

Improving the Health of a Latino Community with Community Partnership and Program Implementation

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Abstract

Health disparities are more common among lower socioeconomic groups. The Latino community is considered the fastest growing community in the United States but they still suffer from being underserved in the health care system. The YWCA and University of North Carolina at Asheville partnered to offer a program called *Salsa, Sabor y Salud* to educate Latino families on living healthier lifestyles. This program engages families in learning about the importance of physical activity and nutrition. The program provides culturally appropriate resources to support the Latino community in Buncombe County in improving their knowledge about living healthier lifestyles and providing creative ideas to practice as a family. The focus of this project was to create a manual for the *Salsa, Sabor y Salud* program at the YWCA to help make the program sustainable. This manual will help to direct the program facilitators and provide feedback for others to run the program in the future.

Keywords: Health promotion, Community partnerships, Culturally competent programs

Origins of the Project

The Latino population has been one of the fastest growing minorities in the nation. According to Betancourt et al. (2004), “The Latino population of the United States is expected to increase from 31 million (11% of the population) to 59 million (18% of the population) by 2025” (p. 16). By 2050 the Latino population is expected to represent 24.5% of the United States (Timmons, 2002). Specifically, in the state of North Carolina, the Latino population increased from 4.7% in 2000 to 8.4% in 2010. According to the U.S Census Bureau, the Latino population in Buncombe County has more than doubled from 2.8% in 2000 to 6.0 % in 2010.

Even though this population group is considered the fastest growing ethnic group, there exists a major concern in regards to their health. Given that the Hispanic population has been one of the fastest growing minority groups in the United States, there has also been an increase in health disparities. According to Betancourt et al. (2004), “By investing in a multifaceted approach that addresses barriers to health promotion and disease prevention in the Latino population, we can improve the quality of care delivered to this population and can help eliminate racial and ethnic disparities in healthcare” (p. 16). It has been difficult to address these issues among this population due to a variety of factors that exist in today’s society, such as the fact that primarily English is used to deliver healthcare education. Language barriers have been one of the leading reasons as to why Latinos face disparities in their health status (Timmons, 2002).

In Buncombe County, The Latino Health Promotion Partnership (LHPP) conducted a gap analysis and a needs assessment for the Latino population to help address their health needs. The LHPP report identified the most common health determinants to reduce health disparities among the Hispanic community. With the help from the community such as Latino families, physicians, interpreters, and service providers, the LHPP conducted a survey to identify specific themes (Summary Report: LHPP, 2008, p. 5). Findings from this report suggested ten major themes:

- 1) Support in staying healthy (including medical/dental care)
- 2) Nutrition
- 3) Physical activity
- 4) Emotional support and mental health
- 5) Substance abuse
- 6) Parenting
- 7) Language
- 8) Access: transportation finances, immigration, availability of appointments
- 9) Culture and acculturation
- 10) Information/marketing and outreach/networking

Providers and community members listed nutrition and physical activity as one of the top three services that were needed in the community. According to the LHPP report, community members also listed language barriers and acculturation as a common challenge to the Latino community (2008). As a result of LHPP findings, the YWCA and UNC Asheville partnered to seek funding to develop a program to meet the community needs. For this reason, *Salsa, Sabor y Salud* became an ideal program to provide support for the Latino community in a culturally appropriate manner.

Salsa, Sabor y Salud is a family-based program that focuses on sustaining Latino culture and addresses a variety of topics that focus on health promotion, from nutrition to physical activity. The program intends to teach Latina families to take small steps toward a healthier lifestyle and provides a means of resources to be able to do this. Some of the resources include lessons about physical activity and nutrition, bilingual handouts to enhance their learning from the lessons taught, and a temporary YWCA gym membership where participants could exercise on a regular basis while enrolled in the program. The program is delivered in a manner that retains the Latino culture, an essential consideration for organizations working with people of foreign cultures to cultivate (Timmons, 2002). This program is targeted to the Latino community and therefore is delivered primarily in Spanish to overcome language barriers. With culturally appropriate sessions, this program can help the Latino community become more informed about ways to live healthier lives in Buncombe County while maintaining cultural traditions.

