

Improving Parental Engagement for Latino Youths' Educational Success: Lessons from Juntos Oregon

Abstract

Research has shown that more efforts are needed to increase high school completion and postsecondary enrollment among Latino youths. However, little is known regarding efforts that engage both Latino youths and their parents. To address this gap, we surveyed Juntos Oregon participants to examine the school and community context Latino youths and their families face in the educational journey and identify effects of the Juntos program. Results showed that in a context of persistent discrimination and unfair treatment, Juntos workshops increased the sense of school and community connectedness among Latino parents. Increases in academic planning and motivation occurred as well. Extension may increase its educational impact by strengthening connections and promoting engagement between schools and Latino families.

Keywords: [Juntos](#), [Latino youth](#), [parental engagement](#), [perceived discrimination](#), [educational equity](#)

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Introduction

Latinos in the United States constitute the largest racial/ethnic "minority," accounting for 18% of the population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Latinos are the youngest of any racial/ethnic group, with a median age of 27, compared with 42 for Whites, and 33 for African Americans (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). An estimated 500,000 Latinos turn 18 every year (Flores, 2017). Over the past 2 decades, growth of the Latino

population has been particularly dramatic in nontraditional settlement areas, often in more rural settings in the southeastern and northwestern United States. These trends relate to employment in agriculture, meat and vegetable packing, service, and other primarily low-wage jobs (Kandel & Cromartie, 2004; Suro & Tafoya, 2004).

In Oregon, the Latino population grew by 316% between 1990 and 2000, and another 72% between 2000 and 2010, compared to 50% growth in the United States overall (Ruffenach, Worcel, Keyes, Franco, & Adams, 2016). Today, 550,000 Latinos account for 13% of the Oregon population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Almost two thirds (64%) of Latinos in Oregon were born in the United States, about half (49%) are bilingual, and Latino Oregonians have a median age of 24 (Ruffenach et al., 2016). Oregon's educational system reflects these trends, as 23% of students in kindergarten through Grade 12 are Latino (Ruffenach et al., 2016).

Similar to other states, Oregon is facing challenges in serving underrepresented learners and communities. Although Latinos have experienced improvements in educational outcomes, disparities in high school completion and postsecondary attainment persist. Researchers have described dropping out of high school as a complicated process, incorporating individual and contextual interactions over the entire period of a child's education (Epstein, Connors-Tadros, Horsey, & Simon, 1996). This finding highlights the importance of school and community environments to student outcomes. In that sense, high school completion efforts may benefit from a population-based approach in which emphasis is placed on school and community practices and policies beyond individual and family-level behaviors (Harris & Kiyama, 2015; Kasman, Owen, & Hayward, 2017).

The purpose of our study was to evaluate Oregon State University's Juntos program during the 2016–2017 academic year. Juntos (meaning "together" in Spanish) provides culturally responsive programming to Latino youths and their families, promoting high school completion and college access. More specifically, we were interested in understanding the school and community context Latino youths and their families experience during the educational journey and the level of parental engagement in academic planning and motivation outcomes after completion of Juntos. Findings from our study may inform Extension professionals' outreach and programming efforts related to Latino youths and their families.

Program Description

Juntos was established in Oregon in 2012 (as part of Open Campus, a branch of Oregon State University Extension Service) and was adapted from a similar program originally developed in North Carolina to increase high school completion and college preparation in Latino youths (Behnke & Kelly, 2011). Our Juntos team revised the curriculum and delivery model to better fit the sociocultural context of Latino Oregonians, primarily those living in nonmetropolitan communities. Accordingly, we developed a more robust evaluation component incorporating relevant issues discussed in the literature. A key feature of Juntos is that content is developed and delivered in Spanish to facilitate participation of the whole family. Notable adaptations in Oregon include addition of a shorter middle school curriculum and emphasis on local educational systems (e.g., articulation of area resources and community college and university partners).

Juntos engages youths and their families (parents, guardians, siblings), an approach that has been shown to improve educational outcomes for Latino youths (Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2012; Olivos & Mendoza, 2010). In addition, Juntos uses popular education, a family empowerment approach (Wiggins, 2011), to prepare Latino families to better navigate spaces where structural barriers exist, such as unfamiliarity with the U.S. educational system, work conflicts, and bias. Such barriers limit parental engagement with schools and affect

academic outcomes (Gonzalez, Borders, Hines, Villalba, & Henderson, 2013; Lee & Bowen, 2006). By the end of the 2017–2018 academic year, Juntos had served over 3,500 Latino youths and parents in 28 communities statewide.

