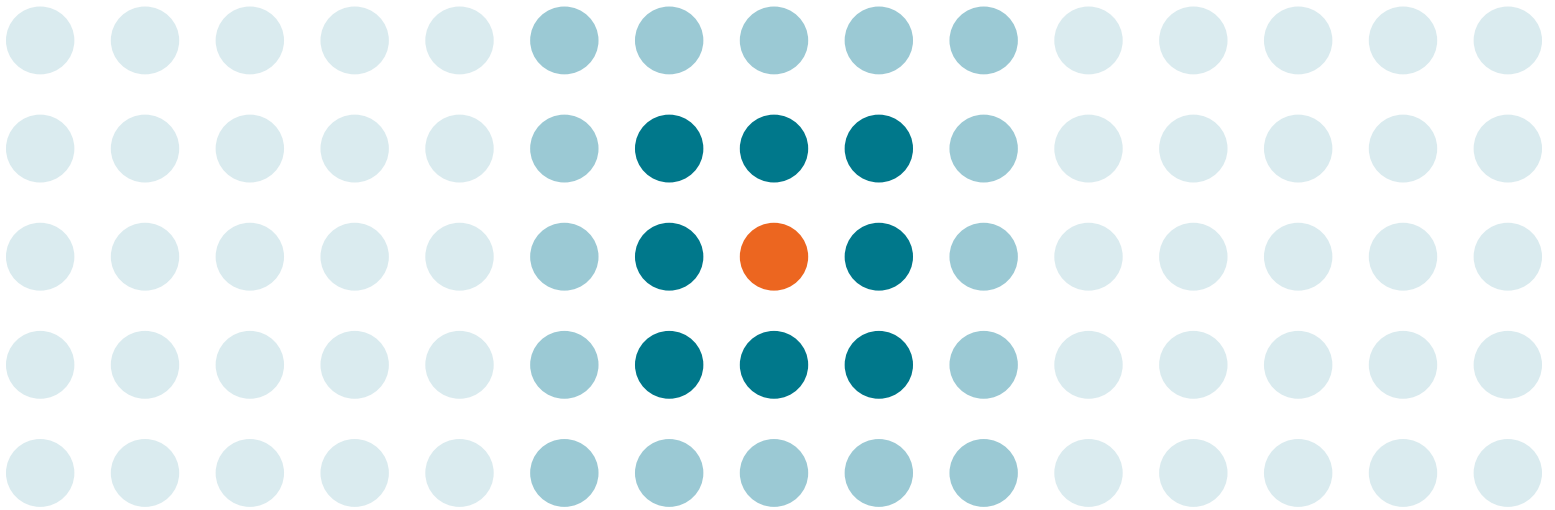




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WORKING PAPER / SUMMER 2009

Public Engagement and America's Growing Latino Population:

by Lara Birnback, with Maria Martha Chavez, Will Friedman & Isaac Rowlett

Public Agenda's Center for Advances in Public Engagement (CAPE) researches, develops and disseminates new insights and practices that help improve the quality of American public life by building the field of public engagement and citizen-centered politics.

CAPE is dedicated to creating new and better ways for citizens to confront pressing public problems. CAPE is housed within Public Agenda, a nonpartisan, nonprofit opinion research and public engagement organization founded in 1975 by social scientist and author Daniel Yankelovich and former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance.

For nearly three decades, Public Agenda has been working in communities to help citizens understand complex problems and create momentum for change by building common ground, managing differences and creating new partnerships. The Center serves the field by advancing three distinct but interrelated strands of work:

- The Public Engagement **Research Project** conducts and disseminates studies that clarify the dynamics and impacts of specific public engagement practices. Among the questions it explores are: What are the short-and-long term impacts of public deliberation on citizens, communities, leadership and public policies? What are the impacts of framing public issues for deliberation in contrast to framing them for purposes of persuasion—and what are the democratic implications of those differences for the media, political and civic leadership and civic participation? Why do deliberative democratic habits and practices take root in some communities more than others? And how can deliberation practices best go to scale, and be applied beyond the level of individual communities?
- The **Digital Engagement Project** experiments with and explores new Internet-based tools and their application to engaging citizens in public deliberation and problem-solving. Guiding questions include: Can the Internet only be used to link together like-minded people, or are there effective ways to produce greater “boundary-crossing” online, bringing diverse citizens together to better understand their differences? Can blogging contribute to deliberative public engagement, or only to partisan electoral or interest group politics? Is deliberation feasible within online communities?
- The **Theory-Building Project** promotes greater interplay between researchers and practitioners to improve the field's understanding of how public deliberation works and how it can work better. Principal areas and inquiry are: How does the public come to judgment? How does public deliberation relate to political and social change?