The program was implemented in a partnership between UNC Asheville and the YWCA, with UNC Asheville taking a leadership role during the first year of the pilot program in 2010. In 2010, the program was led by some of the former members who had conducted the LHPP report: Alphonse Rodriguez, Ellen Bailey, Amy Lanou, and several UNC Asheville students. In 2012, as part of the program's sustainability plan, the leadership would transition to the YWCA with support from UNC Asheville volunteers. In 2012, the program was led by Alphonse Rodriguez (YWCA staff), Katie Souris (YWCA Staff), 2 AmeriCorps volunteers, another UNC Asheville volunteer, me with support provided by Ellen Bailey (UNC Asheville.) The program took place in the summer from June 11 to August 1, 2012 at the YWCA. My role in this program was to come up with a project that would facilitate the leadership transition and make the program more sustainable. After a variety of suggestions, the YWCA decided that the creation of a handbook/manual would best serve the YWCA with this program leadership transition.

Methods and Work Undertaken

The first step for this project was to plan for the program that would begin early in June and end at the beginning of August. The planning began by meeting with the two leaders from the YWCA to learn about the program and the procedures that needed to take place to make the program possible. First, I met with Katie Souris and Alphonse Rodriguez, the main facilitators of the program. My first duty was to get informed about the program. I read various materials, such as the proposed Salsa curriculum, the lesson plans for the eight sessions, and related documents. After that, we began to meet regularly for the creation of this program.

At the beginning, my project for the program was to create an evaluation plan to make the program more sustainable to the YWCA. An evaluation plan would allow the YWCA gather information from participants to determine how effective the program is, what modifications might be helpful, and what grant proposals might sustain the program. After an unexpected leave of the Preventative Health Director, Alphonse Rodriguez, my role in the program and my project changed. Before Alphonse's departure, she suggested that I create a program manual/handbook for the YWCA staff who would be leading the program instead. I became one of the co-facilitators to help with the creation of the handbook for the future program leaders. I was able to see firsthand what the schedule was like for each session that took place. This allowed me to observe

any modifications made throughout program and include it in the manual. Katie Souris would be leading the program for the first time because she speaks Spanish and works in the Preventative Health Program.

With Alphonse's departure from the YWCA, a few things changed in the project as well. Katie Souris became my community advisor. I explained to her the proposal plan for my new project and she agreed that the idea to create handbook for the future facilitators seemed more rational given the time constraints for the public service project and the immediate needs of the YWCA for additional support.

The National Latino Children's Initiative (2008) created the official *Salsa, Sabor y Salud* curriculum in 2003 and modified in 2008. It was created by Latinos for Latinos, but it is designed to allow for modification depending on the organization's needs. Even though there is already a Coordinator's handbook for the program, the idea to create a new handbook was to serve the YWCA specifically. The handbook that I created modified the curriculum to work for this organization. Since the YWCA wanted to update and change some particular activities that were in the curriculum, a few sessions had to be modified to best serve the participants of the program. The development of the manual began as the program started and as we planned for the sessions. The sessions took place every Monday and Wednesday from 10:00 am to 11:30. Since the lesson consisted of nutrition and a physical activity lesson for both adults and children, we decided that the sessions would be split up among these two topics. On Mondays we would focus on the nutrition lesson and on Wednesday we would focus on the physical activity lesson. Even though we divided the lessons, we thought that it was important to include some physical activity each session, even on the nutrition days, to reinforce the program goals and message. This ended up working well so I decided that I would create the manual using this lesson format. The program manual consists of general knowledge about the program, checklists before and after orientation day and schedules for each session day. In the manual, the session that was taught each day is described to demonstrate what a typical lesson might include. As I started facilitating the sessions, it became easier to create the manual because I included each session according to our plans. I noticed the importance of co-facilitating the sessions as I was working on the development of the manual because I became more aware of a variety of details that needed to be included in the manual to understand the program.

