

Report on findings from Food and Culture in Social Justice Capstone Project,
In collaboration with the Latinx Action Research Collaborative from
“Where food fits in. Stronger partnerships could create stronger community food
security”
Casa Latinos Unidos

Summary:

Between the months of April 2019 and May 2019 research was conducted at Casa Latinos Unidos as part of an undergraduate student capstone project for the Food and Culture in Social Justice Certificate program at Oregon State University. Research was comprised of formal and informal interviews, observations, and volunteerism with the organization in an effort to understand and complete these objectives:

1. Demonstrate skills of observation and analysis of food using mixed methods,
2. Understand the relationship between Casa Latinos Unidos and the Corvallis School District,
3. Assess the cultural appropriateness of the food pantry in its current state,
4. Make suggestions to Casa and the School District for ways to improve the functionality of their shared space,
5. Make suggestions to Casa for programming to support food security and culturally appropriate foods

Findings:

While initially intending to focus on food security and aspects of cultural appropriateness, it became clear that the space use of the Welcome Center shared by Casa and the School District was a key factor to strengthening this partnership, which will ultimately lead to improved food security.

The Welcome Center

There is some confusion about what Casa is doing at the space, and their role there. District employees don't know about Casa and its range of services. Casa employees don't always know how to serve those looking for Welcome Center services during open hours. The space itself seemed to feel like storage; curriculum materials used by the District are stored without much organization. Additionally, the physical location was challenging to locate for the first time. Accessibility of the center and services was cited as an issue for clients (from data collected by interview participants)

The Food Pantry

Initial observations showed limited options for clients; after a major yearly donation variety was much increased however was still lacking a variety of cultural foods. Most of the goods donated/available include things like canned: green beans, tomatoes, beans, chili peaches; macaroni and cheese; peanut butter; tomato and chicken noodle soups; instant noodles.

Recommendations:

The Welcome Center

Cross-training of both Casa staff and district employees to be more aware of services provided by respective organizations can mitigate misunderstandings and tensions surrounding space use. A shared (monetary and otherwise) investment in sound/space dividers to help control noise and privacy in an open floor plan could assist in making the Welcome Center space feel more intentionally shared. Additionally, the School District stores various curriculum items in the building in such a way that make it feel cramped and unorganized. Investment in storage space would open the area for more community use.

The Food Pantry

Casa's extensive involvement within the Latinx community makes them the perfect organizer for facilitating the mobilization of food security efforts both for and within the Latinx community in Corvallis and Benton County. Casa hosts many events within the Corvallis community. Creating intention behind those events and programming to make a call for the donation of culturally appropriate foods serves to strengthen both the Latinx community (through the act of giving), but also deepens relationships between Casa and the School District. Regular food drives hosted by Casa Latinos Unidos provides the opportunity to further develop partnership relations, as well as offer an opportunity to provide culturally appropriate foods to the food pantry.

Additional advertising surrounding the food resources that Casa clients have access to could also increase food security within the Latinx community. An interview with a Casa employee revealed that in their five months of working with the organization, they had only seen one client utilize the food pantry resources. A promotion of the partnership via the organization's website and Facebook page could help to inform clients of additional services that are available to them.

While a more comprehensive and detailed study of the workings of both organizations could provide more detailed findings, the following recommendations are based off of the current knowledge-base available at the time of conducted research.