

# Distance Education for Mexican-American Migrant Farmworkers

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### 1.0 Introduction

Migrant farmworkers may be the most economically challenged working group in the United States. Migrants may earn as little as \$5000 in a year, and families of seven may have annual incomes of less than \$10,000 (Martin, 1994; Biennial Evaluation Report, FY 93-94). They are also the most undereducated major subgroup in the country (Velázquez, 1996; Ortiz, 1995). Although there have been some successful programs to serve this group, their success might be considered marginal because they reach so few of those in need. Drop out rates continue to soar, and generational cycles of poverty and illiteracy continue unchecked (Chavkin & Gonzalez, 1995). This paper explores the situations and circumstances that contribute to the academic failure of migrant students. Revealed are the needs of this special constituency, programs that have tried to serve those needs, and suggestions for new directions toward successfully reaching this population.

Related Reading: America's Farmworkers

Related Reading: Farm Labor Conditions

### 2.0 Characteristics of Mexican-American Migrant Workers

Migrant farmworkers may be the workforce with the greatest number of unmet needs in the United States. Inadequate housing and health care, language and cultural barriers, harsh working conditions, and fear of detection by immigration authorities punctuate the concerns and issues of this population. More than 90% of migrant farmworkers are Hispanic, with 80% Mexican-born (Martin, 1994). Focusing on the West Coast migration stream that provides California, Arizona, Washington and Oregon with migrant labor, we learn that the lion's share of these workers come from North-central Mexico, with another large population from the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca, specifically the poor and rural Mixteca region. The majority of these workers are between the ages of 25 and 44 years. Many are not literate in their native language, which is typically, but not always Spanish (Runsten & Kearney, 1994).

Related Reading: Mixtecs

### 2.1 Population Size

Accurate statistical data for the migrant labor population are difficult to come by. The population is transitory and often undocumented, and descriptive data varies widely. In 1989, the US Department of Labor initiated the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) to answer concerns over the effects

of immigration reforms on farm labor supply. The NAWS data suggested that of the 2 million farmworkers who help to produce crops, 840,000 might be classified as migrant (Martin, 1994). A year later in 1990, a study by the Migrant Health Program in 1990 doubled the estimate to 1.6 million (Bartlett, 1991).

### 2.3 Migration Patterns and Living Conditions

The National Agricultural Worker Survey (NAWS) defined migrants as workers who travel 75 or more miles in search of crop work (Martin, 1994). Bringing few belongings, migrant workers move from crop to crop, labor camp to labor camp, and often, from state to state, following the seasons of harvest in the west. The migration patterns of these workers can vary depending upon their area of origin in Mexico. While Mestizo workers of central Mexico have developed a more cohesive and organized labor presence in the West, and consequently migrate less, the newer Mixtec population are concentrated in jobs with shorter duration, resulting in their working at more farm jobs, and moving more often (Runsten & Kearney, 1994).

It is not unusual to find "colonias," small enclaves of unincorporated living communities, and culture networks dotting the migration stream from California to Washington. Colonia is the term given to farmland that had been purchased by developers, then sold unimproved to mostly poor Mexican-Americans (Salinas & Rodriguez, 1996). These are areas of extreme poverty with substandard housing, unserviced roads, untreated water, and inadequate basic public services.

Related Reading: Colonias

### 3.0 Educational Needs of Migrant Workers

The varying educational backgrounds of migrant students is a dynamic that substantially influences the needs of this population. While some migrant students will have attended Secundaria in Mexico (equivalent to grades 7 - 9 in the US), others may have attended only a few years of Primaria (elementary level), and still others may have no formal schooling whatsoever (Romo, 1993.) Languages and dialects may also vary from region to region, presenting a student body that may not be entirely Spanish speaking (Martin, 1994), confounding attempts at standardizing solutions for this population.

A lack of literacy skills, limited English proficiency, and a high rate of mobility are daunting challenges to the educational success of migrant students in traditional school settings (Menchaca & Ruiz-Escalante, 1995). Strategies for serving both the adult population and their children must be developed while paying deliberate attention to the unique realities and living circumstances of migrant students. No matter what kind of educational program is initiated, the program should primarily center around the needs of the student. Programs developed to maximize the sense of ownership in learning, and programs that are grounded in competencies directly related to and relevant to the student's immediate needs are considered to have the most potential for success (Menchaca & Ruiz-Escalante, 1995; Morse, 1997; Biennial Evaluation Report, FY 93-94). The development of individually tailored programs that also offer direct mentoring, or case management, may be the most effective and efficient manner in which to serve these working students. Skills in basic literacy, as well as outcome oriented (GED/diploma) curriculum would then be shaped by the student's individual interests and inclinations.

