Diversifying Community Engagement & Outreach

Developed and adapted by René García-Hernández (Él/He/Him),
Principal consultant at Bienestar Latinx &
Director of Programming and Community Engagement at
Just Communities Central Coast

Bienestar Latinx

comunidades
JUSTAS
JUST communities

Six Building Blocks for Engaging Diverse Communities

Bienestar Latinx has adapted and developed six building blocks to help organizations foster equitable programming access by increasing the participation of and engagement with diverse audiences. Bienestar Latinx predominantly works within the Latinx communities in Santa Barbara County and throughout the Central Coast. This framework draws from personal and professional experience of Latinx leaders and is supported by comprehensive research of best practices of strengthening community engagement and involvement through the lens and heart of diversity, equity, inclusion, access, and justice. Relationship building is a cornerstone of success in engaging any community and is a thread that runs through the six building blocks. This work may require fundamental shifts in organizations that will take time to establish and execute. Although engaging with diverse communities and promoting equity is a long-term commitment, these building blocks help break down the work into bite-sized pieces to help you get started. For each building block shown here, we have assembled tools and resources to help put them into action. We recognize that every organization has a unique structure, mission, and needs, so the building blocks are offered only as suggestions and may be adapted as needed. Also, these blocks are presented in a recommended sequence; yet again, each organization should feel free to work on a building block that fits in with its own current stage in the process and is consistent with its own size and resources. We all have to start somewhere.

AN INTRODUCTION TO ENGAGING DIVERSE COMMUNITIES: ESTABLISHING A FOUNDATION

*Increased equitable access and engagement begins with creating a solid foundation and internal structure that supports these efforts. Each organization needs to determine what equity means and why pursuing it is important. **Much of this work involves identifying and removing barriers that limit a community's full access and participation.***

Establishing a Foundation

In order to move from "we are considering and thinking about" to "we are changing and improving," your organization's equity initiative needs to be embedded in your mission, values, culture, and structure. This step does not automatically require a complete rewriting of the mission statement; however, examining your current mission statement through an equity lens or creating a separate value statement can be an important step in wholeheartedly and structurally embracing the work from within. This first building block definitely requires conversations, reflection, and agreement among your staff and board members as to what equity and diversity mean and how they enhance your organization, authentically, and respectfully serve the community.

As much as this building block is a stepping stone for building equitable access to programming, it is also an opportunity to be part of a bigger movement—away from barriers and discrimination and towards a community that prioritizes the equitable access to all resources for all of its members.
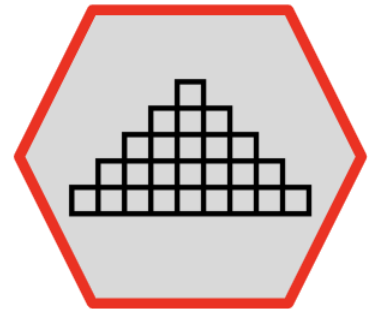
Putting It Into Action
It is crucial to ensure that everyone in your organization is familiar and utilizing common language. Your definitions for "diversity" and "equity" may change over time as you advance your efforts, and the broader, public conversation about equity and inclusion will continue to evolve as well. Some examples: ● "Diversity includes all the ways in which people differ, and it encompasses all the different characteristics that make one individual or group different from another. It is all-inclusive and recognizes everyone and every group as part of the diversity that should be valued. A broad definition includes not only race, ethnicity, and gender — the groups that most often come to mind when the term "diversity" is used — but also age, national origin, religion, disability, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, education, marital status, language, and physical appearance. It also involves different ideas, perspectives, and values." (UC Berkeley) ● Equity is defined as "the state, quality or ideal of being just, impartial and fair." The concept of equity is synonymous with fairness and justice. It is helpful to think of equity as not simply a desired state of affairs or a lofty value. To be achieved and sustained, equity needs to be thought of as a structural and systemic concept. ● "Racial equity refers to what a genuinely non-racist society would look like. In a racially equitable society, the distribution of society's benefits and burdens would not be skewed by race. In other words, racial equity would be a reality in which a person is no more or less likely to experience society's benefits or burdens" because of their membership in a particular racial group (Aspen Institute). ● Systematic equity is a complex combination of interrelated elements consciously designed to create, support and sustain social justice. It is a robust system and dynamic process that reinforces and replicates equitable ideas, power, resources, strategies, conditions, habits and outcomes.

