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Involving new immigrants and minority youth in local food systems

Jan Flora

Iowa State University, floraj@iastate.edu

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Involving new immigrants and minority youth in local food systems

Abstract

The project focused on building awareness of the social and cultural aspects of food and its origins among an audience of high school age immigrant youth. Latino students from three Iowa communities were involved in photography project experiences.

Keywords

Sociology, Human systems demographics and beginning farmer programs

Disciplines

Human Geography | International and Community Nutrition | Rural Sociology



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Principal Investigator:

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Jan Flora
 Sociology Extension
 Iowa State University

Budget:
 \$40,434 for year one

Q What is the social meaning of food in the lives of Latino youth?

A The project helped these Latino youth understand more fully the social role of the food value chain in their lives by using the PhotoVoice program. It also was meant to assist in the integration of Latinos in local/regional food groups in Iowa.



MARKETING

Background

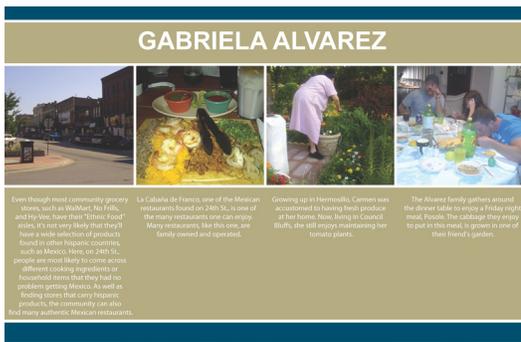
Latino high school students from three communities in Iowa (Des Moines, Council Bluffs and Ottumwa) participated in a PhotoVoice project with ISU Sociology Extension with the intent of raising their awareness of local food systems. Through photography, youth artistically engaged the local food system, and came to better understand how they and their families are an integral part of the food web. This effort was fueled by collaboration with regional food groups and allied sponsoring organizations in each region.

Three regional food groups (RFGs) affiliated with the Regional Food Systems Working Group (RFSWG) committed to work with the ISU Extension Sociology team during the first year: Southwest Iowa Food and Farm Initiative, Hometown Harvest of Southeast Iowa, and the Healthy Urban Food and Farming working group in Polk County. The objectives of the project were to:

1. Involve immigrant and minority residents in local and regional food groups:
 - a. Using participatory techniques (the project chose PhotoVoice, a community-based participatory research process that uses photography as a tool for engaging people in a critical reflection process around specific issues), train youth to better understand the food system in their communities.
2. Strengthen capacity in RFGs and in their regions for integrating immigrant and minority groups into community food systems.
3. Disseminate materials, methods, and insights to other RFGs in the RFSWG and beyond via the Sociology Extension website.

Approach and methods

Participating students were chosen in different ways in the three communities. The Des Moines students were part of an Upward Bound program with Iowa State University. The Council Bluffs students were selected by the director of the Latino Center in consultation with her advisory board. In Ottumwa, Hímar Hernández, Extension Community Economic Development Field Specialist, collaborated with school officials and other community leaders in choosing the students. Selection was



Student poster

completed by the end of May 2011, with 20 students beginning the program.

Participants were encouraged to take pictures that not only represented their favorite meals, but also included how the food in those meals was produced, processed and distributed. The pictures varied from traditional supermarket and ethnic grocery stores to religious symbolism of Latin American culture. The activity helped the students to better understand the food system while reflecting on their cultural identity.

As part of the process, students participated in two training sessions on Participatory Action Research and PhotoVoice methodologies. In

summer 2011, students learned about food systems networks and were asked to take pictures with their smartphones that reflected some of the components of the system. A follow-up workshop was held in two of the communities in September. These workshops focused on assisting the participants to choose their photos for the posters, writing photo captions, and tips on how to write a summary of their reflections.

After contemplating their photographs, students were asked to write an essay about their experiences in the project. This task clearly reflected their awareness of the connections between food and culture. A significant observation of the students was the importance of family in the food system. Most students reflected on the role their mothers play in providing healthy meals and maintaining cultural ties through cooking traditional meals.

Students selected three or four photos representing the most significant experiences and meanings that emerged from different parts of the local food value chain. Nick Van Berkum, communications director for the ISU Sociology Department, designed posters using the students' content. The students then presented the posters at meetings in their respective communities, with family, friends and community leaders in the audiences.