### 3.1 Basic Literacy

Of the most urgently needed skills for migrant workers is basic literacy. On an average, migrant workers have a formal schooling experience of only 5.5 years (Bartlett, 1991), and many have no schooling experience at all. Basic literacy in both their native language and English must be structured with an acute sensitivity to the circumstances of this mature population. Text-based and test-managed programs are unlikely to engage and sustain the interest of the migrant worker who has little experience with these traditional methods. Cooperative learning, grounded and developed with content that is relevant to the individual's experiences, and stylized to include confidence-building assessments and incentives, will

have the best potential for successful results (Morse, 1997). Also needed are educational professionals to administer these programs who are both bilingual and sensitive to the unique needs of this group.

### **3.2 Home and Life Management**

Often coming from the poorest regions of their home countries, immigrant migrant workers can be overwhelmed by the concepts of managing household economics, personal finances, and family health in a new country and language. Programs that address the life management needs of this population, from simple household mathematics to nutrition and child immunization, are vital to the overall welfare of migrant communities.

### **3.3 Advancing Job Skills**

Transition from school to work normally occurs following the completion of at least a high school education for most students in the United States. For migrant workers, this transition often precedes the completion of formal education. Migrant children drop out of school once they are old enough to work in the fields and earn money (Velázquez, 1996). Access to programs offering the migrant worker ways to expand their occupational skills and enhance their language and social skills, can open new avenues for economic opportunities. Yet few work-study programs have been targeted toward this population (Salerno, 1991). Vocational programs can open a world of work opportunities outside of the farming industry to migrants. However, the high mobility of this group makes it difficult for sustained experience to be gained through these programs.

### **3.4 Goal-oriented Education (certificates, diplomas, and degree programs)**

Certification and alternative degree programs have helped many migrant students to demonstrate their academic successes despite the challenges. Programs such as the High School Equivalency Program (section 4.2, below) and California's Portable Assisted Study Sequence (PASS), have made it possible for many students to work towards GED attainment. In order for migrant students to attain degree goals, accurate and detailed accounting of credit accrual is necessary. This can be facilitated through credit exchange programs, and partial credit options that accommodate for frequent moves. Also needed is close monitoring of migrant student progress by migrant student counselors (Rasmussen, 1988). Use of the Migrant Student Record Transfer System (MSRTS) has had spotty success. Too often, credits are lost through bureaucratic oversight. In order for the MSRTS to work well for migrant students, the system should be simplified, local educators should be given open access to the information held in this database, and students and their families should be granted a role in the upkeep and maintenance of their information (Cahape, 1993). Unfortunately, instead of an overhaul of the system, the MSRTS was scheduled for discontinuation in 1995 (Wright, 1995).

Related Reading: PASS

### **4.0 Educational Opportunities for Migrant Workers**

A variety of programs exist that address the needs of migrant students, from New York's Migrant Dropout Reconnection Program to rural Kentucky's Kenan Trust Family Literacy Program (Salerno, 1991). Programs like GRASP (Giving Rural Adults a Study Program) focus on the needs of adult population with a home-study GED course, while programs like The Migrant Alternative School in the state of Washington focuses on GED preparation, basic skills and vocational training in a more traditional school environment. An obstacle to some of these programs is the lack of a system to track the academic progress of adult migrant students.

Related Reading: GRASP

### **4.1 Classroom-based Education**

The establishment of special programs to serve migrant populations has met with limited success, and greater failure for a variety of reasons. Intensive programs of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) tends to concentrate on oral language skill development, and does not cultivate reading and

writing or critical thinking skills. Newcomers programs, which attempt to address both the cultural and educational adjustments of the migrant student, tends to segregate the migrant student, tracking them away from both college prep courses and their English-speaking peers. Bilingual education tends to be more comprehensive at the elementary level, and becomes more limited to core subjects at the secondary level. A lack of certified bilingual teachers adds to the frustrating mix of initial challenges for the migrant student.

#### **4.1.1 Accessibility**

Lack of transportation to class sites as well as lack of child care are just two examples of barriers that limit the migrant workers accessibility to education. While labor camp-based programs could feasibly be designed to circumvent transportation challenges, this concept has yet to be used on any large scale as a viable alternative to remote-site education centers. Another factor that impacts accessibility is fear. As many migrant workers are often undocumented, fear of detection by immigration authorities may also keep these workers from educational opportunities (Bartlett, 1991).