The manual notes these changes and guides the future YWCA staff who will lead the program and facilitate their leadership by providing important details to run the program successfully. I feel that this information is vital for this program because it is important to provide the correct information when teaching about these topics.

One important detail that was not included in the Salsa curriculum was how to plan for the beginning of the program for orientation day. For this day, I created a checklist to help prepare for this day. We encountered a variety of problems for which we were not prepared. For example, we did not know that we had translated documents in Spanish for the initial paperwork that needed to be filled out by the participants. I was informed about this because I expressed my concern to Professor Bailey and told her that the schedule for orientation day did not go well due to the extensive time that we needed to translate the documents to the participants. After this, we realized that none of us knew that the YWCA already had translated forms in Spanish to provide

to each participant. Luckily, Professor Bailey had extra copies from the previous program to provide for the new participants. It was also necessary to have enough staff to help fill out this paperwork. If we had known this in advance, we would have saved time. I documented these problems in the manual so that staff can be prepared for the next program.

In the manual, I included information about how to recruit participants for the program based on the previous pilot program success. I included information about how the YWCA began the recruitment of participants for the program by contacting Norma Brown at the Emma Family Resource Center. I also listed the importance of contacting former participants to help with recruitment. Participants who had previously attended the program in 2010 helped to spread the word about the program which had a very positive outcome.

The manual also informs future staff of the procedures that need to be taken in the development of the flyer. This flyer is used to inform the community about the program. It is important however, to be aware of the procedures that need to be taken before the flyer is delivered. I included important details such as receiving approval from both community partners before it is posted at any location. The flyers gave necessary information about the program such when it would take place, where it would take place, and other additional information. I also included important locations where fliers could be delivered and posted such as St. Eugene's Church, Buncombe County Health Department, the Department of Social Services and Mexican stores. This would help find more families that would be interested in participating in the program. These sites were chosen because of the high volume of Latino families who attend and/or professional and personal connections with these groups.

The program focuses on being culturally appropriate for the entire family, but in particular sections it is necessary to modify an activity. As a co-facilitator, I noticed that the families really enjoy that this program focuses on Latino culture. During one of the sessions we had to dance to a song called *La vibora de la mar*; this game was very important to play as a family because most of the parents seemed very nostalgic and eager to demonstrate to their children how to play and dance to this song. I feel that by maintaining their cultural beliefs they seem very excited and eager to learn about their health. An important reason as to why I feel that it is imperative to develop the manual is because in particular lessons, the activities take less time than expected. For example, we had an activity in which the adults have to dance to a song called *Brinca* and the expected time takes about 25 minutes. This activity takes less than expected and it is imperative that another activity be prepared beforehand.

Another idea that I thought was very important to include in the manual was an introductory game for every session. As we taught each lesson, we decided that it would be a great idea to include introductory games that included some kind of physical activity. By playing a game, the children and the adults could all play as a family and we could enforce the need for physical activity on a regular basis.

Another modification that was included in the manual was updated versions of certain materials. For example, in some sessions, the activities were not consistent and needed to be updated. One important modification was the incorporation of "My Plate" from the United States Department of Agriculture. The visual that was given from the program was not following the necessary

guidelines that the USDA recommends. Even though the plate that was provided by the *Salsa, Sabor y Salud* curriculum is bilingual; it does not follow the adequate recommended amounts of food portions because it is outdated. For example, in the USDA “My Plate”, there is a significant stress on the importance of the consumption of more fruits and vegetables than any other food group. In the manual, I suggested to incorporate the new updated plate to be consistent with the USDA’s recommendations. I found a USDA’s “MyPlate” (Mi Plato) visual in Spanish that could be used as resource. In addition, I incorporated a “Mi Plato” coloring sheet that can be used for the adults and/or the children. I also found a consumer brochure in Spanish which provides information about nutrition and physical activity that can be given to the adults.

