Reaching Out to Hispanic
The Hispanic population looks at recreation differently—identifying those differences can help agencies welcome them with open arms.

By Jon McChesney, Ed.D., Michelle Gerken, Ph.D., and Kelly McDonald

For Victor Aguilera, life in the United States is about hard work. Six days a week he shovels manure, repairs fences or stacks hay on a horse farm. His day off is often spent alone in the house he shares with two men, completing laundry and housework.

But one night a week he is a star, the featured player in Lexington, Ky.'s, growing Hispanic Soccer League. Soccer provides a release from work, a connection to home, meaning a few hours when Mexico isn’t so far away. Aguilera says, “It’s the only thing outside of work that we have here. Work, sleep and soccer. That’s what I do.”

Raul Diaz says that soccer gives him a chance to relax, provides him confidence and has been the primary avenue for adjusting to life in America. Aguilera says, “Soccer has given me meaning. It’s given me recognition. People know me. I’d be so bored without it.”—Lexington Herald-Leader, July 31, 2004

The American population is becoming more and more diverse, with Hispanic-Americans as the dominant force within this changing dynamic. As of 2004, the U.S. Hispanic population became 14.3 percent of the total population, already surpassing its 2000 estimate of the largest minority group in the United States.

According to the 2000 U.S. Census, the Hispanic population will reach 80 million by the year 2020, comprising one in five U.S. residents. This growth in diversity presents recreation managers and leaders with new challenges and opportunities. As our society becomes more diverse, recreation professionals must think differently to broaden the scope of programs to meet the needs of diverse groups of people, like Raul Diaz.

This growing diversity means recreation professionals are expected to have knowledge of diverse groups to provide them with satisfactory services. Hispanics have identifiable recreational characteristics due to their culture, traditions and family relationships that are necessary to determine in the successful provision of facilities and programs.

The Hispanic population values leisure, and 74 percent report that leisure time is spent mostly or exclusively with other Hispanics. Within the realm of “leisure,” casual, informal gathering of friends and family is the preferred activity. Leisure does not have to mean engaging in a specific activity; rather, “spending time together” becomes the activity.

While Hispanics spend two-thirds of what non-Hispanics spend on recreational trips, they over-index on spending in two key areas of recreation: bicycle purchases and rentals, and rentals of RV’s. “Spending the day at the park” is an enormously popular choice for Hispanic families, and park activities range from cookouts to softball and soccer games, to riding bikes or simply soaking up the sun and listening to music.

It is important to note that the term Hispanic applies to any of 22 Spanish-speaking countries, including Mexico, Cuba, Columbia, Venezuela, Argentina, Honduras, as well as the United States and Puerto Rico.

Hispanic recreation follows cultural traditions that make nature and family-oriented activities popular. Hispanics in general, enjoy the “gathering” type of activities versus the organized type of activity that characterizes much of the municipal recreation landscape.

The influence of socialization plays a large part on the recreation experience, thus the need to provide a variety of facilities for social gathering usage.
"Since I grew up in Venezuela years ago, I find myself even now, not wanting to undertake or get interested in long-term activities outside my home," says Ignacia Perez, a 73-year-old Hispanic. "I dare to say that probably 99 percent of the Latin American people of my generation feel the same way. We were pretty much like the Walton's family—closeness and home customs.

The importance of family can be explained through the Hispanic culture. Research has shown that Hispanics tend to participate in larger, extended family units due to their strong cultural focus on the extended family. Perez underscores this point, "A lack of time was an issue that prevented involvement in organized recreational activities. For example, we ate three meals per day like most people in America, but each of these meals was prepared from scratch—no canned or frozen food."

Recreation managers must be aware that separate ethnic blocs in the Hispanic community are influenced by their own distinct cultures. Hispanic is a general term used to characterize many different groups, and each group will have different needs based on their social, historical, political and linguistic histories.

For example, Hispanic migrant workers present a different challenge for recreation service providers because they have identified trust as the most important step in becoming involved in programs. Professionals must work with the people and not force themselves on this group. These laborers will be able to educate the recreation staff as to their recreation needs and wants.

