



4-H Teen Conference:

A Powerful Experience with Lasting Constructive Impact on King County Latino Youth

Sonia G. Morales Osegueda

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ABSTRACT

Washington State offers development programs such as the 4-H Annual Teen Conference, held at the Pullman campus. The program targets youths from all ethnicities and backgrounds. Since 2009, seventy-two Latino youth from King County have attended the Teen Conference. This article describes how Latino youth benefited from a wide variety of educational workshops, ranging from skills development to college and career exploration. It also examines the influence parents have in supporting their children in this kind of experience that often provides the first encounter with a higher education environment that serves to spark the aspiration to pursue a college education.

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Introduction

The Latino community is very diverse nationally and is growing quickly (ABC/Univision, 2012). These demographic changes will significantly alter the ethnic make-up of classrooms across the country (INCRE, 1998).

Nearly one-fourth of children in America are children of immigrants (First Focus, 2015). The number of Latino public school students is projected to increase from 12.5 million in 2013 to 15.5 million in 2024, and to represent 29% of total enrollment in 2024 (IES, 2015).

In Washington State, the Latino population has been the fastest growing community and is expected to continue to be the fastest growing in the coming decades (Ennis, Rios-Vargas & Albert 2011; Kirschner & Iron, 2006; Santier, 2011). Although growth slowed compared to the 1990s, the new figures show the Puget Sound region ended the last decade with sizable population increases despite a lingering recession (Brunner & Mayo, 2011).

Currently, there are disparate opportunities for Latino youth with respect to education. For example, compared to non-Latino White and Asian American students, Latino students still lag behind in graduation rates (Campbell, Denes, & Morrison, 2000; Hurtado, et al, 2008; Zamboanga & Knoche, 2003). State data for the state of Washington indicate an achievement gap for Latino students. Therefore, there are likely social and economic consequences if this gap is not addressed (Contreras & Stritikus, 2008; King County, 2013). Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini (2004) found that many minority students are academically and financially less prepared for college. Furthermore, young Latino immigrants appear to have financial commitments that limit their ability to pursue higher education, even though they see a college education necessary for successful life (Lopez, 2009).

Since new generations must be made competitive for the workforce, there is a significant interest in promoting the academic achievement and success of Latino youth. To ensure equal access to a high school diploma, Latino youth need adequately financed schools, capable teachers, and opportunities to engage in extracurricular activities during and after the school year. Additionally, individual characteristics such as motivation and positive study habits contribute to academic success among adolescents and must be nurtured.

THE INFLUENCE OF PARENTS AND OTHER FAMILY MEMBERS

Family members and parents play a critical role in the academic achievement and career choices of Latino youth (Alfaro, Umaña-Taylor, & Bámaca, 2006; Ceballo, 2004; Ferry, 2006). Although parents conscientiously send their children off to school every day and expect them to do well, they can add an important extra component that will boost their children's success.

Parent participation is the ingredient that makes the difference. In fact, research has shown that a home environment that encourages learning is even more important than parents' income, education level, or cultural background (Gurian, 2011; TXCC,

2012). For instance, when parents allow young people to attend programs outside of their schools, such as educational conferences, they are giving their children the opportunity to explore and develop more knowledge and information about higher education. Awareness of these educational institutions helps encourage parents to initiate discussions with their children and work together in making academic success a reality (Behnke & Christine, 2011).

GRADUATION RATES

Data show that 62.9% of Latino students in the state of Washington graduated in 2009 and 62.9% in 2010 (Ireland, 2010). In 2009, the Latino graduation rate in King County was 64.1% (King County, 2011), and in 2010 it was 64% (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010). The overall graduation rate at the state level increased by 3% from 2009 to 2010, while among Latino students the rate increased by 4%. The graduation rate for King County Latino students, however, did not show an increase for those years.

4-H TEEN CONFERENCE OVERVIEW

Since 1927 Washington State University has implemented an Annual Teen Conference through the 4-H Youth Development program (Frad, 2011). Although this event was originally designed for 4-H members, it has had a strong impact with non-members such as Latino youth. The conference, which usually takes place during the last week of June, invites seventh through twelfth graders from across the state. Participants spend three days at the Pullman campus (Frad, 2008). Since 2009 over five-hundred teens have attended the 4-H Teen Conference each year. Approximately 25% participants are Latino youth (Morales, 2011).