Major support for CAPE has been provided by the **W.K. Kellogg Foundation** and the **Rockefeller Brothers Fund**. CAPE products have also been developed through work done in collaboration with the **Kettering Foundation**.

For more information on CAPE (<http://www.publicagenda.org/cape>) and Public Agenda's public engagement work (<http://www.publicagenda.org/publicengagement>), contact **Alison Kadlec**, Vice President, Public Engagement and Director, CAPE, at 212.686.6610 x 40 or akadlec@publicagenda.org. You can also find us on Facebook and follow us on Twitter.

Public Engagement and America's Growing Latino Population:

Working Paper / Summer 2009

by Lara Birnback, with Maria Martha Chavez, Will Friedman & Isaac Rowlett

Foreword

by Alison Kadlec, Director, CAPE

Understanding the barriers to, and opportunities for, more empowered participation of Latino populations in this country is a pressing need facing advocates of citizen-centered politics, community organizers, and deliberative democracy researchers and practitioners alike. If we, in our many intersecting fields in the democracy movement, are unable to support and encourage robust participation in public life by the largest and fastest growing minority group within our population, the quality of life in and of our democracy more broadly is necessarily diminished.

In this working paper we seek to gain a better understanding of what we as public engagement practitioners, and others in the field overall, might do differently to make more robust Latino participation in community engagement initiatives a reality. While we focus here on what can be learned from a small selection of cases, we hope that our reflections will pave the way for a more robust discussion among both community organizers and deliberative democracy practitioners about ways to ensure real access and inclusion of Latinos in collaborative problem solving and community-building work around the country.

It is important to note at the outset that there are a number of open questions that require far more focused exploration by a wide range of researchers and practitioners than has heretofore been pursued. These questions include, but are certainly not limited to, the following:

- 1) How are opportunities for, and barriers to, participation in public life shaped by the irreducible diversity of the communities that fall uneasily under any single heading such as “Latino” or “Hispanic?” This point is underscored by the established fact that few people identify with either of these terms, tending instead to identify with a specific country of origin for self or family.
- 2) How do the experiences of foreign-born Latinos and first- or second-generation Latinos differ, and how do those different experiences shape people’s attitudes toward participation in public life?
- 3) Given that nearly half of all foreign-born Latinos are in the United States without legal authorization and most do not have recourse to becoming fully included in our country’s national life, how can deliberative democracy practitioners work alongside political activists to help create and improve spaces for meaningful participation of these marginalized populations?
- 4) What must be done to ensure that deliberative democracy practitioners and researchers understand, appreciate and learn from the existing forms of participation and engagement that are already embedded in the fabric of various Latino communities (but which remain under the radar for most “mainstream” deliberative democrats)?



We do not pretend to have answers to any of these questions, but we feel strongly that they must be asked and we are certain that the answers must be collaboratively generated. We also believe that the Latino experience in this country, by virtue of its intrinsic complexity, requires that we expand our thinking about the relationship between race, ethnicity, group identity and public participation.

It is our hope that this piece helps spur conversation among and between advocates of deliberative democracy, community organizers, and political activists concerned with ensuring that Latinos in this country have a place at the table and a role in shaping our collective destiny. Please join the conversation at <http://www.publicagenda.org/pages/public-engagement-and-americas-growing-latino-population>

I. Introduction

In January 2003, the United States Census Bureau first reported that Latinos had become the largest minority group in the United States and, in May 2008, the Bureau reported that the nation's Latino population had reached 15.1 percent of the estimated total U.S. population of 301.6 million. Latinos were then the largest minority group in 20 states, and they were also reported to be the fastest-growing minority group. The rapid growth of the Latino population in the United States is expected to continue, and a growing number of states, like California, Texas, and New Mexico, are now "majority-minority" states with residents of Latino heritage in the majority.¹

Given their numbers, it is especially troubling that research indicates a low level of civic engagement for Latinos across the nation. As one practitioner notes,

Latinos are less likely to be civically involved in their community than any other minority group, despite the fact that they are the biggest minority in the United States. A great concern exists over ways to effectively promote and improve this group's participation in their community's decision-making process.²

Young Latinos don't seem to be bucking the trend. A 2003 study by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) found that Latino youth are least likely to have discussed politics with their parents; only 42 percent of Latino youth report having discussed politics with their parents "sometimes or often," compared with 53 percent of White youth and 46 percent of African-American youth.³ CIRCLE research from 2006 found that, compared with young African-Americans (the most politically engaged group) Asian-Americans (heavily engaged) and whites (moderately engaged), young Latinos were the least engaged—i.e., the least likely to volunteer, work

¹ Bernstein, R. (2008). "U.S. Hispanic Population Surpasses 45 Million, Now 15 Percent of Total." [Press Release] Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/PressRelease/www/releases/archives/population/011910.htm>

² Curiel, S. (2007). "Strengthening Oregon's communities: Latino community leadership training" [Masters of Public Policy Thesis]. Retrieved from ScholarsArchive at Oregon State University.