In recruiting Hispanic migrant workers to programs, trust relationships must be established. The value of trust was underscored by Nancy Sequera, a 61-year-old Venezuelan female working with the Kentucky Migrant Network Coalition. Sequera identified immigration as a serious issue. "Immigration is a problem for many who come to the United States," she says. "Without a visa, an individual cannot participate in normal everyday life unless it is voluntary." Most recruitment must happen through trusted people and word-of-mouth promotion.

The exclusion of minorities in recreation programming happens too often because local and municipal recreation agencies design programs and facilities for the needs of mainstream society. Recreation agencies often neglect the recreational needs of the Hispanic population because of a fear of the unknown, insecurity toward serving diverse populations and programming for the middle class. Hispanics may not participate in recreation programs due to socioeconomic factors such as education and income. Many Hispanics have identified three barriers to their participation in recreation: the perception of discrimination, the fear of not being liked and the possibility that workers will not be Hispanic.

Language barriers can also negatively impact Hispanic participation in recreational services. "Many Hispanics are not comfortable or able to speak English so this limits their ability to integrate into mainstream activities," says Sequera. Other research has shown that some members of an ethnic group might not be aware of park and recreation agencies even if promotional material is widely available because of these language barriers. To combat this barrier, use a bilingual or multilingual staff, board or volunteer pool. The agency literature should also be produced in multiple languages. A bilingual staff member, board member or
volunteer may not always be feasible, but these groups should not be ignored because a member of an ethnic community could be used as an interpreter and liaison.

Park and recreation managers need to realize the importance of new approaches for recreation planning, programming and delivery to meet the needs of diverse groups. Strategies have been identified in recreation literature that can aid in planning and implementation of programs for diverse groups.

"Clients as colleagues" is a programming philosophy that targets groups. Research has found programming for ethno-specific activities needs to take place within the ethnic groups themselves, thus programming with participants is important and effective in meeting diverse needs.

Cooperation and partnerships will aid in the success of programs and lead to even more participation within the group. The overall strategy suggested is to program with diverse groups rather than for them, a method consistent with micro-segmentation, which is the process of first identifying a target group and then developing services that will satisfy what they seek.

Other researchers have identified a programming approach called the "I" triad that can be used as a tool for recruiting and serving diverse groups. The "I" triad consists of three steps: invite, involve and include. The first step is to invite diverse groups to use recreation services. Hispanics are greatly misunderstood due to poor representation in the media or inaccurate assumption by the public.

Hispanics need to be understood from their culture. For example, use diverse people in marketing pictures on agency literature. Efforts made in the four national forests of southern California (Angeles, San Bernardino, Cleveland and Los Padres) to include the Hispanic population in outdoor

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recreation have been successful because they redesigned recreational sites. The ECO-Teams program hired Hispanic youth to disseminate important information to visitors, and to illustrate appropriate attitudes and behavior toward the environment.

Including diverse groups means soliciting their opinions and hearing what they have to say about your services. Involvement takes inclusion a step further, thus having Hispanics as board members, staff and volunteers to aid in personal selling.

Diversity training must focus on cultural differences. For example, Sequeria says, “Hispanics are not going to participate without an invitation. Hispanics feel Americans are very formal where Hispanics are informal. Hispanics enjoy expressing themselves and are less self-conscious whereas Americans express when it is permissible (i.e. sporting events). Hispanics feel recreation is a time to have fun, be happy and loud. They have to feel comfortable or they will not participate.”

The diversity in the Hispanic community and its recreation preferences leads to challenges in programming for this group. Researchers have found that even when variables such as age, income and gender were controlled, racial and ethnic differences in participation still existed. It is crucial to recognize that the purpose of public recreation programming is to create programs that are reflective of our multicultural society. Top researchers in the field—Dan L. Dustin, Leo H. McAvoy and John H. Schultz—discuss a worth ethic for parks and recreation, “Recognizing the richness of individual differences, park and recreation professionals have an obligation to do all that is in our power to ensure continued opportunities for choice.” In the case of Hispanic-Americans, providing choices in recreation programs and services is imperative.