Ties to Academia

This opportunity to become a co-facilitator and to develop a handbook for this program has been a wonderful educational experience. I expanded my knowledge as a student in Health and Wellness Promotion and I was also able to practice my Spanish speaking skills as I helped to teach various topics about physical activity and nutrition. These topics were the main focus throughout my academic career.

One aspect that I learned throughout my academic preparation was the importance of community partnerships for program sustainability. With the YWCA and UNC Asheville community partnership, I was able to observe how community partnerships can work to implement a program. I realized that it is important to know how community partnerships make a program successful because each community partner brings a unique approach that contributes to program success. Each also brings different strengths as well as diverse culture and expectations (Plowfield, 2005). As a community partnership, I noticed how UNC Asheville and the YWCA worked to meet the common goals of the program. Each partnership provided assistance so that the program could be successful such staffing, planning and funding. According to Plowfield et al. (2005), “Solid communication skills are important for managing the successful development of merged goals. Verbal and communication skills that are clear and goal oriented must also demonstrate respect for the work of the other partner (p. 218).” Trust is also a key factor in community partnerships. Plowfield et al. (2005) states, “When people engage in new partnerships, building trust among agency staff is critical to building trust along agency partners” (p. 219). For example, the importance of clear communication and trust between partners became evident early on in the program. Since this was the year to transition to YWCA coordination of the program, UNC Asheville members of the team were relying on the YWCA for leadership and coordination; however, since a key staff member left and the YWCA staff person was leading it for the first time, we need to clarify roles, expectations and the modified level of support needed from UNC Asheville early in the program in order to support the program.

It is also important to acknowledge that sometimes many programs require program changes to make it sustainable. For this program, I noticed that even though the goal was to follow and evaluate the curriculum, we had to modify the curriculum to make it fit the planned schedule. According to Scheirer et al. (2011) “Yet as health programs persist in practice, they often change over time. Some program components may be implemented and maintained with fidelity; other

components may be modified by staff for multiple reasons” (p. 2060). This is what happened in order to carry out the program and we noticed it was crucial for the development of the manual. These changes were necessary to make sure that the program was effective and could provide a means of sustainability presently and in the future.

It is important to note that when developing community partnerships, it is essential to have a meaningful collaborative approach. Research has shown that community-academic partnerships help in the process of eliminating health disparities because they provide services in a trusted community-based service agency (McCann, 2010). Yet it is important to have collaborative approaches if seeking long term success. In community partnerships, there also exist unanticipated barriers which can create changes in the development of a program but it is important to maintain focused in meeting the common goal of both organizations.

Challenges Faced and Responses

One of the main challenges encountered during my project was a change in staffing at the YWCA. Shortly after the program planning began, the Director of Preventive Health (Alphie Rodriguez) at the YWCA left her position. Before the program started, Katie Souris who works in Preventive Health at the YWCA had expressed interest in being involved with the program because she speaks Spanish, but her primary role is as case manager for the Diabetes Wellness Prevention Program at the YWCA. The former Director of Preventative Health supported the program and was expected to guide the program as it evolved through the summer. Without her advice, this transition was more difficult since none of us had the experience or expertise that she had. With her guidance, we could have developed a more concrete understanding of the program because Alphie had also worked with UNC Asheville partnership. It was a big challenge to plan for the program since none of us knew what to expect. Katie explained to us that since it was her first time leading this program, she found it challenging to facilitate the program as well. Since the program was led by UNCA two years ago, the idea this year was to have the program transition to being YWCA led program. This became very hard to do because of the change in YWCA staffing and the fact that a new Director of Preventive Health to replace Alphie had not been hired during the summer program. We had to ask for guidance from a UNCA faculty member who had previously run the program. My faculty advisor had to be unexpectedly involved with Alphie’s departure since she was familiar with the pilot program and the resources needed to make this program successful.