³ Lopez, M.H. (2003). "Fact Sheet: Electoral Engagement Among Latino Youth." The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement: College Park.

with others on community problems, buy or refuse to buy products for political or ethical reasons, sign paper or e-mail petitions, contact officials, and belong to groups involved with politics. The exception to this disengagement was the relatively large numbers of Latino youth (25 percent) who reported having participated in recent protests, most likely the frequent and large protests which were occurring around federal immigration policy at the time the research was done.⁴ Even so, additional research corroborates such findings and suggests that they are applicable beyond this context.⁵

Because the number of Latinos in the United States is relatively large and growing, the extent to which Latinos remain less engaged in civic life represents a serious gap in America's public life in general, and a weakness in the burgeoning public engagement/democratic governance movement more specifically.⁶ If we are unable to ensure robust participation by our largest and fastest growing minority group, our communities as a whole are impoverished and deliberative democracy is incomplete.

One of the animating impulses behind this paper, then, is to gain a better understanding of what we as deliberative engagement practitioners, and others in the field overall, might do differently to make more robust Latino participation in community engagement initiatives a reality.

Towards this end, we examined several examples of Latino engagement, interviewed organizers and moderators of Community Conversations in our own network, and reviewed research by others, such as Greg Keidan's recent and useful "Latino Outreach Strategies for Civic Engagement."⁷ After reviewing the three examples we conclude by highlighting some of the obstacles and enablers of Latino engagement in public deliberation-based approaches to community problem solving.

II. Three Examples of Latino Engagement

San Jose Unified School District— Latino Engagement in Action

The San Jose, California, school district has been a leader in using public engagement strategies and processes to reach out to parents and other community stakeholders for more than ten years as an integral element of its student success strategy. Just over half of the students enrolled in the district are Latino, and school officials and volunteers realized that, to be successful, it was imperative that they find effective ways of reaching those parents and involving them in the district's overall engagement efforts.

One of the first steps taken was to identify volunteer Latino parent liaisons to advise at the district and school level on how best to approach parent involvement and issues relating to Latino students. At the school level, the District has also implemented "Los Dichos," a program that helps active Latino parents reach out to other Latino parents to help them feel comfortable and welcome on campus. In addition, the district has been working in cooperation with the Mexican consulate to provide parent education at school sites. For example, a number of schools now operate computer labs where parents (or any district employee for that matter) can learn English for free on the school computers using Rosetta Stone language-learning software.

According to the Assistant Superintendent of Educational Accountability and Community Development, Bill Erlendson, "The deal is to make them [parents] feel that school is part of their community, not something separate. They aren't used to that kind of thinking and it's a big cultural shift." The key, according to Erlendson, is to make the school feel like a caring place that welcomes everyone.

⁴ Lopez, M.H., Levine, P., Both, D., Kiesa, A., Kirby, E., and Marcelo, K. (2006). "The 2006 Civic and Political Health of the Nation: A Detailed Look at How Youth Participate in Politics and Communities." The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement: College Park.

⁵ Hritzuk and Park (2000) conclude that Latinos were more likely to volunteer and attend rallies and protests than were whites (157).

⁶ On the growing civic engagement movement, see Leighninger, Matt (2009) "Democracy, Growing Up: The Shifts that Reshaped Local Politics and Foreshadowed the 2008 Presidential Election" (Center for Advances in Public Engagement at Public Agenda); and Sirianni, Carmen and Friedland, Lewis A. (2005) "The Civic Renewal Movement: Community-Building and Democracy in the United States" (Charles F. Kettering Foundation, Dayton).

⁷ National Civic Review (2008).



Regular parent education forums are also a part of the District's engagement efforts, including one held in May of 2008 and attended by more than 300 Hispanic parents and students. The forum began with a few keynote speeches from respected members of the local Latino community and then broke into small groups so that participants could get information on going to college, financial aid, how to get accepted, etc.

Latino parents and students also attend the district's yearly Community Conversations, which attract a diverse group of parents, students and school staff and administrators. To set the agenda for each year's Community Conversation, an annual "Climate Survey" of parents, students and teachers, in grades 3-12, is given in English and Spanish. If students report bullying, for example, but parents and teachers don't, district and school leaders know there's a problem that needs to be addressed, and that issue in turn becomes the topic for the Community Conversation.

