

Advancing our movement in the development of Latin@ Leadership

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Leadership can be defined as the action of leading a group of people or an organization or it can be defined as the state or position of being a leader. Over the past several years, there has been much talk about leadership among Latin@s in the sexual violence prevention movement. In the midst of these conversations, two clear thoughts have emerged. The first thought is that there is a need to develop leadership that is identified and embraced by the diverse Latin@ community that advocates for the needs of the ever increasing Latin@ and Spanish-speaking populations in the United States in victim services and prevention work. According to the Pew Hispanic Center, Latinos or Hispanics account for 56 percent of the Nation's growth in the past decade. The 2010 Census counted 50.5 million Hispanics in the United States, making up 16.3 percent of the total population¹. The second thought is mixed consensus on how this leadership would look or function.

Many Latin@ advocates express feeling isolated and lacking support in their work environment while others say that limited resources do not allow them to provide outreach and support to victims in a culturally-relevant manner.

In exploring this issue, there are many questions. Is there a clear need to develop national Latin@ leadership in sexual violence? If so, how would that be developed and who should be involved? Would it be possible to ensure community buy-in to support the leadership once it was established or would the community support be fragmented?

In a critical conversation conducted at the 2011

National Sexual Assault Conference in Baltimore, participants were asked to describe characteristics of a Latin@ leader. Many participants described someone who was strong, charismatic, knowledgeable about the community and not afraid to speak up. However, when participants were asked what they needed from Latin@ leadership, they began describing advocacy, resources and materials. Participants expressed a need for information specific to certain sub-groups in Latin@ populations such as immigrant women or domestic Latin@s. Because the Latin@ community is so diverse, this is just one of the challenges that exists in developing a national Latin@ leadership that is inclusive rather than exclusive.

One of the challenges in leadership development stems from issues around group identity. Though the term "Latin@" is a commonly used term by many people in the community, it is not utilized by all groups of Latin@ or Hispanic individuals and groups. Additionally, the term "Hispanic" is not universally embraced or well received by all the diverse populations who are today often classified in the United States society as Latin@s. Self-definition is an important aspect of the rite of naming oneself. Latin@s may prefer other terms when referring to their ethnicity such as Chican@s, Hispan@s, Latin-Americans, etc and some individuals may choose to not identify their culture or ethnicity.

Latin@s make up a diverse group of Spanish-speaking language heritage, Native American - European and African descendants. Many Latin@s

perceive the term “Hispanic” as having been imposed by the United States Census bureau. Latin@s should not be thought of as a race but rather an ethnicity. Latin@s make up an ethnic group that share common roots in all races and come from 20 unique countries having different values and traditions but share a common language, family structure, and a possible religion or influence of a religious history.

As one participant of the critical conversation expressed, “it is hard to think about organizing the Latin@ community at a national level because we are not organized on a local level.”

With such great diversity in the community and limited resources, how can we begin to develop resource materials for victim services and prevention work in the Latin@ community? As we begin to explore questions around organizing at the community and national level, it is important to begin to explore our commonalities instead of focusing on our differences. Since I began working in organizing the Latin@ community over 20 years ago, so much energy has been expended on identifying the ways that we are different and how our needs are different. This has been an important process in naming our diverse needs and developing our voice because so many of Latin@s have been silenced. Silenced in our own communities which did not encourage us to speak out against sexual violence. Silenced by societal and institutional oppression that did not recognize or hear our voices. In reaction to a culture of silencing, we have often internalized our experiences and began silencing each other instead of encouraging one another. At times, the focus on our differences has created additional challenges in our ability to work together.



However, there is a new energy and spirit among Latin@ advocates and prevention specialists. It is a song that sings how it is time for us to move beyond our differences professionally, culturally and personally. It is time for La comunidad Latin@ to join together in solidarity to move forward in our efforts to end sexual violence against our Latin@ sisters and brothers. Current cuts in the federal budget have left us with fewer funds pushing the Latin@ community to use even more their history of community organizing and the ongoing effort to accomplish more with less. There is much work for us to do to develop a dialogue around healthy sexuality and relationships in a community where so many taboos continue to exist around these types of conversations. There is so much that we can accomplish together if we can set aside our egos and begin to look at our commonalities. One commonality shared by all Latin@s working to end sexual violence is the love for our families, our community and our desire to help Latin@s live healthier and safer lives. I think this alone is a great foundation to begin our work together in solidarity.

NOTE: The “@” symbol as a way to foster a non-sexist inclusive language. Adding the “@” symbol, which has both an “a” (feminine) and an “o” (masculine) reflects a more gender-neutral description of this population.

Resources

1. Pew Hispanic Center 3-24-11
<http://pewhispanic.org/reports/report.php?ReportID=140>

