

The Juntos Program: A Wraparound Program Helping Latina/o Youth Succeed in School

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Introduction

Considering the emergence of the Latina/o population as the largest minority group in the US (US Census, 2017), 4-H and other youth-serving organizations have sought ways to engage more Latina/o youth. In 2006 and 2007, Andrew Behnke and Cintia Aguilar conducted detailed focus groups, needs assessments, and community asset mapping activities around the state of North Carolina. These assessments demonstrated that Latina/o families felt the biggest priority for their communities was helping their youth succeed in school and attain a higher education (Behnke, 2008). These and subsequent research efforts also led to a better understanding of how to serve and meet the needs of Latina/o youth and their families.

Statistics support what these Latina/o parents suggested, showing that Latina/o youth who drop out *are more likely* to experience long-term economic and academic inequalities, suffer a life of long-term poverty, low-paid employment or unemployment, dependence on government assistance, increased incidence of incarceration, mental health issues, and negative physical health outcomes (e.g., Aud, KewalRamani, & Frohlich, 2011). Over their lifetime, the social and economic ramifications of the predicted 6.7 million dropouts have been estimated to incur a financial burden of 7.3 trillion dollars when considering the following: unpaid taxes, economic output loss, increased

welfare support, police and correctional services, rehabilitation efforts, and medical and mental health expenses (Balfanz et al., 2014).

In an effort to broaden its reach with the Latina/o population, National 4-H Council leadership created a National Hispanic Advisory Committee made up of key partners and 4-H leaders from across the US, who developed a Best Practices Toolkit on Latino Youth Outreach. At this same time, National 4-H Council sought out programs from across the US that were having success reaching and retaining Latina/o youth. Because of this search, National 4-H Council discovered NC State's Juntos Program (pronounced "Who-n-toes"; Behnke & Kelly, 2011).

Juntos is made up of four wraparound components: 1) Family engagement which includes a five-week middle school or six-week high school Juntos Family Workshop Series followed by bi-monthly family nights to increase parent involvement and school communication; 2) Monthly one-on-one success coaching by a local Juntos Site Coordinator to help students with their academic progress; 3) After-school Juntos 4-H club meetings and activities twice a month throughout the school year; and 4) summer programming (including a week-long summer college experience, full-day college family events, soccer tournaments, and other educational events. Studies have also shown that these four approaches have often proven the most successful in helping Latina/o students stay in school (Behnke, Gonzalez, & Cox, 2010; Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006; Schargel & Smink, 2014; Zeller, Carpenter, Lacefield, & Applegate, 2013). For more information on the program check out www.JuntosNC.org

Thanks to a large commitment from the New York Life Foundation, National 4-H Council partnered with Juntos in 2015 that has now helped Juntos expand to California, Florida, Illinois, New York, and Texas. Though the program had already been running in North Carolina and seven other states, this recognition brought the program further into the national limelight where it became known as Juntos 4-H. Juntos 4-H is making inroads to building resilience among thousands of Latina/o youth and their parents across the US.

Participants

This study includes 241 students who participated in all four components of the Juntos Program during the 2016 -2017 school year. The Juntos 4-H Program intentionally recruits the vast majority of its participants from low-income households and purposefully seeks students that are struggling academically. All of the respondents in this study were of Latina/o background, 51% were female, and 75% were born in the US. The majority of respondents were in the 8th grade (32%) with a large representation from 9th (21%) and 10th grades (27%). Respondents represented five counties in North Carolina from among 312 active Juntos 4-H'ers in those counties for a 77% completion rate.

Measures

The goal of this study is to assess the impact of the Juntos 4-H Program on participating youth. We created an instrument with 89 quantitative and seven qualitative questions. These questions have been established and piloted with thousands of youth over the previous five years. To establish content validity, we asked a panel of experts to determine whether the instrument was appropriate to assess the impact of the Juntos Program (Henerson, Morris, & Fitz-Gibbon, 1987). The panel indicated that in their opinion there had not been important omissions and that emphasis on the

various sub-areas was balanced. This research was approved by NC State University IRB, the data was kept confidential via passcode protected excel files, and names and identifying information of respondents was not collected.

Besides basic demographic questions, only a small subsample of the quantitative questions asked are used in this study. The questions included 22 statements to which the respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement on a four-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree), and 12 behavioral statements measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Never to 5 = All of the time), assessing changes in participant’s actual behavior. The same survey was administered twice in the first month of the school year (pre-test) and during the last month of the school year (post-test).

Trained graduate student data collectors traveled to the five counties to administer pre- and post-test surveys over Qualtrics in a computer lab with participating students. English and Spanish versions of the survey were available at the click of a button on students’ screens. There were 293 pre-surveys and 247 post-surveys. Less than 1% of the responses were incomplete (282 out of 293 and 241 out of 247 respondents). Because of the nature of this evaluation, responses to quantitative questions were entered and analyzed using Wilcoxon t-tests and basic descriptive statistics in SPSS 25.

Results

The first goal of Juntos 4-H is to “Increase Latina/o student success by improving student attendance and grades, and achieving high school graduation.” Findings showed that participating students experienced heightened levels of academic success. For example, participating students stated or showed that because of Juntos 4-H: 94% felt motivated to get good grades in school; 87% felt they improved their grades to prepare for college; 78% felt it increased their motivation to graduate from high school, and 68% felt it improved their school attendance. Additionally, 100% of 12th graders in the program graduated from high school on time.