This kind of outreach has enabled the district to make progress on very specific goals. For example, even though San Jose graduates more than twice the number of honors students than the state average it is nevertheless the case that many Latino students were not going to college. Through Community Conversations, the district learned that Latino parents in particular were worried about their kids going far away to attend college and they were concerned about how they would pay for it. Following those conversations, the district has launched various initiatives to help allay parents' concerns and provide more education about financial aid and college in general. Assistant Superintendent Erlendson reports that, even after just a few years of working on the issue, the Climate Survey is reflecting a greater number of students, especially Latino students, saying they plan to go to college.

Oklahoma City, OK: Learning as You Go

The National Education Association's (NEA) Public Engagement Project/Family-School-Community Partnerships is designed to create an open dialogue between educators and community members in an effort to find common ground. A number of NEA local affiliates around the country have received training through the Public Engagement Project on how to hold community dialogues on a variety of education-related topics.⁸

In Oklahoma City, OK, the local NEA affiliate and the Oklahoma City School District decided to tackle the achievement gap between Latino and white students by convening members of the Latino community in Community Conversations on how to best work on achievement gaps. Undaunted by initially low turnout, they steadily made progress by both adjusting their strategies and by gaining credibility among the Latino community over time.

Organizers realized from the outset that they would need trained Spanish-speaking moderators and recorders for the conversation, which they recruited by reaching out to respected local community advocates, regents at the State Department of Education, the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, and local colleges, among other places. In the end they trained 15 to 20 people to moderate at the first Community Conversation, held in April 2007.

The organizers took measures that they thought would ensure good participation up front, such as offering child care and holding the event at a community center that is part of a local Baptist church rather than at the school (as they had been told parents were not likely to show up at the school). Invitations had been mailed to every Latino

⁸ The NEA's Public Engagement Project (PEP) began in 1997 using Public Agenda's Community Conversation model and Choicework Discussion Starters. Through this program, scores of communities across the nation have been helped to engage such issues as Purposes of Education, Parental Involvement, School Safety and Closing Achievement Gaps.

parent in the district, and follow-up phone calls were made by Spanish speakers. However, rather than the roughly one hundred parents they were shooting for, only 20 attended.

Undeterred, they held a second conversation a month later where roughly 50 parents attended. This conversation was held at a local technical college in direct response to parents expressing a desire to know more about the local higher-education options available to students. The same topic of closing achievement gaps was the focus for this conversation but they adjusted the program by shortening the opening plenary session prior to breaking the group into small discussion groups, having seen parents become restless and leave during the plenary at the April meeting.

Following the second conversation, organizers invited a number of parents who had attended both meetings to be trained to moderate the next conversation, to be held a few months later. Jennifer Smith of the Oklahoma NEA noted that having the parents facilitate the conversations gave them a feeling of ownership and resulted in a more community-directed conversation. In addition, an incentive was offered to parents at the August conversation: If they brought more parents with them, they would receive a small stipend. This conversation was attended by roughly 100 people.

At every conversation food was provided by “Los Mariaches,” a local restaurant owned by a couple from the same state in Mexico as many of the local parents and students, further adding to the comfort level of participants. Quite possibly, word got out about the good meal, which may also have contributed to the growing participation. Also, in addition to mailed invitations and phone calls, Spanish-language fliers advertising the conversations were placed in Mexican restaurants, grocery stores, Mexican churches, etc.

Interestingly, one measure meant to boost attendance fell by the wayside as organizers learned more about what was needed: Although childcare was offered for the first three conversations, families wanted their kids to go with them into the rooms where the small group discussions were taking place (where they played or sat quietly). Thus, it was ultimately decided that formal child care services would not be offered going forward, allowing organizers to put more energy and resources into the things that were working.

A meeting in 2008 was attended by roughly 250 people. This session continued to respond to the local Latino community’s interest in college readiness by including a course curriculum book that was, for the first time, printed in Spanish as well as English. In addition, local staff and professors from the college came to help parents and students choose courses and explain how to fill out the Free Application for Student Aid (FAFSA) forms.

According to a local organizer, over time they were able to establish a good level of trust with the community, largely because they acted on many of the things parents said they wanted. For example, they learned there were not enough bilingual staff at one of the high schools and, now that the school has hired more, the community is far more willing to come to the school and work with the school.

