

February 3-11, 2007 Mexico Study Tour Report

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Why did I participate?

I pursued this study tour because I had not previously had the opportunity to comprehensively experience a culture different than my own. I believe cultural experiences are important to being a well-rounded individual and an effective community educator. I also pursued this opportunity because the U.S. Census shows Green County's Hispanic/Latino population more than doubled between 1990 (119 individuals) and 2000 (327 individuals). In conversations with educators, service providers, and employers it is evident the number of Hispanic/Latino residents and workers continues to grow.

What did I learn?

This study tour enhanced my capacity to continue local educational work by giving me a greater understanding of the social, economic, and cultural factors resulting in Mexican immigration to the United States. While rural Wisconsin has adequate roads for transporting goods and at the very least telephone lines to communicate with others, in Mexico rural areas equal isolation, poor transportation routes, and obvious poverty. Many young people dream of making a better life. It was fascinating to learn about the psychological and social impacts of immigration on Mexican communities. We learned for many rural Mexicans, coming to the United States represents the opportunity to help families back home improve their quality of life. They are sending money home to buy school uniforms, construct homes, purchase livestock, or buy symbols of economic status such as washing machines or automobiles. It was expressed to us that many Mexicans upon return to Mexico find they no longer fit in at home. And for many young men, they may bring back with them habits of drinking and drugs acquired while away from the social controls of their home community.

Among other things, we had the opportunity to interact with rural small business owners. The federal government was very proud of their efforts to offer small business funding, but in talking to the owners, it was clear that a key educational component was missing to their small business development program. Many did not even know their revenues and expenses on a monthly basis. It left me wondering about the long term survival of these businesses. An additional experience that stands out in my mind was our conversation with a woman who co-owned a restaurant with her sisters. She spoke with us about her efforts to help organize her community in response to a proposed Wal-Mart store. Located near a cultural and archeological site, they feared not only the store would impact local businesses but it would affect the area's historical significance. Her grassroots leadership was inspiring for many reasons, but specifically because of their persistence despite the government's obvious attempts to deter them.

Interestingly the most powerful part of the experience was being in a country where I spoke very little of the language. This experience made me think very hard about what it is like for a Mexican, who speaks very little English, to come to our community. It can feel very isolating and frustrating when you are unable to communicate. I can not image the added feeling of not being welcomed by your new neighbors.

What will I do with my new knowledge?

In Green County, we hired a Family Living Educator fairly fluent in Spanish. I have processed my experienced in Mexico during conversations with her and together we have been helping a local committee reach out and include more Latino immigrants in our dialogue about how to meet needs.

Because I was able, as part of the study tour, to visit historical and cultural sites, learning about how Mexico's past has shaped its present, I feel as though I am now able to be more culturally sensitive in my community educational programs. I realized a cultural understanding is critical before we can effectively build capacity to respond and therefore, I sought a way to expose local service and educational providers to not only Mexican, but Latino culture. I identified a Wisconsin Humanities Council literature series and have been working with our Family Living Educator to invite participation in the reading of books written by Latino authors. We are engaging local immigrants in the reading and discussion in hopes to break down barriers, expand cultural understanding, and build bridges that will lead to real community change.

This, of course, is just the start of how I will use what I have learned in application to the work I do in Green County as the UW-Extension Community Resource Development Educator. I have great appreciation for the opportunity to participate in the study tour as a UW-Extension professional.