I felt that it was very challenging at the beginning to find all the documents that were needed for the program. In many situations, Professor Bailey had to advise us on the sessions. She was of great help at the beginning because she gave us all the resources for the initial program day. She gave us all the documents that were needed for orientation day such as YWCA membership forms and photo release forms. She was also of great assistance in guiding us with the lessons. At the beginning we did not know where to locate the supplies at the YWCA and with her guidance we were able to successfully locate all the supplies needed for the sessions. I included all this information in the manual so that in the future, all this information could be documented in case there was not anybody available to ask where to locate these materials.

Another important challenge was time. When program planning, it is necessary to communicate effectively and provide a regular scheduled time to plan the sessions to make sure that the lessons are delivered effectively to the participants. It was challenging to plan for lessons of this program. Time was needed to plan as a team in preparation for the sessions. Since YWCA staff was involved in other projects, it was very hard for us to meet as a group. Taking more time to plan out the lessons as a team would have helped with the development of the manual. This would have been a great time to discuss what was vital in each lesson and what needed to be omitted. It really helped to review each lesson on a weekly basis and prior to each lesson, to make sure that the timing of the lesson did not need to be adjusted. It was important to prepare and become familiar with each lesson so that it could be taught successfully. Even though this was a challenge, we were able to overcome this and were able to make adjustments in a timely manner. The manual addresses which lessons take less time provides an example of how the lesson is adjusted.

When faced with these challenges, it is important to acknowledge why community partnerships are very necessary. Each can provide a level of contribution to run the program successfully. Even though a YWCA staff member left, we had a UNCA faculty to guide us throughout the program. The community partner served as our guidance and was a primary resource to make this program successful. Without this assistance, this program would have been very difficult to implement. This was not expected and it is very difficult to have sustainability and consistency when the community partner is going through staffing transitions. Many responsibilities are left out but collaboration with community partners help make this type of transition easier.

Results

As I observe the sessions that I help to teach, I notice that the families are really enjoying their involvement in the program. The adults are all eager to participate and the children are excited as well. They have told me that they really love the program and that they see the importance of each session. Becoming a co-facilitator for this program has really given me the opportunity to learn about the importance of having a culturally appropriate program. This was necessary in order to teach the Latino communities to live healthier lifestyles. It is also important to be sure that the lessons are family engaging as they are doing activities. Having culturally related activities really impacted their way of learning the material. A participant of the program told me that she has had difficulty teaching her child about the importance of physical activity and nutrition but as they have attended the program, her child is more aware of the importance. I feel that the manual really places emphasis on family engagement. With the approval of the YWCA, I modified lessons in the manual that can be completed as a family. One session that was really fun to do as a family was the *My Garden* activity. This activity consisted of learning how to plant fruits and vegetables. Families planted seeds in a cup and were able to take it home to watch the plant grow. Originally, this activity was supposed to be done after the adults and the children are separated, but this activity can be really fun to do as a family.

My community advisor and my faculty advisor strongly encouraged me to include the activities that were not listed in the curriculum. In particular, I added the locations that we visited that were close to the YWCA because it really made the sessions more educational. For example, in

one of the sessions we decided to take both the adults and children to a local park. While the children played at the park, the adults were taken to the park's main office to learn how to check out the equipment for free. I felt that this activity is important to include in the manual because families can have additional resources to be physically active when they are not involved in the program. I also provided in the manual details of how we visited a local grocery store called Amazing Savings to learn more about reading food labels and choosing more nutritional food products. This was a great activity because of the hands on experience. We also took the adults to visit the gym to encourage them to visit this place more frequently. During this activity, the adults were able to become familiar with the equipment. The adults felt very happy that this was done because they felt more comfortable visiting the gym for the first time as a group. The adults suggested that we do this activity at the beginning of the program because it made them feel more comfortable to go exercise in the gym.