The “Thickening” of Public Engagement within the Latino Community in Bridgeport, CT

In 2007, Public Agenda’s Center for Advances in Public Engagement (CAPE) published “Transforming Public Life: A Decade of Citizen Engagement in Bridgeport, CT.”⁹

This report examined of the impacts of the gradual embedding of public deliberation as an accepted and sustained method of public problem solving for many community and civic leaders in the city. Our research documented how, when

⁹ Will Friedman, Alison Kadlec and Lara Birnback (2007) *Transforming Public Life: A Decade of Citizen Engagement in Bridgeport, CT* (The Center for Advances in Public Engagement at Public Agenda).



it comes time to work on public issues and policymaking, many of the institutions, organizations, and individuals in the city defy “business as usual” through a remarkably inclusive and deliberative citizen-centered approach to problem solving.

In the case study, we documented how public engagement in Bridgeport was, “initially applied to problems of education and school reform. But over time, its use has broadened to neighboring issues, and then to neighbors’ neighbors, encompassing more and more aspects of public life. Engagement in Bridgeport has thus evolved from a relatively narrow stream of activity to an increasingly multi-layered, “thick” community phenomenon.”¹⁰ This case vignette of Latino engagement is a further example of this phenomenon.

A number of the individuals who had acted as moderators and/or participants in early Community Conversations on education in Bridgeport were simultaneously involved in the formation of the Greater Bridgeport Latino Network (GBLN), a nonprofit organization whose mission is, “To educate the public, private, and nonprofit sectors about the various social and economic issues affecting Latinos and to participate in activities that foster a sense of support and unity among the Latino community.”¹¹

Alma Maya, City of Bridgeport’s Town Clerk and a co-founder of the organization, reflected on its origins:

The reason the group came together was due to a recognition among a group of young Latino professionals that there was something missing. There was nothing really specifically available for Latinos...giving us a sense of a connection with our community.

I think it is really important to bring the community together around topics that we all felt were important, such as immigration, juvenile justice, also workforce development.

These are issues that are important to our community, and they’re also important to the Bridgeport community.

In 2007, a subset of GBLN members decided to begin a program specifically for Bridgeport’s Latino youth, “Civic Engagement for Latino Youth.” The program, supported by nearby Pitney Bowes, provides classroom-style and experiential learning about politics and public life to juniors and seniors in local high schools. Guest speakers and field trips to the capitol in Hartford are incorporated into the program to enable students to interact with Latinos who are directly involved in politics and/or social justice work.¹² Catalina Estrada, a former student participant, reflected on why she wanted to get involved in the program and what she has experienced.

I thought by learning how to vote and civil things, how the system works, I can grow and give back. I will be able to go to school and exercise my rights and give back. Before the Latino Youth Engagement Program I did not care, I didn’t even know about the voting process. The program opened up my eyes about our rights.

And she used the neglect of her own school as an example of what happens when a community is not engaged.

The windows’ blinds are all broken, the paint is peeling, the place is dark and the bathrooms are a mess. We need more books, the classrooms still have the old black boards, not the white board that other schools in the region have. It makes me mad; most of the Fairfield, and Trumbull schools in the county are nice, they are brand new, so it is not fair that next door they can have all of this.

So far, we’ve described a sound, if fairly traditional leadership development program with an emphasis on knowledge of the political system and advocacy techniques. In 2009, Public Agenda worked with the program’s leaders to add a public

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Interview with Eileen Lopez Cordone, Co-Founder of the GBLN.

¹² It should be noted that the program, while incubated within the GBLN and primarily serving Latino youth, is open to all young people regardless of race or ethnic background and, in fact, each cohort has had some non-Latino students participate.

deliberation dimension to their civic education program for Bridgeport youth, which they embraced as another important facet of the youth development work in which they were already engaged. The fact that some of the GBLN's founders were moderators and participants in early Bridgeport experiments in public deliberation is surely relevant.

We like to engage the community. I think it's part of Bridgeport, which I really think is a very positive thing. Things may not get done really, really quickly, but you certainly have the input of the community when you're trying to act on things and change things, which I think is really more important.

—ALMA MAYA, co-founder GBLN

And, the importance of better community dialogue and deliberation is something that the youth themselves recognized.

Sometimes we have a problem starting the discussion but maybe it is because we are not asking the right questions. If we could learn how to ask certain questions to [stimulate] the discussion, that would be worth learning--what are the different parts of the problem or different part of the question.

—MARISOL RODRIGUEZ, former Youth Civic Engagement Program participant.

Students decided to hold a “Youth Summit,” based on Public Agenda’s Community Conversation model to bring together a cross-section of students, parents and educators to delve into a topic that they saw as important to Bridgeport’s Latino youth. The teens initially identified three topics they wanted to discuss, school safety, teen pregnancy and jobs, and decided to focus on the first theme in their initial summit, feeling that school safety was the area over which they might have the greatest influence. Specifically, they wanted to make headway on ways to make schools safer and reduce violence among Bridgeport youth, especially conflicts arising between youth from different neighborhoods or ethnic and racial backgrounds.