Methods and Measures

We conducted pre- and postprogram surveys with youths and parents who completed the 6-week Juntos workshop series during the 2016–2017 academic year. The surveys addressed constructs of school and community connectedness and experiences of discrimination salient in the recent literature (Gonzalez et al., 2013; Lee & Bowen, 2006). We collected data on relevant sociodemographic characteristics, such as age, gender, years living in the United States, acculturation level, household income, and parent educational level. We then asked youths and parents about the school and community context elements of experiences of discrimination (Krieger, Smith, Naishadham, Hartman, & Barbeau, 2005), connectedness (Mashek, Cannaday, & Tangney, 2007), and response to unfair treatment (Krieger et al., 2005) and about academic planning, motivation, and attitudes (Plunkett, Behnke, Sands, & Choi, 2009).

Surveys were available in both English and Spanish. Surveys were developed in English and then translated into Spanish and checked for consistency by bilingual members of the Juntos team. We administered baseline and demographic surveys at the first workshop session and the postprogram survey during the final session. Parents provided informed consent to take the survey and consented to their youths' participation, and youths assented to complete the survey. Identifying information was not collected. The study was approved by the Oregon State University Institutional Review Board.

We used Qualtrics for data entry and initial data exploration. We conducted further data analyses using Stata SE 14.2 (College Station, TX). We calculated summary statistics for all study variables and used chi-square and *t*-test statistical tests for categorical and continuous variables, respectively, to assess preprogram/postprogram comparisons. We transformed the previously validated acculturation scale (Marin, Sabogal, Marin, Otero-Sabogal, & Perez-Stable, 1987) into two categories (less or more acculturated), following Marin et al.'s (1987) protocol. Similarly Krieger et al.'s experiences of discrimination and response to unfair treatment scales were categorized following those authors' guidance.

Results

Sociodemographic Characteristics

We collected preprogram demographic data for 129 youths and 143 parents (Table 1). We compared these data to demographic data for 103 youths and 126 parents collected via the postprogram survey to confirm consistency between response groups.

Table 1.
Sociodemographic Profile of Juntos Evaluation Participants, 2016–2017

Variable	Youths	Parents
Age (<i>M, SD</i>)	15.28 (1.37)	41.68 (6.72)
Gender (no., %)		
Female	75 (59%)	105 (73%)
Male	51 (40%)	37 (26%)
Born in United States (no., %)	99 (78%)	8 (6%)
Years living in United States (<i>M, SD</i>)	12.90 (5.03)	19.89 (7.99)
Years living in Oregon (<i>M, SD</i>)	11.59 (5.26)	15.77 (8.25)
Mexican heritage (no., %)		
Born in Mexico	25 (20%)	128 (91%)
One or more parent born in Mexico	123 (96%)	135 (97%)
Acculturation level (no., %)		
More acculturated	99 (77%)	8 (6%)
Less acculturated	30 (23%)	132 (92%)
Socioeconomic status		
Household size (<i>M, SD</i>)		5.07 (1.64)
Annual income below \$35,000 (no., %)		103 (76%)
Education level (no., %)		
More than high school education		
Parent		27 (20%)
Partner		16 (14%)
Parent with bachelor's degree	8 (7%)	

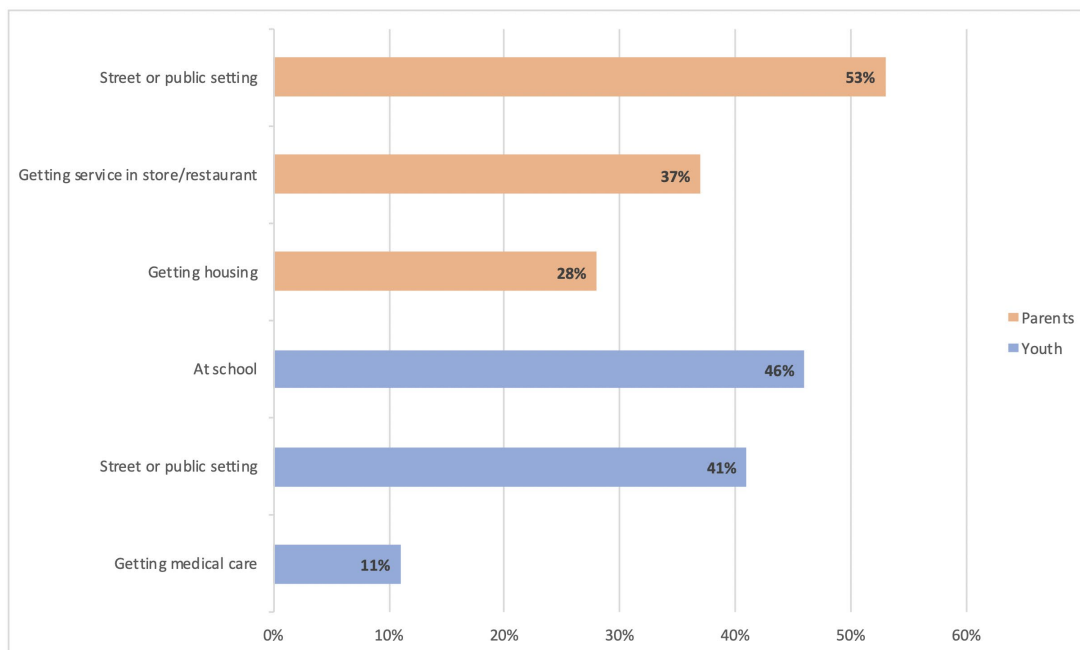
Demographics of the study participants are consistent with Oregon trends in the Latino population with respect to nativity and ancestry (Ruffenach et al., 2016). Youths and parents reported low household educational attainment. The majority of adults (76%) reported a household income of \$35,000 or less, signifying that they likely met the qualification for Medicaid, which at the time was a maximum annual income level for a family of five of \$40,127 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2019).

