



Summary of Issues to Be Considered for Program Leadership





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BACKGROUND STATEMENT

Program leaders that have a solid understanding of cultural factors unique to Hispanics will be able to guide marriage education programs to more effectively serve Hispanic couples. This document outlines several important areas that program leaders should consider when developing services for Hispanic couples. Programs that offer services reflecting Hispanic culture will most likely have more success reaching Hispanic couples. These programs may also experience more positive outcomes for participating couples. Hispanic family researchers, national marriage researchers, and service providers discussed issues related to program leadership at a national forum convened by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF). Understanding these issues will help program leaders make informed decisions and develop services which are relevant to the Hispanic population. This memo summarizes these discussions and is not intended to be an exhaustive account of the issue of program leadership. Experts were convened on September 15 and 16, 2006, in St. Louis, Missouri, in conjunction with a conference sponsored by the Center for Latino Family Research.

A wide variety of marriage enrichment curricula are available in the market. While available curricula vary in terms of their theoretical orientation and format, for the most part, each of them address problem solving, communication, commitment, forgiveness, and what brought the couple together. The common themes addressed in most marriage education curricula illustrate what most practitioners and social scientists agree on: there are universal, cross-cultural patterns in healthy marriages and relationships. At the same time, they understand that culture influences attitudes, behaviors, thoughts, and interpretations of these patterns. For example, while commitment may be a universal principal that is found to be a healthy component in marriages, commitment may vary in definition from culture to culture. Since marriage enrichment curricula have predominantly been developed for an Anglo-American, middle-class audience, researchers and practitioners in the forum raised concerns as to the relevance of these curricula for Hispanics living in the United States.

Program directors and practitioners must be aware of this fact when considering marriage and relationship education curricula recognizing additional steps of adaptation and possible translation may be required in order to effectively reach the Hispanic population.

LESSONS LEARNED

Making Your Program Culturally Relevant

Part of what unifies the Hispanic culture is shared values and a common language. This suggests that marriage enrichment programs can be generally adapted to better reach the needs of the Hispanic community. Program directors and leaders must be aware that although the content of existing curricula may be culturally relevant to the dominant culture, it may need to be adapted to effectively reach the Hispanic population. Modifying existing marriage programs to fit the needs of a Hispanic audience involves adapting the content of the curriculum and the process or the delivery of the curriculum material. The goal of adapting curricula is to ensure its relevance to the audience, increase participant retention, maximize participation, and encourage the acquisition and practice of healthy relationship skills.



Programs can become culturally relevant by giving attention to the stories, examples, and language used in delivering the curriculum. Although some curricula may need to be adapted to make it relevant to Hispanic couples, many will only need to be “tweaked.” That is, the program leader should consider which examples in the curriculum presentation materials or participant workbook may not resonate with the target population. For example, if the curriculum includes an exercise in which couples are planning a weekend trip, the activity can be altered to discuss attending a wedding or *quinceñera* rather than the camping trip described in the curriculum. By working with trained workshop leaders, curricula can be tweaked to include examples that make the exercises more relevant to the local Hispanic community.

Tweaking your program may also involve considering cultural values such as *familismo*, *personalismo*, *respeto*, religion, and fatalism. This can be done by either explicitly adding activities that address these values or integrating these throughout the skills presented to the group. Program leaders should assume that the population they are working with has valuable knowledge about their cultural values and what contributes to a healthy relationship. This knowledge should be sought out by program leaders and utilized when adapting curriculum content.

Some program leaders may need to go beyond tweaking and actually coordinate the translation of the curriculum workbook and materials. Translation may be necessary because not all curricula are available in Spanish, various versions of Spanish exist, and literacy may be an issue for some program participants. The aim of translating and/or adapting curricula is to ensure relevancy to the audience, promote and practice healthy relationship skills, and maximize participation while meeting longer-term goals of increasing retention and decreasing attrition.

The Facilitator

A program facilitator may be the most important component of the marriage education program. The facilitator possesses his or her own culture, experiences, and personality, which all affect how the curriculum is delivered. The facilitator understands the curriculum in light of his/her experience and adapts it to fit his or her own delivery style. This is particularly relevant when serving Hispanic couples.

It is important that the facilitator either share a similar background with the audience or be knowledgeable about Hispanic culture. Sharing a similar background will help the facilitator connect with the audience and convey curriculum concepts in a meaningful and respectful manner. Program leaders should make an effort to hire and train Hispanic facilitators to lead marriage education programs. The fact that the facilitator shares the same cultural background as the group, and understands the core cultural values that inform the attitudes and behaviors of Hispanics in a particular community, will likely increase retention and satisfaction among program participants.

In addition to hiring facilitators with shared cultural experience, it is important to assess the attitude of the facilitator to the participants and vice versa. In some cases, it is not uncommon to encounter dissension among Hispanics with regard to other Hispanics of differing socioeconomic status, education level, and even country of origin. Program facilitators must possess qualities such as humility and sincerity, which are conveyed to participants to help create a sense of trust between the participant and the facilitator. This trust is essential to establishing and maintaining a safe and open environment where couples are willing to participate.