Held on June 9, 2009 the Youth Summit attracted roughly 50 students, parents, educators and community members from several Bridgeport schools. Nysia Santiago and Joel Robles, two high school juniors involved in the program, kicked off the event with an opening address in which they spoke about why the topic was so important and what they hoped would result from the conversation.

We chose the issue of school safety because there is a little known fact of this “silent code” that we as students sense in order to protect ourselves. Who designated the entry of a school hallway for a particular race only? We walk where boundaries are not to be broken in and outside of our school and neighborhood. Why?

We recognize and acknowledge that our parents are more involved today with our success in schools and that community members and business are working together to provide valuable resources for us—yet we feel students now need to commit by joining in, to really bring a positive change in our schools. We hope your suggestions and recommendations tonight will eliminate the silence and we hope to continue working together to build a lasting relationship amongst our fellow and neighboring students.

Participants in small groups discussed the problem of school safety using a Choicework Discussion Guide developed by Public Agenda that presents a scenario of three school communities, each of which has approached the issue of school safety in a different way.¹³ Participants discussed which scenario they would want for their own community and school, as well as other approaches to school safety to consider. In the course of the dialogue, participants assessed areas of common ground, areas of concern or disagreement, outstanding questions, as well as ways youth and adults can work together to make a difference in the community on the issue.



Some of the preliminary action ideas that resulted from the discussion included:

- Hold school conversations and student focus groups about drugs, alcohol and violence.
- Support mentoring programs between older and younger students.
- Change the security system structure to include progressive disciplinary policies for nonviolent incidents in which the “punishment fits the crime,” while setting a zero-tolerance policy for violence in order to set a standard for children and develop a sense of accountability in both children and parents.
- Provide more options for after-school activities, like recreational sports or arts programs.

By all accounts, the participants and organizers of the Youth Summit were pleased with the outcomes and would like to see additional events that involve public deliberation. The students were especially pleased that the Chief of School Safety attended the Youth Summit.

I think that was really excellent...he went to each small group, he listened to what everyone has to say. It's like at least he tried to make a difference, to listen to what everyone had to say. It seems like he really does care.

—NYSIA SANTIAGO, Civic Engagement for Latino Youth participant.

I applaud the effort of the GBLN for putting on this event and I would like to see more of this type of event put on across the school district because we all learn something from this conference that working together we expect great things from our students as well as all involved in the development of children in this community.

—MELVIN WEARING, Director, Police & School Security, Bridgeport Public Schools

The two students that were the top members of the organizing team (Joel and Nysia) received a proclamation from the state legislature presented by Andres Ayala, the state representative for Bridgeport, and they also received a letter from Connecticut's Governor Jodi Rell acknowledging their work. Even though he felt that organizing the Youth Summit had been a lot of work, Joel reflected, “... if it can make a big difference to the community, it's worth it. It's well worth it especially if you see your plans and ideas come to life; it's a real good feeling.”

Eileen Lopez-Cardone, former GNLN president added:

To see them take the leadership role, it's important to give them that kind of power, [to say] you can take the lead on this, you can get up there and speak. That's important for any youth to feel that level of power, that I can voice my opinion.

III. Obstacles to and Enablers of Latino Participation in Community Dialogue, Deliberation and Action

What factors come into play as either obstacles to or enablers of Latino participation in deliberative forms of community engagement? This final section aims to shed some light on this question based on a variety of sources—the three examples of Latino engagement described earlier, interviews with a number of individuals in our network who have been involved either as organizers and/or moderators in efforts to engage Latino community members in Community Conversations, and external research on this question.¹⁴

Obstacles

LANGUAGE. The most obvious obstacle to Latino involvement in public deliberation and broad-based community problem-solving processes is language.¹⁵ Non-English speaking Latinos¹⁶, or those individuals with a lesser command of the language, may be reluctant to participate in a

¹³ <http://www.publicagenda.org/publicengagement/choicework-discussion-starters>.

¹⁴ As noted earlier, one especially useful and recent reference on this subject can be found in Keidan, G. “Latino Outreach Strategies for Civic Engagement.” National Civic Review, 2008.

¹⁵ The language barrier to civic engagement has been explored in depth by Wong (2006), Segura, Pachon and Woods (2003) and Ramakrishnan and Baldassare (2004).

