and increased skills and knowledge about the college application process. Youth reported significant increase in their planning for after high school and sharing those goals with their parents.

In addition to statistics, 92% of parents increased confidence in working with their child's school and 93% of parents reported that they felt they had the information they needed to help their teenager successfully complete high school. In addition, 72% of participants attended all of the workshop sessions, and more than 60% of the families had a father present.

We will share our models for funding and expanding the outreach of this program. We also will discuss how we have incorporated 4-H and the Youth and Families with Promise (YFP) mentoring program to serve younger elementary and middle school Latino students and their families.

### **Introduction**

Between 1990 and 2010, there was an almost twelve-fold increase in North Carolina's (NC) Latino population, which grew from 69,020 to 800,987 (U.S. Census, 2011). From school years 2001- 2005, Hispanic students accounted for 57% of total growth in NC public schools (Kasarda & Johnson, 2006). In fact, in NC, the Latino high school senior population is expected to increase from the current number of 4,483 in 2008 to over 27,000 in the year 2020 (WICHE, 2003).

Despite the fact that Latino students are the fastest growing ethnic group in NC schools, they also have the highest dropout rates and face great risk for academic underachievement (Hess, 2000; Laird, DeBell,

& Chapman, 2006). For example, 2010 statistics indicate that Latino youth are dropping out of school at a higher rate than any other ethnic group in the state, with only 61% of Latino youth in North Carolina graduating from high school in 4 years (NCDPI, 2011). Hence, substantial numbers of Latinos risk challenges in their future economic quality of life, including decreased job prospects and future poverty (Glennie & Stearns, 2002; Martinez, DeGarmo, & Eddy, 2004).

The economic impact of high school dropouts in NC is staggering. In 2006, dropouts cost the state seven and a half billion dollars in lost income (Gottlob, 2007). These statistics point to the need for the development of programs that support Latino families and help to promote school success and retention for Latino students. Our most recent study of 500 Latino youth from NC showed that parental involvement was a strong predictor for grades and homework completion (Behnke & Gonzalez, 2009). We also found that lack of involvement in extracurricular activities and work and family pressures were significant risk factors leading to youth's intentions to dropout.

A key factor associated with academic success and dropout prevention is parent involvement (Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems, & Holbein, 2005) and parental academic motivation (Alfaro, Umaña-Taylor, & Bámaca, 2006). Therefore, it is critical that programs be developed that promote these two factors in Latino families. A recent survey, administered during a workshop for 90 Latino-serving Extension professionals from around NC, indicated that "education on how to help Latinos navigate the US school system" was the number one issue of interest (Behnke, 2008). Another study administered to 501 Latino youth in North Carolina found that parents play an essential role in dropout prevention, and that schools that work closely with Latino parents can be much more effective in reducing the dropout rate (Behnke, Gonzalez, & Cox, 2010).

Research and experience have indicated that family-oriented educational delivery modes, rather than child-only ones, are more culturally appropriate among Latino communities (Hobbs, 2004). The programs described below use this "family approach" to encourage Latino families to work together in making academic success a reality. This article outlines the unique efforts currently taking place through the Juntos program, which serves youth and their parents in the 8th through 12th grades.

The Juntos program educates both parents and youth about the school system and encourages communication between home and school, by including both parents and youth in each of the six workshop sessions, involving more experiential activities and games, involving school staff (e.g., guidance counselors, English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers, and representatives from community colleges) and using college age peer mentors to serve as role models (Table 1).

## **Juntos Program Evaluation**

The six-week, 15 hour workshop series uses experiential activities that help Latino parents and youth work towards their educational goals and bridge the gap from high school to college. In the last three years the program has served 587 individuals from 42 middle and high schools in two states (NC and NV). The Juntos program generally has 30-80 participants during each of the weekly sessions.

Currently the program conducts self-report pre- and post-test surveys at the beginning and end of the workshop series. Parents and youth take separate tests, but questions on both surveys are designed to examine changes in participants': 1) awareness that attending college is a realistic goal; 2) understanding about the requirements for graduation and success in high school; 3) skills and knowledge of the college application process; 4) awareness of options for financing college expenses; 5) understanding about the importance of positive communication between parents, youths and school personnel; 6) frequencies of such communication; and 7) understanding about the importance of having peers who plan to go to college.