In order to determine future goals and direction, it is vital for an organization to know who its audience members are today. For some, audience demographic data may be readily available, while for others it may require some time and work to uncover the details. Small organizations with limited resources and staff may choose to move forward modestly at first. The data gathered in this building block is the starting point in evaluating progress as it provides a snapshot of the current audience and helps assess whether and where progress is made along the way. Future data collection will be compared to this starting point.

Assessing Your Current Audience

Assessing your current audience may include more than gathering demographic data. Audience measurement tools can also uncover useful information such as attendance frequency, motives for participation, how patrons learned about an event, or what they liked and may need.

Putting It Into Action
This block establishes a baseline that your organization will revisit when you evaluate your process and progress (described later in this document). The goal of this block is to help you make key decisions based on data. The first step is to identify what data should be collected. This data may include demographics, motivations for attending, and how patrons learned about the event. Once the types of data to be collected are determined, methods to collect the data should be identified. Examples include: ● Point-of-sale data collection. Ticket purchasers would be asked to self-identify according to the demographics being collected (e.g., age, ethnicity, educational background). This method requires staff training and an explanation to patrons of why the data collection is important. This may be conducted on an annual basis or one performance per year. ● Audience survey. A patron survey would be conducted at a performance or event. The survey could be administered by volunteers. ● Direct mail or email survey. A brief survey mailed to all subscribers with an enclosed self-addressed, postage-paid return envelope. This survey can also be administered using email. Completion incentives could be offered to increase the response rate. ● Current membership. Analyze membership and/or ticket sales data to describe your most typical members (e.g., purchaser's residence).

AN INTRODUCTION TO ENGAGING DIVERSE COMMUNITIES: DEFINING AUDIENCE SEGMENTS

In this building block, an organization will categorize its current audiences into segments, and identify audience members whose engagement has been low in the past. Organizations should consider the various reasons why they haven't had meaningful engagement and involvement from certain communities in the past (e.g., programming that has not been culturally relevant, language access, lack of relationship building with a particular community, or economic barriers). The more accurately the audience segments can be described, the more strategic and focused the programming and outreach can be in the future.

Defining Audience Segments

If your organization has limited resources and staff, you can begin with small steps, such as identifying one or two new audience segments. Then, as your organization makes progress in engaging communities, you can revisit this building block to specify other groups to broaden or deepen their engagement.

Putting It Into Action
Your organization might choose to reach out to an entirely new audience segment that is underrepresented, or the goal may be to increase the participation of a segment of the current audience. Reaching out to new communities is not about displacing or alienating current audiences, but expanding and deepening existing engagement. The following are some examples that show the goal and description that an organization might use to identify an audience segment. ● Reach adults with below-median incomes. ● Encourage participation from area families who have school-age children with disabilities. ● Connect with more Spanish-speaking adults under 30 from the tri-county region. ● Engage "new participants," particularly Black refugees and immigrants.

Questions to Consider
● What is the focus for this diversity and equity initiative (e.g., increasing participation among the current audience or engaging a completely new audience segment)? ● How does your current audience compare to local area demographics? Which groups are underrepresented? ● Who in your organization will lead this effort (e.g., executive director, volunteer, audience development manager, community engagement coordinator)? ● What resources/capacity do you have available to pursue new audience segments?

AN INTRODUCTION TO ENGAGING DIVERSE COMMUNITIES: DETERMINING PROGRAMMING & EVENTS

This building block requires research and a sustained commitment to building relationships. For example, an organization that seeks to better serve a particular community might consider organizing informal gatherings to ask what the greater cultural interests and needs are, as well as what roadblocks exist.

Determining Programming & Events

Consider the relevance and appeal of your current programming and events to the communities you want to engage. Many organizations already have resources for connecting with specific communities, such as staff members with professional and personal connections, volunteers who are community leaders or board members who are active in other civic organizations. Having a diverse staff and board definitely helps in connecting with communities, and examining your current hiring and board recruitment practices can help in making changes on this front. While an individual cannot represent an entire community, she,he, or they may have connections and insight that bring a new perspective and voice to the table.

This building block heavily relies on relationships that are cultivated and nurtured genuinely and consistently. Continuity is key. Reaching out once or putting on a singular event or program will not create a long-lasting relationship between the organization and a particular community. Again, engagement is a two-way street and communities cannot be expected to participate in your activities if you do not participate in theirs.