School and Community Context

At baseline, youth and adult Juntos participants identified instances in their lives in which they had encountered discrimination because of their race or ethnicity. Figure 1 shows the top three circumstances

participants reported. Strikingly, almost half of youths (46%) reported experiencing discrimination at school and 43% of parents reported experiencing discrimination on the street or in a public setting. These responses indicate that Latino youths and their families are experiencing discrimination in many aspects of their lives, including in key institutions such as schools, in public spaces, and when obtaining services.

Figure 1.
Experiences of Discrimination Among Juntos Participants



Youth and adult Juntos participants also reported their perceptions regarding connectedness to the school and broader community and response to unfair treatment (Table 2). Youths reported stronger school connectedness than parents at baseline, which is understandable given the amount of time they spend at school. Postprogram data indicated statistically significant increases in parents' perceptions of school and community connectedness and level of response to unfair treatment (engaged vs. passive).

Table 2.

School and Community Context: Connectedness and Response to Unfair Treatment

Topic	Youths		Parents	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
School connectedness (<i>M, SD</i> ; range: 1–6)	3.96 (1.32)	3.84 (1.33)	3.58 (1.46)	4.01 (1.28)**
Community connectedness (<i>M, SD</i> ; range: 1–6)	3.53 (1.57)	3.54 (1.33)	3.55 (1.48)	3.92 (1.21)**
Response to unfair treatment (no., %)				
Engaged	61 (47%)	55 (53%)	93 (65%)	89 (71%)*
Moderate	38 (30%)	27 (26%)	29 (20%)	30 (24%)*
Passive	30 (23%)	21 (20%)	21 (15%)	7 (6%)*

Note. Preprogram (pre)/postprogram (post) comparisons were computed via chi-square and *t*-test statistical tests for categorical and continuous variables, respectively.

p* < .05. *p* < .01.

Academic Planning, Motivation, and Attitudes

Parental involvement in youths' academic planning and motivation is associated with educational aspirations and academic success (Alfaro, Umaña-Taylor, Gonzales-Backen, Bámaca, & Zeiders, 2009). We asked youths to report on their parents' involvement in their academic planning and their academic motivation and to assess their own academic motivation. As well, we asked parents to assess their involvement in their youths' academic planning and to assess their youths' academic motivation. Both youths and parents reported statistically significant increases in parents' involvement in academic planning after completing the Juntos workshops (Table 3). Although the youths' measures of academic motivation did not change after the workshops, youths reported a statistically significant increase in their perception of academic motivation by their parents.

Table 3.
Parental Involvement in Academic Planning and Motivation and Youth Levels of
Academic Motivation Among Juntos Participants

Topic	Youths		Parents	
	Pre <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Post <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Pre <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Post <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)
Parental involvement in academic planning (4 items; range: 0–4)	1.97 (1.06)	2.35 (1.06)**	2.75 (0.95)	3.12 (0.68)**
Parental involvement in academic motivation (3 items; range: 0–3)	2.64 (0.51)	2.51 (0.51)*		
Youth's academic motivation (5 items; range: 0–3)	2.38 (0.46)	2.30 (0.50)	2.83 (0.45)	2.79 (0.43)

Note. Preprogram (pre)/postprogram (post) comparisons were computed via *t*-test statistical test.
p* < .05. *p* < .01.

Additionally, youths reported that participating in Juntos positively influenced their attitudes about school. Over 92% of youths agreed that Juntos motivated them to graduate from high school, and 82% said the program helped them feel like they belonged in school.