Through a wide variety of educational workshops addressing college and career exploration, financial aid and scholarship opportunities, youth get to discover and consider potential opportunities available to them beyond high school. Moreover, this event teaches skills needed to make intelligent choices for the future. The conference embraces students from different ethnicities and gives Latino youth the opportunity to meet students from different backgrounds from around the state. The youth conference also hosts an academic fair that provides students with the vital information regarding WSU. Here the youth are able to meet dedicated instructors, college mentors, and career advisors. Lastly, students have a positive experience they can share with others when they return to their communities.

Teen Conference Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of the Teen Conference is to encourage students to work hard in order to complete secondary education, get ready to attend college, and have the opportunity to increase their skills. The objectives are to:

- Expose Latino youth to a higher education environment that encourages them to persist and complete their high school education, and aspire to further their education beyond high school.
 - Enhance and develop personal skills.
 - Provide parents with the information needed to better understand the importance of their role in supporting their children to get involved in activities such as the 4-H Teen Conference.

YOUTH PARTICIPATION/METHODS

Seventy-two Latino youth, ages 13 to 18, participated in the Teen Conference between 2009 and 2013. Within the same time frame, twelve students attended more than once. Youth participated in different sessions that were taught by extension educators, university staff, collegiate 4-H members, and motivational speakers using a variety of teaching methods, including lecture, experiential learning, and group discussion.

Most participants were recruited by their parents, who have volunteered in 4-H programs, and by 4-H staff. Another promotional method was by former participants. Before the conference parents and youth were invited to attend informative meetings where they were able to ask questions about what to expect. Eight parents attended the conference as volunteer chaperones during the five years.

At the end of the conference an open questionnaire with four questions was provided to all students. They were surveyed face-to-face to measure the conference impact with the following questions: (1) Have you visited a higher education campus before – whether that means a four-year college or university, community college, or a vocational or technical college? (2) Have you attended a teen conference before? (3) How will attending the teen conference help you to fill out your goals? (4) Do you have plans to attend college?

Findings and Discussions

The majority of participants were female, 56.9% and 43.1% were male. From the twenty five students graduated in these five years, 68% were female and 32% were male, respectively (Table 1).

Table 1. King County Latino Youth Participants by Gender
4-H Teen Conference (2009 to 2013)

Gender	Students		High School	
	#	%	#	%
Female	41	56.9	17	68
Male	31	43.1	8	32
Total	72	100	25	100

Twenty five students (35%) out of the total number of participants have graduated on-time during these five years (Table 2). In this study, none of the Latino students who attended the conference have

Table 2. King County Latino Youth Graduates from High School (2009 to 2013)

Year	Students		High School Graduates	
	#	%	#	%
2009	13	18.0	3	12
2010	12	17.0	1	4
2011	14	19.4	10	40
2012	14	19.4	3	12
2013	19	26.2	8	32
Total	72	100.0	25	100

dropped out and/or have graduated after the year they were expected to graduate. Factors such as encouragement, motivation, mentorship, and parents support have been the key for student’s success. The other students who have not graduated are currently in middle and high school. Expected graduation dates for these students range from 2014 to 2018.

The majority of Latino youth who attended the conference are residents of fourteen cities from King County (Table 3). Seventeen (23.5%), fourteen (19.4%), and thirteen (18%) live in the cities of Sea-Tac, Renton, and Kent.

Table 3. Latino Youth Representing 14 Cities from King County 4-H Teen Conference (2009 to 2013)

City	Students		High School Graduates	
	#	%	#	%
Sea-Tac	17	23.5	10	40
Renton	14	19.4	8	32
Kent	13	18.0	2	8
Seattle	5	6.9	1	4
Burien	4	5.6	0	0
Federal Way	4	5.6	0	0
Maple Valley	4	5.6	1	4
Auburn	4	5.6	0	0
Kirkland	1	1.4	1	4
Des Moines	1	1.4	1	4
Issaquah	1	1.4	0	0
Redmond	1	1.4	1	4
Covington	1	1.4	0	0
Tukwila	2	2.8	0	0
Total	72	100.0	25	100

Responses of Students to the Four Questions:

1. Have you visited a higher education institution – whether that means a four-year college or university, community college, or a vocational or technical college?

