



# Enlaces News #3

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## Mexican Federation Leaders Complete Pilot Leadership Training Program

On September 7, participants in the Mexican Hometown Federation Leadership Training Initiative celebrated their graduation from the eight-month training program at a closing ceremony in Chicago. Graduates of the training program included leaders and representatives of Asociación de Clubes y Organizaciones Potosinas de Illinois, Durango Unido en Chicago, Federación de Clubes Michoacanos en Illinois, Federación de Oaxaqueños del Medio Oeste, and the Federación de Clubes Unidos Zacatecanos en Illinois.

From January through June 2002, participants met in biweekly workshops organized by Enlaces América staff, participants to explore issues of organizational development, financial management, and strategic planning. These workshops served to nurture a spirit of collaboration amongst training participants, and throughout the summer of 2002, they continued to meet on a monthly basis to share and reflect on personal and organizational challenges they face in carrying out Hometown Federation work. The close of the training program in September marked the end of the pilot project phase of the Leadership Training Initiative; the five participating Chicago-area Federations, with support from Enlaces América, are currently seeking funds to continue with the initiative.

Federation members and Enlaces América staff see the training program as a means of developing the enormous potential Hometown Federations have to better their communities in the U.S. and in Mexico. In conversations with Enlaces América staff, representatives of various Federations reflected upon their experiences with the training program and how it served to strengthen their work with their hometown federation.

First, these training program participants were asked to describe the mission of their Federation. All the answers reflected a degree of binational civic engagement and citizen organizing around a very strong sense of regional identity. The answers included “address the social and economic needs of our state [in Mexico] by supporting the construction of roads, hospitals, schools, etc.,” “organize our communities to better our lives and participate in civic life here and there;” and “help our communities of origin and get to know one another here.”

Examples of the activities Federations carry out in order to advance this mission include: sponsoring exchange programs between students in Chicago and students in states of origin; meeting with Mexican state government officials to try to influence state policy and budget decisions and development plans; organizing events in the Chicago area to highlight the culture of various regions of Mexico; and holding fundraisers to help community members who encounter medical or other problems.

Participants identified a number of challenges that Federations face carrying out their work in the U.S. and in Mexico. Several of them spoke of their concern about young people in the U.S. losing their culture and identity as Mexicans and as Michoacanos, Zacatecanos, etc. They also spoke of the challenges of working with state governments in Mexico, who are only just beginning to recognize communities in the U.S. as the force that they are, and who are only starting to deal with them with the respect and seriousness they deserve. On an internal level, Federation members pointed to difficulties of working with few resources and no paid staff. All the work done by Federations is done by people with multiple additional commitments to work, family, etc; it is hard sometimes to find time for Federation members to gather together to meet. A related challenge is that it is hard to make the Mexican community itself aware that the Federations exist.

In reflecting on what the training program had meant for them, participants were nearly unanimous in citing the connections they developed with each other as being the most important aspect of the program for them. One person said “We learned that each state and federation are different in geography and name, but we have a lot in common. We have the same needs, and we can support each other in the future. ” Another said, “Sharing experiences amongst ourselves was extremely valuable for me. I learned from the ways in which other people do things.” Another emphasized the emotional value of the program: “Being able to share ideas and support, it gave me strength to keep going.”

Participants also appreciated meeting other Chicago immigrant community leaders in the context of the program, and noted that they had learned from the trainings the importance of network and coalition-building.

In addition to serving as a space for relationship-building and exchange amongst Federation leaders, the training programs also helped participants develop important individual and organizational leadership skills which help them advance their Federation’s work. Participants cited techniques for conducting outreach to community members and the press, as well as ways to organize effective meetings, as important skills they put to use immediately in their work with the Federations. They also said they learned how already-established organizations function, and how local, state, and federal politics function in this country.

When asked for specific examples of how they had put to use the skills they developed in the training program, participants again emphasized the importance of the friendships and connections nurtured over the eight-month training. One participant said “I have become a leader by knowing more people, having more contacts. I met a sick person from Chihuahua, and I knew the name of someone from the Chihuahuans Federation that could help him. Somebody from the Michoacanos Federation was looking for an event room, and they called me because they know I have access to one.” Another participant commented: “Our meetings have been much better organized since the program. We have learned how to be organized, be realistic, how to make an agenda and carry it through.” Finally, one participant summed it her experience: “We have learned how to convert dreams into plans.”