Results and discussion

- Ten students completed the course; each received a graduation certificate and a \$200 check.
- The graduate students and project director developed a curriculum and carried out "PhotoVoice Basic Training" for participating youth in each community. After the initial workshop, a second curriculum on "Reviewing albums and providing feedback to improve pictures" was prepared and presented in two of the communities. The two curricula and a description and agenda for the community meeting appear on the ISU Extension Sociology website: <http://www.soc.iastate.edu/extension/diverse/localfoods/photovoice.html>.
- A meeting was held in each participating community at which students presented their posters.
- Three students from Des Moines and Council Bluffs presented posters and responded to questions at the December 2011 RFSWG meeting.

Conclusions

The project was effective in imparting knowledge of the food system and the Latino



PhotoVoice training in Ottumwa

high school students' role in it. Students became more appreciative of the importance of family time (bonding social capital) and came to see much more clearly how food connects them to their culture. Several students came to appreciate the role of their mothers in cultural reproduction as the food preparers in their families. The project helped students realize where food comes from and in a few cases increased their concern about and interest in eating healthier and locally procured food. It would be interesting to compare U.S. Anglo (white) youths' photos and reflections on food with those of other cultures.

The project was less successful in integrating Latino youth into local food groups. The team should have expanded its efforts to find appropriate partners at the community level to coordinate local work, with local coordinator-trainers as liaisons with both the regional food group and the ISU team. In the medium term, that would facilitate involvement of the RFGs with Latinos and other immigrants, as well as with the three communities where the project was carried out. Now that materials are available and a training program has been tested, a 'training of trainers' effort would be more appropriate. Also, building a diverse network to include schools and other community groups involved in community gardens, farmers markets, Community Supported Agriculture farmers, etc. would strengthen PhotoVoice as a tool for encouraging youths' reflection about the food system as they learn by doing.

When evaluation results are integrated into the Sociology Extension website, information about the site will be shared with appropriate listservs in Iowa and beyond. The team will seek web links with Community and Economic Development Extension, Agriculture and Natural Resources Extension, the Regional Food Systems Working Group, the three partnering RFGs, the Leopold Center, and others.

Impact of results

The project succeeded in involving Latino youth to reflect on how food is embedded in culture and in relationships, particularly of the family. It encouraged them to think about where their food comes from and how it moves from seedling to the dinner table. Latino youth learned how to use the technique called PhotoVoice to better understand the food system in their community. This PhotoVoice training program and curriculum can be used in the future to assist Regional Food Groups and others interested in involving immigrants, refugees, and minority group members in a community food system.

Involving Latinos or other immigrant or minority groups in the local food system requires long-term effort. Several cultural barriers need to be addressed by all participants, organizers, youth and parents. Trust and more participation can be built through recognition of differences and of shared goals by members in the community, if supported by appropriate learning tools. As a consequence of this project, a subset of Iowa Latino teens became aware of opportunities associated with local foods.

Education and outreach

A presentation was made at the annual Cambio de Colores conference at the University of Missouri-Columbia, attended by researchers and extension personnel with an interest in working with Latinos/as and immigrants. The paper will be part of the proceedings of the conference, to be provided to those who attend the 2013 Cambio de Colores meeting. A paper, based on the proceedings paper and the project evaluation document, will be submitted to the Journal of Extension in summer 2013. The ISU Extension Sociology team also wrote a popular article for Community Matters, the magazine of ISU's Community and Economic Development Extension program. A poster was prepared and has been shown at two events on the ISU campus.

Leveraged funds

The project did not leverage other funds, but in-kind contributions (primarily of personnel) were provided by Southwest Iowa Food and Farm Initiative, Hometown Harvest of Southeast Iowa, the Healthy Urban Food and Farming working group in Polk County, the Latino Center in Council Bluffs, Hímar Hernández (Extension Community Economic Development Field Specialist in Ottumwa), Sociology and Sustainable Agriculture Graduate Students who volunteered (Hector Bombiella, Claudia Marcela Prado-Meza, and Caroline Oliveira), Judy Levings (Assistant Director of 4-H Extension, who coordinated evaluation focus groups), and the advisory committee for this project (Sue Deblieck, Hímar Hernández, and Hannah Lewis).

***For more information,
contact:***

*Jan Flora, Department
of Sociology,
317 East Hall, Iowa
State University,
Ames, Iowa 50011-
1070; (515) 294-4295,
e-mail floraj@iastate.edu*