Forty seven percent of students responded that they had visited a college to explore college opportunities, and to visit friends. They indicated that these visits were for a short period of time (hours).

2. Have you attended a teen conference before?

Seventeen percent (n=12) mentioned that they had previously had the opportunity to attend the WSU 4-H Teen Conference. Four students (6%) had participated in the Latino/a Educational Achievement Project (LEAP) Conference held in Tacoma, WA. Equally important, seven students (10%) reported that they had attended a one-day conference at a college or at a university.

3. How will attending the teen conference help you to fill out your goals?

Sixty two students (86.1%) stated that the conference helped them meet their goals. For instance, one student said “Sponsors, parents’ support, and 4-H King County helped me achieve my main goal of having such as experience.” Another student commented that “The conference improved my leadership and self -confidence in achieving my goals, and get in contact with college recruiters and sponsors.”

4. Do you have plans to attend college?

Sixty five students (90.3%) responded “yes.” They stated that they want to attend college to become professionals and to be a role model for others. However, seven (9.7%) do not know what they will do after graduation.

OTHER FINDINGS

Eighty one percent of youth indicated that staying in the dormitories, making new friends, attending workshops, and other events provided them with real life and concrete college experiences. They indicated that workshops also offered them with good information not readily available at their schools or by the other means. More significantly, the majority of the students reported that the workshops allowed them to get a feel for what a regular college class would be like. Youth left the conference with more interest, increased knowledge, and a better understanding of college opportunities and available information, including how to apply for scholarships and what it takes to be successful in college.

One of the greatest advantages for the youth who attended the conference was the opportunity to develop skills. The conference encouraged them to develop the discipline and confidence needed for a successful post-secondary education. Students mentioned that, as a result of those opportunities, they felt they were better communicators and wanted to practice and implement/communicate the skills learned with others in their communities. In addition, they wanted to speak to their peers about the impact that the conference made in their lives and educational aspirations.

Twenty one out of twenty five high school graduates that participated in these conferences took an active role in pursuing a post-secondary education. Studies from Contreras

et. al. (2008) state that Latino youth want to attend a four-year college after high school. It is important to note that, in this study, four of the participants who graduated on time did not view college as a viable option because of personal and/or family financial problems. They decided to enter the workforce directly instead.

Parent chaperones/volunteers, mentioned that the conference was well organized and that it was very supportive of the needs of the students. They also commented that they and the youth enjoyed the combination of programs and social activities that provided them the opportunity to share experiences with others.

Overall, 88% of the parents stated that they were facing economic barriers such as financial limitations to support their children's academic endeavors. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2004); and Brown (1989) students whose parents are involved in their education are more likely to attend school regularly, graduate and go to post-secondary education regardless of parent income and educational background.

Furthermore, parents mentioned that they motivate their children to do well academically irrespective of their financial constraints, their lack of academic training, educational achievement, and language barriers. This outcome is congruent with the work of Thompson (2013), which indicates that parents throughout the Washington region want their children to attend college, and they believe it is possible. These responses also concurred with what Gonzalez-Martingale (2012) states: "I find that parent support is the most fundamental aspect in student success. As a nine year educator in urban districts and working with Latino students I see this every year. The success of my students also has depended on the support their parents provide regardless of their economic background and social status. Parents in my classrooms do not speak English and some are even illiterate in Spanish, nonetheless, this is not a negative factor in their enthusiasm and dedication to support their children" (Personal comment to author).

Recommendations

As the Latino population continues to grow it is highly recommended that extracurricular activities, such as the 4-H Teen Conference, have to be promoted among parents and at secondary schools in order to reach more youth. Parents can learn about these opportunities through informational meetings provided at school sites, facilitating the efforts to make them aware about the conference's benefits and the key role that it can play in encouraging and preparing youth for future educational success.

Lastly, it is imperative to address the barriers that socioeconomic issues present and that limit students' participation in these types of programs and activities. Therefore, along with the promotion of educational conferences to parents and schools, it is also necessary to recruit individuals, organizations and other donors that are willing to sponsor and support students to attend activities as the 4-H Conference.

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