Discussion

Our findings indicate that Juntos is achieving positive outcomes among Latino youths and parents. Participants acknowledge that there are a number of barriers and areas where they need support in pursuit of higher education. At the end of the workshop series, participants reported significant gains in parental involvement in youths' academic planning and motivation to complete high school and pursue higher education.

These changes are meaningful because they are associated with college attendance among minoritized adolescents. The learning outcomes of Juntos may reduce the effect of interpersonal and structural barriers Latino parents may face with regard to supporting their children's education (Fisher, Wallace, & Fenton, 2000; Suárez-Orozco, Martin, Alexandersson, Dance, & Lunneblad, 2013). These gains may be beneficial for Latino students, even if some barriers to engagement persist. Adolescents who perceive their parents as engaged in their education may also be more academically motivated to pursue higher education opportunities (Ryan & Ream, 2016).

Juntos participants face a number of educational challenges, both sociodemographic (e.g., low income, low parental educational attainment) and institutional (e.g., discrimination and unfair treatment, low school/community connectedness). Our findings suggest that behavioral gains in academic planning and motivation may be jeopardized without concerted community/institutional efforts by schools and other stakeholders (e.g., 4-H, city and county government) to support Latino youths and their families.

Our study also revealed opportunities to strengthen impacts of the Juntos curriculum and delivery. Youths reported no significant changes in academic motivation and response to unfair treatment. It is possible that the 6-week workshop period is not long enough to change behaviors associated with these constructs. Future

curriculum assessments will better focus on engagement in these areas. However, increased parental involvement in youths' academic planning and academic motivation may have positive longer term impacts (Ryan & Ream, 2016).

The significant increases in parents' perceptions of connectedness following our intervention suggest that Juntos participation is facilitating engagement of Latino families in their schools and communities. Despite relatively long periods of U.S. residency (average of 20 years), parents' low levels of acculturation may limit their participation in the absence of programs delivered in Spanish, such as Juntos. In a primarily monolingual English-speaking school environment, Spanish-speaking parents are likely prevented from actively and meaningfully engaging with schools toward supporting their children's academic journeys (Plunkett et al., 2009).

A number of limitations of our study need to be acknowledged. First, we relied on self-reported data, which may be influenced by response bias. Second, due to difficulties collecting identifiers to connect preprogram–postprogram and parent–youth surveys, preprogram–postprogram statistical tests compared postprogram individual results with preprogram average scores. Third, the evaluation surveys took more time than expected to complete, putting pressure on participants to complete them faster and perhaps causing response errors. We have since worked to refine the evaluation instruments to reduce their length and focus on measuring the most relevant constructs.

Future Directions and Implications for Extension Professionals

Juntos is growing to better meet the needs of Latinos in Oregon. Since our study was conducted, Juntos has expanded to several new communities, and partnerships are in development to grow program reach and innovate the delivery model. Some of these partnerships leverage existing Extension networks or nearby established Juntos programs, and others are in more remote areas not typically served by this type of programming. This expansion represents the value that partners in the education and nonprofit sectors see in Juntos as well as the active interest from communities in the program.

Juntos has also been implemented in a partnership with a regional university, our first university-to-university partnership. In central Oregon, Juntos has expanded to the majority of secondary schools in the region, and several schools have created or are exploring development of permanent full-time-equivalent staff positions to support Juntos and provide more consistent resources for Spanish-speaking and Latino families. These innovations are intended to sustain more equitable outcomes.

Extension professionals may consider our findings to better meet the needs of Latino youths and their families in their respective communities. Demographic trends and overall improvement in educational access for previously underrepresented groups are increasing the need for Extension and youth development programs to respond to school/community context so that youth programming can be more impactful (Erbstein, Moncloa, Olagundoye, Diaz-Carrasco, & Hill, 2017).

To ensure that culturally relevant Extension programming is reaching Latino families, it is key for Extension to develop and nurture connections with schools and other community partners and seek innovative partnerships. Juntos achieves this by engaging Latino youths and families together, honoring parents' language preference, accommodating work and childcare needs, and partnering with bilingual/bicultural school staff and community leaders to deliver program content. Moreover, it is important to invest resources

(training staff, making policy changes) to tackle the pervasive negative effects of discrimination and unfair treatment. In the absence of tackling systemic issues, any educational programming may have limited effects. The Juntos framework can be an example for other Extension professionals to enhance cultural responsiveness in their educational programming.

Empowering Latino youths and families enhances their capacity for seeking academic support of their children and may, in turn, give them tools to challenge inequitable institutional practices and policies. Local school and community networks cultivated by Juntos support this objective by bringing additional resources to Juntos participants and providing opportunities for school, community, and civic engagement. In a time when Latinos in Oregon and nationwide are facing an increasingly divisive social and political climate, these connections may be especially impactful.

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