Pre- and post-test surveys were collected from 176 Latino parents and 134 Latino youth who had participated in all six sessions of the program (Behnke & Kelly, 2011). Each question was answered on a four-point Likert-type scale (from strongly agree to strongly disagree), and a Wilcoxon sign test was used to assess the change from pre- to post-test. Additionally, post-tests included open-end questions for use as formative evaluation, to determine participants' impression of the program, their satisfaction with the program, and perceived strengths and weaknesses of the program.

Table 1. Wilcoxon Pre- and Post-Test Mean Differences for the Juntos Program.

Parent Questions	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Mean Difference	
My teenager and I have started talking and planning for his/her future after high school.	2.54	3.48	.94	**
I understand how to prepare for an effective parent/teacher conference.	2.31	3.36	1.05	**
I know exactly what my teenager's goals are for after high school.	2.59	3.35	.76	**
I understand what is required to graduate from high school in North Carolina.	2.21	3.42	1.21	**
I know what classes will help my child meet his/her goals after high school.	2.01	3.20	1.19	**
I understand what higher education options are available to my teenager after high school graduation.	2.05	3.29	1.25	**
I have the skills and knowledge necessary to help my teenager apply for financial aid.	1.75	3.12	1.37	**
I am aware of the different tests that are required for entrance into four year colleges.	1.74	3.25	1.50	**
I feel that i have the skills and knowledge necessary to help my teenager complete the college application process.	1.72	3.21	1.48	**
I know who to contact at my teenager's school with questions about my teenager's education.	2.25	3.48	1.23	**
I feel comfortable contacting school personnel to request help regarding my teenager's education.	2.36	3.42	1.06	**
I feel I have the information needed to help my teenager successfully complete high school.	2.05	2.86	.81	**
I monitored my teenagers homework.	2.12	3.25	1.13	**
I met with school counselors when I had questions about my teenager's future.	1.36	2.52	1.17	**

Table 1, cont. Wilcoxon Pre- and Post-Test Mean Differences for the Juntos Program.

Student Questions	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Mean Difference	
I feel that I receive the support I need from my parent(s) to successfully complete high school.	3.17	3.53	.36	
My parent(s) and I have started talking and planning for my future after high school.	2.76	3.28	.52	*
I help my parent(s) remember to attend parent teacher conferences at school.	2.58	3.10	.51	*
My parent(s) know what my goals are for after high school.	2.67	3.43	.73	**
I understand what is required to graduate from high school in North Carolina.	2.84	3.38	.55	*
I know what course of study is most appropriate to help me meet my goals after high school.	2.64	3.21	.57	*
I understand what higher education options are available to me after high school graduation.	2.60	3.34	.74	**
I have the skills and knowledge necessary to apply for financial aid.	2.48	3.14	.66	**
I am aware of the different tests that I am required to take if I choose to apply to a four year institution.	2.48	3.28	.80	**
I feel that i have the skills and knowledge necessary to complete the college application process.	2.66	3.13	.47	
I've talked about going to college with my friends.	2.07	3.22	1.15	**
I've discussed my progress in school with my teachers.	2.39	2.71	.32	
I've thought about my goals for after graduating from high school.	2.75	3.72	.98	**
*p < .05. **p < .01.				

Results from these evaluations using a Wilcoxon sign test have revealed significant mean differences from pre- to post-tests (Table 1). Parents and youth reported an increased understanding of NC graduation requirements, classes needed, higher education options, financial aid options, and necessary tests. Parents reported a significant increases in monitoring their child's homework, meeting with school staff, and increased skills and knowledge about the college application process. Youth reported significant increases in planning for after high school and sharing those goals with their parents.

In addition to statistics found in Table 1, increased confidence in working with their child's school was reported by 92% of participating parents. Ninety-three percent of parents reported that they felt they had the information they needed to help their teenager successfully complete high school. One Latino father reported, "This course was very good because it informed us about a lot of things we didn't have any idea about and other things we had concerns about." In addition, 72% of participants attended all of the workshop sessions, and more than 60% of the families had a father present. A team of four bilingual educators (with the input of school guidance counselors, school administrators, university recruiters, and other partners) used the results from in-depth pre- and post-test surveys to improve the program content and methodology with each iteration of the program.

