

Leveraging Hispanic/Latino State Commissions to Advance Extension's Diversity Agenda

Abstract

Many states have created Hispanic/Latino commissions to focus on the needs of their Hispanic/Latino populations. By viewing these state agencies as informational and capacity-building resources, Extension personnel can use the agencies to advance their own organizational and programmatic diversity agendas. To illustrate this point, this article describes the Hispanic/Latino Commission of Michigan, the agency's web page, its publishing of a Statewide Schedule of Events brochure in celebration of Hispanic Heritage Month, and use of the agency's outputs by Extension personnel as tools for planning activities that target Hispanics.

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Introduction

Kansas, Maryland, Michigan, Nebraska, and Oregon are among the many states that have commissions targeting their Hispanic/Latino residents. These Hispanic/Latino commissions have been created over the years by state legislatures and gubernatorial executive orders, generally to provide information about the state's Hispanic population, enhance the skills of members of that population, and/or advocate for economic, social, legal, and political equality for members of the population.

The rapid growth in the Latino population nationwide has elicited an increasing need for Extension professionals to recruit and serve Hispanics (Allen, Gudino, & Crawford, 2011; Behnke, 2008). When viewed as tools for building capacity and social capital, Hispanic/Latino commissions and the activities and resources they provide can help Extension professionals engage Hispanic/Latino community and organizational leaders in planning educational programs and other initiatives for this population. The Hispanic/Latino Commission of Michigan (HLCM), the commission's web page, and the Statewide Calendar of Events brochure the commission publishes annually in celebration of Hispanic Heritage Month (HHM) (Hispanic/Latino Commission of Michigan, 2015) serve as examples for making this point.

The Hispanic/Latino Commission of Michigan

Information on the HLCM is readily attainable from its web page (http://www.michigan.gov/lara/0,4601,7-154-75952_75957---,00.html), which is organized into five sections, each with links to additional information. The

commission's mission and history, as well as the names of the current slate of appointed commissioners, is found in the "About Us" section. Annual reports and other information about the agency are found in the "Important Information" section. The HLCM web page also has "Meetings," "Contact Information," and "News" sections.

Created by legislative statute in 1975 to help the state serve the needs of Michigan's Hispanic people, the HLCM's mission is to enhance the abilities of Michigan Hispanics (Michigan Department of Licensing and Regulatory Affairs [LARA], 2016). The commission currently works to market the state's career development services to Michigan Hispanics, to encourage initiatives to reduce the high school dropout rates of Hispanic youths, and to facilitate efforts to increase the enrollment of Hispanics in postsecondary education and training programs (LARA, 2016). The law directs the commission to counsel the governor and the legislature concerning the coordination and administration of state programs serving the Hispanic/Latino population (LARA, 2016).

Using the HLCM as an Informational and Capacity-Building Tool

Just as the Celebrating Diversity Calendar developed at the University of Florida (Guion, Chattaraj, & Lytie, 2003) can serve as an educational tool for Extension professionals to learn about and celebrate diversity, the HLCM can serve as an informational and capacity-building resource for Extension personnel to learn about Hispanic/Latino culture and to create inclusive ways to extend educational reach to Hispanics. The commission's web page and its Statewide Calendar of Events brochure combine to provide an abundance of information and social capital—building opportunities Extension personnel can leverage not only to celebrate diversity in their work but also to propel their diversity education agendas.

First, Extension personnel can consider the priorities of the commission, identified on its web page, as preliminary indicators of Hispanic/Latino community needs. Extension personnel can then consider developing relevant educational programs and other activities, perhaps in partnership with the HLCM.

Second, the "Meetings" and "Contact Information" sections of the web page have links to meeting dates, agendas, and notices of information that Extension personnel can use to plan for participation in the HLCM's open meetings. At these meetings, Extension personnel can learn about the issues confronting the Hispanic community as well as about Hispanic-led organizations and community leaders serving the community. Involvement by Extension personnel in HLCM activities also creates the opportunity to inform HLCM leaders of new developments in Extension related to serving the needs of Hispanics.

Third, Extension personnel can use HHM events and activities taking place in communities across the state, many of which are mentioned in the Statewide Calendar of Events brochure, as opportunities to gain understanding of the contributions and cultural traditions, values, and beliefs of Hispanics. Extension also can sponsor HHM events, on its own or in partnership with community stakeholders.

Fourth, there exists the opportunity for Extension and the HLCM to partner with and generally support each other in the creation of local and statewide initiatives specifically targeting the educational needs of Hispanic/Latino residents in the state.

Summary and Conclusion

The need for Extension professions to recruit and serve Hispanics is growing, given the rapid growth in the Latino population nationwide. Hispanic/Latino state commissions can serve as informational and capacity-building tools. Extension personnel can use these agencies to learn about Hispanics, their culture, and the issues they confront

and to leverage Hispanic organizations and community leaders to plan inclusive educational initiatives to effectively serve the Latino community. The HLCM's web page and statewide calendar of HHM events are examples of resources provided by Hispanic/Latino state commissions, and these tools can be used by Extension personnel to advance outreach and programming targeting Hispanics.

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