#### **4.1.2 Class Schedules vs. Pressing Needs**

Economic considerations force migrant workers and their families into this cycle of transience. As the harvest progresses, so too does the movement pattern of the workers. This pressure to move has a devastating effect on students attending traditional schools, resulting in both extremely high drop out rates, and a student group that remains chronically at risk. The reasons behind students leaving school are many, ranging from failure in classes, extensive migration, limited fluency in English, lack of family support, and the need for additional family income.

Work experience, and work-study programs that help students both develop new and marketable job skills, as they continue their education prove to be powerful tools towards the retrieval of dropout migrant students. These programs couple the learning opportunity with the economic incentive vital to the migrant family.

### **4.2 High School Equivalency Program (HEP)**

The High school Equivalency Program (HEP) is an instruction program for adults who are seasonal and migrant farmworkers or the children of farmworker families. The HEP prepares students to attain high school equivalency certificates. It also provides preparation for continuing post-secondary education or employment.

#### **4.2.1 Origin and Goals**

The United States Congress recognized the special educational needs of migrant workers and their children when it funded the HEP in 1967 (High School Equivalency Program, 1996, "History of HEP"). The HEP is for migrant students who are at least 16 years old and who are not currently enrolled in school. The program helps them to obtain high school equivalency certificates, the equivalent of a secondary school diploma. The program prepares students for continuing into post-secondary education, job training programs, or the workplace (Biennial Evaluation Report, FY 93-94; Office of Migrant Education, 1996).

#### **4.2.2 Population Served**

Over the last 20 years, the HEP and the related College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP) have served approximately 45,000 students out of an estimated 1.4 million people whose migratory employment patterns make it difficult for them to complete high school and college. The HEP is by far the larger program, serving an average of 3000 students annually (Biennial Evaluation Report, FY 93-94).

To serve these students, HEP programs have been established at more than twenty locations throughout the U. S. and Puerto Rico (High School Equivalency Program, 1996). The list includes (Office of Migrant Education, 1996, "Programs"; "HEP Project Directors"):

- California (California State University, Sacramento),
- Colorado (University of Colorado/Boulder),
- Florida (University of South Florida),
- Idaho (Boise State University),
- Maryland (Center for Human Services, Bethesda),
- Mississippi (Mississippi Valley State University),
- New Mexico (Northern New Mexico Community College),
- New York (SUNY),
- Oregon (University of Oregon),
- Puerto Rico (Inter American University of Puerto Rico; Pontifical Catholic University of PR),
- Tennessee (University of Tennessee),
- Texas (University of Texas at El Paso, Southwest Texas State University; Texas A&M University - Kingsville Campus; University of Houston; University of Texas-Pan Am; SER-Jobs for Progress of SW Texas, Laredo),
- Washington (Washington State University),
- Wisconsin (Milwaukee Area Technical College)

Over the last 20 years, 83% of HEP students have been Hispanics between the ages of 17 and 20. In 1992, it was reported that more than 75% of the program participants had total annual family incomes under \$10,000, and that the average family had seven members (Biennial Evaluation Report, FY 93-94).

#### **4.2.3 Program Description**

The HEP is a residential instruction program. Students enrolled in the program are provided with on-campus housing, a weekly stipend, academic and vocational counseling, health services, and career advisement. Instruction is provided in English and Spanish during the class sessions, which last from six to twelve weeks (Office of Migrant Education, 1996). The HEP prepares students to (1) complete the requirements for high school graduation or the general education development (GED) certificate; (2) pass a standardized test of high school equivalency; and (3) participate in subsequent postsecondary educational or career activities (Biennial Evaluation Report, FY 93-94). For insight into how the program actually works, see the University of Oregon's HEP web site (High School Equivalency Program, 1996).

#### **4.2.4 Successful Aspects**

The most recent evaluations of the HEP are from the mid- to late 1980s. They show strongly positive outcomes, although again, the data vary widely. One study concluded that between 1980 and 1984, 85% of the students enrolled in HEP programs between 1980 and 1984 have passed the GED, but another study showed that the average rate of GED completion was only 70%. In any case, the completion rate seems to be very quite positive. (Biennial Evaluation Report, FY 93-94). HEP programs that were directly affiliated with colleges and universities seem to have better results, with GED completion rates of 85% , compared to 71% completion from locations that were not associated with such institutions. Of the participants who complete the program, 29 % of the participants enrolled at a postsecondary institution and 18% were employed in nonmigratory work (Biennial Evaluation Report, FY 93-94).