## Discussion

Research indicates a clear need for programs that help promote parental involvement in schools and promote academic achievement within Latino families. Our findings demonstrate that these two promising programs have, at least, short-term impacts on the parents and youth who participate in them. Parents in both programs indicated increased knowledge and skills that will help their children achieve academically. By implementing programs such as Juntos, Cooperative Extension can help educate and empower Latino parents and improve the academic outcomes of Latino children. These types of programs also help Latino parents learn that Extension staff are trustworthy and will provide them with safe and reliable resources for their families.

These types of programs are models for other programs that wish to serve Latino youth and their families because they were developed in Spanish for the Latino parents and older teens of North Carolina. Rather than simply translate a program developed for English-speaking families, these programs use culturally appropriate activities and specially crafted concepts that were specifically designed to meet the needs of Spanish-speaking parents and youth.

During the development of these programs we learned some lessons that are worth sharing that can help Extension professionals effectively work with Latino families, their communities, and their schools. We are often asked how we do so much Latino programming with so few Spanish speakers on staff, and our short answer is: We have the best partners. The key to the success of programs like these is true collaboration with key partners. These collaborations include ESL teachers/coordinators, guidance counselors, family involvement coordinators, principals, school administrators, community college representatives, members of local faith and business communities, university college student mentors, community center staff, local Extension FCS and 4-H agents, Extension staff, community family strengthening groups, and so on. To engage partners there must be a real benefit for the partner, and a real commitment to the program. Though many of our partners speak Spanish, and many do not, they all have a special place in their hearts for Spanish-speaking families. Having the heart for this kind of work is what really matters most!

However, to make programs like this successful, collaborations also require commitment. We suggest requiring all partners to volunteer in a substantial way to ensure positive outcomes for the families being served. This echoes the saying, "Give them a responsibility, and they will act responsibly." For example, we have found that it is not enough to simply have the permission of school officials or the blessing of district administrators. We suggest having an initial partners meeting and leaving this meeting with a signed letter of commitment and scope of work, to make it clear who will be contributing, in what ways, to the programming. Most partners want to be involved in a meaningful way, but most feel they don't have a lot of time and need direction and support to understand where they can contribute usefully. We split up

tasks like coordinating meals for each session (we often have potlucks when permissible), transportation, child activities, teaching, scheduling, materials for families, participant recruitment, and so on.

We find the importance of sharing responsibilities to hold just as true for the parents and youth in the program as for the professionals and partners putting involved. All parties benefit by literally, “bringing something to the table.” For example, trusted parents and partners are essential to the effective recruitment and retention of Latino families. Though flyers and phone calls can help, the face-to-face invitation is what really makes the difference for some of the hardest-to-reach families.

One of the innovative approaches we have used to engage hard-to-reach parents is working with the children or youth to prepare dances, videos, presentations, skits, and other talents to share, at the first workshop night. Parents generally come to see their youths’ presentations and are usually inclined to continue to attend because of the fun and interactive activities in the workshops. We have also had success with hosting student led “telethons,” where students call and invite their parents, and the parents of their classmates, to attend the workshops. We also suggest sending home colorful calendars, magnets, or other items in Spanish that can be both informative and a reminder of the benefits of participating.

Another innovation involves inviting key school and community partners to attend a daylong training on the program curriculum, where they learn how to conduct the workshop series and are then provided with free materials and resources. Participants commit to either co-teach or “shadow” with the program staff as they deliver the workshops and programs in their community during the first year. This enables partners in each community to gain the experience and “know-how” to facilitate the program in subsequent years.

Due to the initial success in these communities of programs like Juntos, it is the intention of the program developers that these programs be replicated by Extension agents and other partners to support and educate Latino families and youth across the United States. For example, all of the curriculum resources for the Juntos program are available online at <http://ncfamilies.com/juntos>. The free Juntos program resources include the brand new: 1) 300+ page curriculum (how to conduct the program on a week-by-week basis, handouts for parents and youth, teaching aids, etc.); 2) promotional videos; 3) DVDs with successful practices for parents; 4) PPTs for each session; 5) double-sided posters (Spanish/English) on how to get to college; 6) and various games and activities (e.g., The Quest for Success family board game specially created for this program).

Upon going through the training, one Cooperative Extension agent commented, “I attended the Juntos training last week and wanted to let you know how pleased I was with the materials. During my time in extension I have not had the opportunity to use a program that is so well put together. I appreciate the work Andrew, Cintia, and the team have done on the curriculum. It is great to have flyers, power points, evaluations, etc. ready for use. A professional from Kannapolis City Schools attended the training with me and we will definitely be implementing the program in the fall.”