Putting It Into Action
Let your mission and vision guide you in this work, but see if you can broaden your reach. Some suggestions for building deeper relationships with communities and creating programs and events that resonate with a wider range of community members include: ● Participating in the activities and celebrations of cultural groups, instead of only inviting the community to come to the organization's programs and events. ● Making events and programs welcoming by offering pre show introductions, behind-the-scenes tours, or translation services. ● Integrating elements and traditions of a particular culture into programs and events (with feedback from community members before doing so). ● Including community partners and members from various cultures and demographic categories.

The defined audience segments and programming goals set the stage for effective outreach and communications plans, which are essential to successfully engaging new audiences. This building block involves reaching out proactively, encouraging the identified new audience members to participate in the organization's programming and reducing or eliminating challenges to their access and participation.

Developing a Marketing & Communications Plan

Start small by focusing on what is organizationally feasible; experience some success; and then expand your efforts to achieve your goals. This effort, like all equity work, requires sustained relationships with the communities the organization strives to engage. These community connections will help organizations identify the best ways to communicate with the selected groups and to uncover and reduce barriers that have prevented prior engagement or involvement.

Putting It Into Action
Once an organization has created the messages it wants to communicate and has determined the most effective methods for delivery, these plans can be put into place. Some ways to do so include: ● Advertising a program or event in the selected groups' preferred publications ● Placing posts on cultural groups' social media pages ● Sponsoring a culturally specific community event ● Displaying flyers in cultural groups' community gathering spaces ● Providing language translations for print and online media ● Broadcasting through media channels that a particular group prefers; e.g., social media instead of print media, radio broadcasting instead of online promotion.

Questions to Consider
● What community relationships are already established? What new connections need to be made? ● What are your resources in marketing and communications to successfully develop and implement a plan? ● Will you collaborate with other organizations or civic groups in your community outreach efforts? ● What types of media and other communication tools are feasible? ● Which communication channels does the specific community use most frequently? ● Are bilingual staff members or volunteers available to help translate, or will outside services be needed?

This building block enables organizations to come full circle and determine whether they have successfully made progress in increasing equitable access. Measurement is a critical tool for understanding what impact the programming, outreach, and communication strategies had in connecting with a diverse range of community members.

Evaluating Process & Progress

Measuring audiences can be challenging. It takes time and effort, and there can be discomfort in asking people to "check a box" to categorize themselves. Because some people choose to identify with multiple categories, such as multiple races or ethnic classifications, we recommend giving people the opportunity to self-identify or self-express their identity beyond any standard classifications whenever possible.

Evaluating the process is the active and authentic method of assessing, with sensitive awareness, your internal and external actions and behaviors in those efforts. The data gathered in the building block "Assessing your Current Audience" serves as your baseline for assessing your process and progress. Evaluating progress requires data being collected, analyzed, and used on an ongoing basis.

Putting It Into Action
Now that you have gathered data before and after implementing programming changes and marketing plans to attract new audience segments, you can evaluate the progress of how well your efforts are working to engage the new audience. After about one year of your efforts, track the data to understand if there are any changes in who is attending the programs: ● If data shows an increase in attendance in the audience segment you wish to reach, this indicates that your strategies are working. This success validates the approach and you can continue to expand upon these successes. (*Note: It is critical to consistently revisit this milestone and include and assess current audience input*) ● If data shows no change or a decrease in attendance in the audience segment you wish to reach, this is an opportunity to revise your approach. Where is the disconnect happening? A focus group is a good way to understand the underlying causes of the results. A focus group is a small group of people (6-8) from whom you want to gather specific information. The process includes inviting people from the desired audience segment to attend a discussion group to share their opinions and feedback. In this group, explore why they are or are not attending your events: Is it the programming? Location? Economic barriers? Did they know about it? Once you identify the root cause(s), make appropriate program and marketing changes and continue to evaluate progress.

Additional Resources

Just Communities works with community members, nonprofits, organizations, and businesses both locally and across the country to develop Customized Training and Consultation workshops tailored to the specific needs of our clients and their communities. Our workshops take an intersectional approach, using race as a lens through which we can examine other identities and experiences including, but not limited to class, immigration, and gender.

Bienestar Latinx provides consulting opportunities for local, state and federal agencies, non profit organizations, and school districts. We work with the diverse demographics of the Latinx (Hispanic, Chicanx, and other) communities as we strive to transform and dismantle generational trauma in order to foster and help heal future generations of Latinx folks by providing authentic leadership development, programming consultation, cultural healing & fostering creativity.