¹⁶ According to the 2000 US Census, roughly 18 percent of Spanish-speakers said that they spoke English “not well” or “not at all.”

predominantly English language discussion where translation is necessary, or even in bilingual sessions if they feel (whether accurately or not) that their limitations in English proficiency will be a disadvantage.

There does not seem to be a consensus about the best way to handle multi-lingual forums. Some interviewees reported that simultaneous translation is too disruptive or difficult; others didn't find it to be a problem. Some advocated for "separate and equal" Spanish language-only small discussion groups, while others felt this was ineffective, or was counter to the overall intent of bringing diverse community members together and integrating Latinos in the broader initiative. We have successfully seen both approaches applied in our own work with communities, as well as a sort of improvisational group "muddling though" that has been surprisingly effective. In the last scenario, groups use peer-to-peer translation, switching back and forth from one language to another depending on who is speaking.

LEGAL STATUS. Not surprisingly, another big factor in the level of participation by many Latinos is their legal and/or citizenship status. If you are undocumented and fear reprisal from the INS, the last thing you want to do is to be present at a public discussion sharing your personal experience.¹⁷ Suro (2006) points out that undocumented immigration plays a significant role even for many Latinos that are American citizens. While "one-out-of-every-five Latinos is undocumented...nearly one-out-of-every-three Latinos lives in a family with at least one undocumented relative."¹⁸ This suggests that the reluctance to engage with government extends beyond the undocumented segment of the Latino community.

TIME AND MONEY. It is difficult for people who are generally lower income (the Pew Hispanic Center reported the median income in Latino households in 2007 at 40,476 in 2007) to spare the time to participate in civic engagement initiatives because of their work and child care loads.¹⁹

GETTING THERE. Lack of transportation can also be an important issue, as many Latino immigrants in particular may not have a driver's license or access to a vehicle. Care must be taken when selecting venues for events. If they are outside of Latino neighborhoods, are they on public transportation lines? If rides are arranged, organizers recommend picking people up at familiar and safe locations, and having a Spanish speaker present whom they trust.

CULTURAL AND STRATEGIC INHIBITIONS. There may be a cultural hesitancy among some Latino groups to engage with or challenge officials or others in positions of authority.²⁰ In a related vein, Keidan notes that in an effort to be agreeable and avoid having to say "no" some Latino community members may say they will attend an event but not show up. Finally, in some cases there may also be issues with respect to gender roles. One interviewee noted that women must sometimes convince their partners that this is a valuable use of their time. Others suggested that it was important to find ways for the men to feel comfortable at such events when their spouse has brought them and their children along.

UNFAMILIARITY. Adding to existing discomfort may be the fact that some Latinos are not knowledgeable about the American political system and the opportunities and barriers put in place by government to allow for and control community and individual civic engagement. As Hritzuk and

¹⁷ According to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2006 American Community Survey, roughly 40 percent of Latinos in the United States are foreign-born, and of those, only 32 percent are naturalized citizens. Research indicates that civic engagement (on measures such as volunteering, working on problems, contacting officials, etc.) is lower among those who lack legal citizenship status, which is "likely to be a significant impediment to civic engagement." See Segura, Gary M., Pachon, Harry, Woods, Nathan D. "Hispanics, Social Capital, and Civic Engagement." (2001).

¹⁸ Suro, 30.

¹⁹ Exhaustive research on the correlation between socioeconomic status (SES) and political engagement suggests that SES correlates positively to engagement. Scholars like Brady, Schlozman and Verba, however, are keen to point out that income is not the only, let alone the most important, factor influencing Latino engagement.

²⁰ Scholars attribute this reluctance to many factors including widespread racism and discrimination (Schildkraut, 2005), inherited distrust of government and the aforementioned fear of exposing an undocumented family member or friend.



Park write, “Latinos have tended to remain on the fringes of the political process due to unfamiliarity with the workings of American politics and the lack of socialization into the norms of American democracy.”²¹

Enablers

RECRUIT STRATEGICALLY AND LEARN AS YOU GO. First and foremost, careful and conscientious recruitment efforts are critical. Leave plenty of time—months, if possible, not weeks and certainly not days.

Personalized, word-of-mouth outreach from a trusted and respected source is likely to be the most essential step. That said, organizers should also make use of Spanish language media, especially radio and newspapers, distribute Spanish language flyers at the local bodegas and laundromats, and station someone outside of these places to make personal contact with the people coming and going. As with the organizers in Oklahoma City that we discussed earlier, keep listening, learning and responding as you go in order to target your efforts productively and gain credibility over time.