Hispanics are known to be very personable and amiable, and a key indicator of success is weighted on elements of “*personalismo*,” or the nature of the relationship among group participants and the facilitator. Many less acculturated Hispanics may view educators and professionals as authority figures and may interact with facilitators with respect and with the assumption that the program leader will know what the couple needs to do to improve their relationship. Periodically obtaining feedback from participants will help identify if couples are participating in a given program due to personal investment or because of their high regard for the facilitator. Program leaders should make obtaining participant feedback and ongoing program evaluation standard practice. The information obtained from these evaluations will determine if mid-course corrections need to be made to the program design. Asking for participant feedback and evaluating couples' experiences will also help develop a level of trust between program leaders and the participating couples.

Program leaders and facilitators can engage Hispanic couples in a variety of ways to establish a level of trust and create a sense of commitment to the group. A few examples include:

- Begin the program with an orientation instead of immediately delivering the content of the curriculum. Provide time for comments, questions and suggestions, and plan future meetings collaboratively as a group.
- Allow time at the beginning of each encounter to talk with participants about their everyday life. Eliminating conversations focused on the weather, family, children, and other daily activities may be considered rude and impersonal. These types of conversations will help build a trusting relationship with the facilitator and increase group cohesion among the participants.
- Avoid asking questions directly related to employment as a form of introduction. Hispanics give more weight to relationships and may find direct questions about work and employment as offensive or shameful. It may be especially shameful for Hispanics who have attained higher educational degrees but, due to language or licensure limitations, are not working in their area of expertise.
- Incorporate values and issues specific to Hispanics in curriculum content. Program leaders may want to integrate notes for the facilitators highlighting examples of specific values and issues relevant for Hispanics as they relate to the covered domains.

The Participant

Each participant is influenced by his/her own culture, family background and personality. Thus, program participants will interpret the group experience and curriculum content delivered differently as it relates to his or her own worldview. Program leaders should be aware that the worldview of Hispanics living in the U.S. differs for each couple depending on a variety of factors. Individuals and couples will respond to a program and the content of a curriculum differently based on whether they are recent immigrants, second or third generation U.S. born Hispanics, highly educated, low-income, etc. Program leaders should not assume that offering a program and curriculum in Spanish is adequate for reaching Hispanics living in the U.S. The values and challenges of Hispanic participants with respect to marriage and relationships are unique and should be identified by program leaders and incorporated into program delivery. Program leaders should be flexible as couples may shift discussions from the curriculum to issues they are presently experiencing. These experiences may be culturally unique, and program leaders should be open to discussing them and the impact they have on the couple relationship.





For example, some immigrant couples may be experiencing a reunification after a long period of separation. The challenges that this presents can be addressed by the program leader or facilitator with respect to communication and how certain expectations may have changed now that the couple is reunified. The components of a curriculum may need to be applied to specific and unique examples for Hispanic participants to see their relevance and apply the skills to their own relationship. It is important for program leaders and facilitators to be knowledgeable about the backgrounds and experiences of participating couples in order to adapt the program and curriculum to ensure that it is appropriate for a particular audience.

The Location

Hispanics are more likely to reach out for services and attend programs if they are offered in a location that is well known and trusted by the community. Program leaders must be knowledgeable about institutions and community organizations that are held in high regard by the Hispanic community and seek them out as partners in service delivery. Reaching out to stakeholders in the community and listening to their observations and concerns about where services will be rendered will help ensure that the location of services will not discourage Hispanic couples from participating.

Hispanics who have recently immigrated or may be undocumented may not feel comfortable attending programs held in government or state institutions that could be viewed as a threat to these individuals. Program leaders should strive to offer services in a familiar and inviting environment. In many cases, a home setting works well to ease anxieties around participating in community programs. In addition to the physical location, program leaders should adapt the program to incorporate Hispanic values of “*familismo*” and fun. Providing a meal, or light refreshments and extending program activities to include music/entertainment, children and extended family are examples of how program leaders can create an environment that is appealing to couples and reflects the Hispanic culture.

SUMMARY

The majority of empirically validated marriage enrichment curricula provide extensive training for facilitators. These trainings usually focus on the content of the material that is covered in the programs. Since much of the success of the program is dependent on the delivery and process, it is recommended that facilitators are provided with continuous training and support. An education or enrichment program is contingent on the facilitator's skills to identify with the audience, perceive the needs and mood of the group, and create an environment that is comfortable and inviting to couples. Therefore, beyond mastery of the skills and curriculum content, programs will be enhanced when training for facilitators also focuses on understanding the culture, managing group dynamics, and improving presentation skills. The proposed comprehensive adaptation process that attends to both the content and process will lead to a greater likelihood of success in reaching Hispanic populations.