The dilemma surrounding Latino dropout will not be resolved quickly without concerted effort. As prominent scholars of the dropout crisis, Velez and Saenz have commented that, “improving educational opportunities for Latino youth will require significant cooperation among different key players including students, families, teachers, administrators, policymakers, community and business leaders, researchers, and governmental officials” (2001, p. 465).

## **What Has Been Done**

In just three years the Juntos Para Una Mejor Educación Program has grown from a pilot program in one county to a funded program serving families from across the state.

The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (DPI) has awarded the program two Dropout Prevention Grants for \$349,900 which will help quadruple the program in size.

Website at: [www.NCFamilies.com/juntos](http://www.NCFamilies.com/juntos)

## Impact

Formative evaluation from in-depth pre- and post-test surveys of the Juntos program, in each of the 7 counties where it was piloted this last year, were gathered and used to improve content and methodology (Behnke & Kelly, 2011). Data from 176 Latino parents and 134 Latino youth who completed the program, revealed that 92% of parents reported increased confidence in working with their child's school. Parents and youth reported an increased understanding of NC graduation requirements (mean difference = 1.26 & 1.51). Parents reported greater comfort at being able to find out what they need to know to help to advocate for their youth's needs in school (mean difference = 1.93) and knowing who to ask for help at school (mean difference = 1.32). Ninety-three percent of parents reported that they felt they had the information they needed to help their teenager successfully complete high school, and they became more actively involved in their youth's education (mean difference = .94). Parents also significantly improved three behaviors: 1) monitoring their teenager's homework (mean difference = 1.49); 2) talking with their teenager about school (mean difference = 1.57); 3) and talking with their teenager about college or other future plans (mean difference = 1.49). All of these mean differences showed significant improvements at  $p < .01$ .

### Parents have said:

- "Because of my participation in the Juntos program, I feel better able to ask for help for my child."
- "I feel better able to find information to help my child get to college."
- "What I liked most from the Juntos sessions was learning how things are here in NC because things are so different than the systems in our home countries."

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## ► Mental Health Response to Spanish-Speaking Telephone Callers: Secret Shopper Study

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### Abstract

Our past information-gathering on public mental health agencies in Jackson County, Missouri identified 12 agencies who reported providing Spanish-language mental health services. To look more closely at these agencies' capacity, we collaborated with community members whose primary language was Spanish, who we trained as "secret shopper" callers. These callers used a brief, structured telephone procedure to request information in Spanish regarding mental illnesses and access to care. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected. Callers rated two-thirds of agency responses as good or very good. One-fourth of the calls yielded poor results, with calls not returned or inappropriate information provided. Inconsistent information provided to callers and unreturned voicemails indicated needs for increased staff training and consideration of access from the consumers' perspective. Our organization should continue to develop technical assistance, to increase awareness and consistency of mental health agencies' response to consumers who do not use English as their primary language.

### Introduction

In March 2009, the Jackson County Community Mental Health Fund (Levy) surveyed clinical directors of Levy-funded mental health organizations (n=30) to ascertain local capacity for non-English mental health services (Eddy, 2009). Thirty-eight percent of the clinical directors reported that non-English mental health services were provided directly by clinical staff, and 85% reported using spoken language interpreters. Consistent with local demographics, Spanish was the most commonly reported non-English language.

The initial survey documented self-reported linguistic diversity in mental health services, but information about cultural and linguistic *competence* was not collected. Cost, accessibility, clinical acumen, linguistic competence and cultural competence can be difficult to measure, but the lack of any one, poses a barrier to accessing services. As a follow-up, we sought information from a consumer perspective, narrowing our focus to agencies' initial response to persons seeking Spanish-language services. Areas of interest included: 1) linguistic competence of personnel; 2) basic information and referral; 3) beliefs about mental illness; 4) and initial service access for low-income, uninsured.

### Method

#### *Interviewers:*

Our project used a "secret shopper" approach to information gathering, a widely accepted method that uses trained consumers to provide feedback about actual agency performance (Levine, 2008). Three community members were recruited to serve as callers, two were female and one was male. Each caller was a native Spanish speaker and also English-speaking. None had professional training in mental health, although each had personal experiences involving a family member or friend with a diagnosed or suspected psychiatric disorder.