The second goal of the program is to “Increase the percentage of Latina/o students preparing for and attending higher education.” Improvements in college preparation was measured using six matching pre- and post-test questions each of which were found to be statistically significant using Wilcoxon T-tests (see Table 1).

Table 1. Wilcoxon Pre- and Post-Test Mean Differences for measures of college readiness

Questions	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Mean Difference	p-value
I know how to apply for financial aid	1.40	3.00	1.60	**
I know where to look for scholarships	1.44	3.16	1.72	**
I plan to apply for financial aid for college	2.48	3.20	0.72	**
I know what different options there are for going to college	2.48	3.28	0.80	**

I've considered various options for going to college	2.36	3.32	0.96	**
I plan to apply for scholarships for college	2.68	3.48	0.80	**

Note: Strongly agree and agree combined. ** $p < .01$

Approximately 91% of youth in the program felt confident they would continue their education after high school. Additionally, 52% of seniors in the program reported they were accepted to a college they planned to attend, 19% above the average for Latina/o seniors in North Carolina. Almost half of the teens (47%) plan to complete a BA/BS degree at a University and 33% plan to pursue graduate studies. The remaining respondents plan to either complete high school without pursuing higher education (9%) or attend community college to seek an AA/AS degree or certificate (11%).

Results showed also that Juntos 4-H consistently met its third goal to “Increase family engagement that leads to students’ educational success.” For instance, 85% of participants felt that because of the program their parents learned how to help them do well in school. Additionally, 96% reported their parents had talked with them about their grades (27% higher than on the pre-test) and 78% talked with them about college options (20% higher than on the pre-test). In the post-test, 91% of students reported that their parents monitored their homework and 83% reported their parents had attended school events numerous times throughout the school year.

The final goal of the program is “Increase the sense of belonging among Latina/o students and families in their schools and communities.” A full 95% of students responded that they felt they belonged in their community, and 94% felt they belonged at their school. In addition, 77% of respondents felt able to advocate for themselves at their school, a factor which increased 18% from pre- to post-test. One assessment of behavior showed that 79% of students reported having participated in community service as part of their involvement in the Juntos 4-H program.

Conclusions and Implications

These results provide empirical support that the four goals of the Juntos 4-H program are being met. In particular, these basic findings demonstrate the utility of working with entire Latina/o families around academic success and using 4-H to achieve the goals. These results can inform 4-H and other youth development programs as they seek to engage and retain this critical audience.

First, the logic model for the Juntos 4-H program maps directly to measures of behavior change that can be readily assessed by those carrying out the program. Each of the behavioral objectives was emphasized with program staff and thus at the conclusion of the program year, these objectives appear to be transferred to actual improvements in the student’s behaviors.

Second, because Latina/o families continue to put a high level of emphasis on their child’s academic success, this primary focus of the Juntos 4-H Program is consistent with the needs and wants of the families. Once the families feel a part of the program, additional 4-H and other Extension offerings are introduced (e.g., EFNEP, financial literacy, STEM activities) and youth and families often participate in those programs as well. This also demonstrates the needs for having bilingual

Extension professionals that can deliver culturally appropriate content of different types to often Spanish monolingual families (Herndon, Behnke, Navarro, Daniel, & Storm, 2013).

Third, an intentional approach to reaching youth while also reaching their families appears to be an effective way to assure long-term success engaging Latina/o youth in 4-H (Hobbs, 2004). Because Latina/o parents have minimal experience with the concept of afterschool clubs and even less with volunteer-led 4-H clubs, Juntos 4-H offers a structured pathway to long-term engagement in 4-H. In other studies, our focus group and attendance data show that Juntos 4-H families are committed to the long-term success of the program and youth over time engage in all aspects of 4-H programming. This is further exemplified by the fact that Juntos 4-H has now been piloted in over 100 schools with thousands of Latina/o youth and their parents.

Fourth, there is value in bringing Latina/o youth together within 4-H. In our experience, most Latina/o youth have few friends that share their culture and Juntos 4-H provides a place where the youth connect and form lasting friendships. These youth feel more connected to their schools and their communities, and their communities view them as contributing to the good in the community.

As with all studies, there are limitations to this study. The study has a relatively small sample size and the selectivity of the sample necessitate caution when interpreting its results. Our findings reveal an overwhelmingly positive attitude toward the Juntos 4-H Program that could be the product of self-selection bias since involvement in the program and the related research was voluntary. Students may also be impacted by confirmation bias due to their commitment to the program and the length of time they committed to the study.

This study provides a window into the future research on the Juntos 4-H Program. It is our intention to soon have an external evaluator conduct a Randomized Control Trial study of the Juntos 4-H Program to establish with greater certainty the effectiveness of the program. We recommend that evaluators develop greater depth in understanding the Juntos Program by (1) examining the outcomes of the alumni of the program, (2) exploring through longitudinal methods the impact of dosage on program participants' behaviors and outcomes, (3) use of focus group and interview methodologies to better understand the impact of the program, and (4) a comparison of evaluation data across the numerous states that are conducting the Juntos 4-H Program.

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Abstract

The objective of this article was to assess the impact of the Juntos 4-H Program on participating youth and to inform others within Extension on ways these findings might relate to their work with Latina/o audiences. A pre- and post-survey of 241 Latina/o 4-H youth from 5 counties in North Carolina provides a snapshot of their experiences in the Juntos 4-H Program. The findings of the study demonstrate that Juntos 4-H has positive impacts on academics, college readiness, parent engagement, and community engagement. Suggestions are made to help Extension professionals develop effective programs with Latina/o youth.

Keywords: Latino, immigrant, youth, families, academic