One particular event of the program that I really support from the curriculum is snack time. We make sure that we have healthy nutritious snacks after each session. By doing this, we give families ideas on snacks that can be prepared easily and can be consumed on a daily basis. I feel that this particular time is crucial to have during every session not only because each participant is hungry but also because it is also a wonderful educational experience. Before each snack time, we review our snacks for the day and focus on the nutritional aspect. In the manual, I suggested that this type of reinforcement be provided before each snack. I noticed that families are always amazed at the snacks that are prepared because they say that they are very creative and most importantly, are very healthy to consume. I also documented in the manual the importance of teaching proper hand washing techniques at the beginning of the program. By doing this, families can practice this habit during the program and throughout their lives. I provide a section for snack time in the manual to remind staff to tell participants to wash their hands.

In the curriculum we had to do an activity with the adults and children and name particular herbs and spices that can be included in foods that we eat. During the session, we had a lot of difficulty translating particular herbs and spices for the activity. Luckily, I had a list that was provided by Professor Bailey but was not included in the curriculum. She suggested that I create a list and include it in the manual so that they could be used for this session.

Sustainability

The *Salsa, Sabor y Salud* program is a great resource for the Latino community. It provides useful information that can be addressed for the Latino Community since it is presented in Spanish and is sensitive to cultural norms. This program strongly exemplifies the cultural aspect for this population since it provides activities that are culturally appropriate. After a few sessions, the families felt very connected to each other. They developed a great relationship which allowed them to share ideas about how to live a healthy lifestyle. I think that it is very important that the program remains culturally appropriate. This a key point when teaching these families to make healthier choices in regards to their health. If this is done, more families will be willing to participate in the program.

Many families reported that they love that the program is given in Spanish because they can relate to their culture and it is easier to make behavior changes. In the manual, I suggest that for future activities for the program, the families should help facilitate certain activities. This idea

evolved when one of our participants really wanted to be involved in helping us lead the song that was danced. She mentioned that she remembered playing these games when she was little and quickly volunteered to help facilitate the activity. This is a great example of how future participants can take lead parts in the sessions that are being taught. As a co-facilitator, I loved that this participant helped us lead the activity because in some of the games it was challenging for us to explain because we had never played the games before. I suggest that some of the participants be involved in the program as Lay Health Advisors (LHAs). Research suggests that LHAs are essential in programs like this one because they are aware of their community's culture (Kim et al., 2005). They can also become an important link between the organization and the community (Kim et al., 2005). In the future LHAs can even help with the recruitment of the participants which will allow the program to become more sustainable in the future.

The manual also provides information about how other organizations or volunteers can be involved in this program. I listed UNC Asheville and AmeriCorps volunteers as primary people to help run this program. I think it is a great idea to have AmeriCorps volunteers to help with the program because they help out tremendously to make the program successful. This year, two AmeriCorps volunteers along with one UNC Asheville student were in charge of the children. These volunteers are essential in the running of the program because they help out tremendously with the children's activities. In the middle of the program, we were left with one AmeriCorps volunteer; this was a big challenge because it became really difficult to do the Salsa activities for the children. I included this information in the manual because I wanted to make sure that future staff knew of this assistance. The AmeriCorps volunteers were wonderful and would be great if this particular type of aid would sustain to make this program more effective in the future. It would also be encouraged to continue to have UNC Asheville students help with this program. This would serve as a great internship opportunity for UNC Asheville students especially if they are bilingual and want to be involved in helping the Spanish speaking community. Spanish speaking students would learn so much from this culturally competent program.

Conclusion

This project has led to wonderful experiences not only in the development of the handbook but also as a co-facilitator of this program. This opportunity has given me real life experience in my academic field of study and has motivated me incredibly to push for my desire to work with the Latino community. I feel that I have created a wonderful relationship with my community and have learned about the importance of culturally appropriate approaches to meet the needs of the Latino community.

As a Health and Wellness Promotion student, I have learned tremendously from this experience. I applied what I have learned throughout my academic career such as concepts about program planning and community partnerships throughout the development of the manual. My hope for this project is that it will help to make the program sustainable at the YWCA so that future participants can benefit from this wonderful program.

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