BRING THE FORUM TO LATINO COMMUNITIES. Reach out to isolated or ethnic neighborhoods and bring some of the dialogue events to them by holding them in places that feel safe to that particular community (i.e., local churches or community centers) at least initially, until trust is built up. Some interviewees noted that, with recent immigration raids and crackdowns, schools and other public institutions may be problematic locations, so pay attention to how the immigration issue might affect your choice venue.

CREATE THE RIGHT COALITION, SUPPORT STAFF AND CONDITIONS. Ensure that respected members of the Latino community are represented among the organizers and/or sponsors of the event, and that this fact is made clear to the community. For both outreach and dialogue facilitation purposes, make sure all staff are well trained, Spanish speaking and culturally competent. Develop Spanish or dual language user-friendly materials that frame the issue for public engagement in ways that meaningfully speak to the concerns of the local Latino community.

CREATE A CULTURALLY FRIENDLY AFFAIR. Make the event as culturally friendly as possible by, for instance, allowing children to attend and providing Latino food. In one Public Agenda Community Conversation held in a school in East Harlem (in New York City) the school’s Latin jazz band put on a concert during dinner. In this, as in many other matters, organizers should be careful not to lump all Latinos into one group, and show sensitivity between different cultural groups and geographic regions as well as acknowledge differences between immigrants and second- or third-generation Latinos.²²

FOLLOW UP. Finally, as is important for all participants regardless of ethnicity, organizers must follow up with participants after the event and keep them informed of results, policy changes, ongoing efforts, etc. that occur after, or as a result of, community input and energy. This will build trust and help ensure good will and future participation.

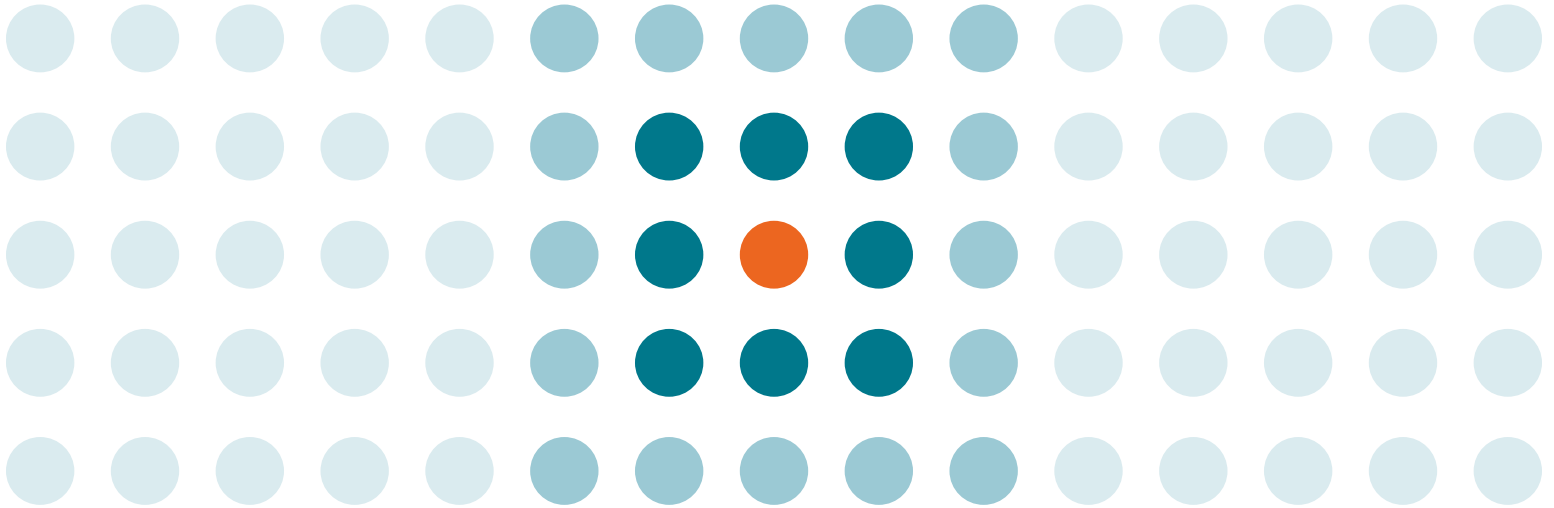
²¹ Hritzuk, N. & Park, D. K. (2000). “The Question of Latino Participation.” *Social Science Quarterly*, 81(1), 163.

²² Extant research suggests that it is difficult to overemphasize the diversity within the Latino community. Martinez’s (2005), for example, deconstructs the myth of Latino homogeneity: “Latinos’ political orientations are quite diverse because of differences in their citizenship status, incorporation, homeland experience, educational attainment, English-language proficiency, and income” (138).



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