#### **4.2.5 Areas for Improvement or Growth**

Although the HEP has accumulated a history of success, its impact is limited to a relatively small number of participants. Neither geographical location nor the size and proximity of the migrant population is considered when awarding grants to HEP institutions, so some areas of high migrant

concentrations do not have HEP services. In 1992, the National Commission on Migrant Education asked consideration of recommendations to expand the program cycle from 3 to 5 years, include geographic distribution as a criterion in future funding, and reject the concept of capacity building as an inappropriate constraint on these programs (Biennial Evaluation Report, FY 93-94).

### **4.3 Conexiones/Connections**

The Arizona State University Conexiones/Connections program was developed to speak directly to the needs of migrant student populations. This program was also designed to allow students to direct their own avenues of inquiry, based upon interests relevant to their lives and experiences. The project has evolved through a variety of phases, now entering a phase of commitment towards the development of an entirely on-line high school curriculum specifically targeted toward migrant student populations.

Related Reading: Conexiones

#### **4.3.1 Origin and Goals**

The Conexiones/Connections began in 1991 as a research project entitled AmigaKids. It focused on identifying talented young students from diverse cultural backgrounds, for whom traditional standardized tests didn't work well. Thirty-five students from an inner-city barrio were invited to the Educational Media and Computers Amiga laboratory at ASU to participate in various workshops over a five week period. Students learned computer animation, music-video production, and other technology based projects. During this discovery phase, the researchers simply watched closely to see what caught the attention of these students, and what made them enthusiastically engage in the learning process.

#### **4.3.2 Branching into Migrant Issues**

Phase I of the Conexiones project (1991-93) focused on twenty-five students who were identified by their migrant education teachers in two selected school districts in metropolitan Phoenix. These students received Amiga 2000 computers in their homes and had them connected by telephone lines to an electronic bulletin board system at the office of ASU's Dr. Sanford Cohn. The primary goal of this phase of the project was to help students learn how to use their computers, and how to interconnect with each other and members of the Conexiones staff through the bulletin board service. To this end, workshops were conducted during the school year, and a supplemental 5-week program was provided during the summer months (1992-93).

Communications software was prepared for use in both English and Spanish. Although the students were free to use either language in their correspondence, the researchers became interested in seeing whether or not there was a noticeable improvement in the migrant students' English skills through their postings to the bulletin board service over time. The researchers were also curious to see if other family members developed an interest in the Amiga in their homes, and in turn, used it to enhance their language and computer skills as well.

#### **4.3.3 Successful Aspects**

Several members of the original Conexiones student group graduated in the Spring of 1994. An assessment of the program's effect on this group revealed many positive results, including one student who's interest and accomplishment with the Amiga had led him to a leadership position among his peers. This student extended the experience by creating a Conexiones club at his school, teaching his friends how to use the computer and the Internet. He is now part of Conexiones staff at ASU. The exposure to ASU's academic community inspired another student to pursue a college degree. In part from the skills he acquired in the Conexiones project, this student was accepted into the undergraduate program at MIT.

#### **4.3.4 Expanding the Concept**

With seven years of experience behind it, the Conexiones project enters a new phase of program delivery. Beginning in 1995, the program coordinators committed to making their educational programs

available to a global student population by proposing the development of an interactive multimedia curriculum that will be delivered via the World Wide Web. The plan for a bilingual virtual schooling environment that will make learning available to students 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year is both expansive and timely. The program will both collect existing digital educational packages, and develop new modules that will include components to track and assess a student's progress toward a diploma or GED, or just pursue casual interests. Migrant students will enjoy ready access to a wide array of learning tools across the nation and around the world.

#### **4.4 Distance Programs**

Surprisingly few programs exist on-line to serve migrant students. The University of Oregon maintains a descriptive web site for its HEP (High School Equivalency Program, 1996), and Washington State University has on-line HEP registration (High School Equivalency Program, 1997). While countless articles address the needs of this constituency, the authors have found few organized curricula targeted for direct use by these students. The MEP's (Migrant Educational Programs) developed by each state, remain focused on accommodating migrant students in the traditional setting, while universities and social agencies scramble to organize new approaches to engage and retain these students through community-based outreach. Electronic delivery, and distance education is just now beginning to see more activity focused towards migrant student issues.

The PASS program (Portable Assisted Study Sequence,) developed in California in 1978, allows students to complete partial credits by providing text-based study modules (workbooks and reading assignments) that can be completed by the student, and assessed by migrant student counselors. Though PASS is one of the few "correspondence-styled" educational programs developed for migrant students, it is available in only 25 states (California, Arizona, Oregon, and Washington included.)

Project SMART, which offers a homepage for World Geography proves to be one of the few loosely organized module-oriented on-line courses for migrant students. Educators are beginning to embrace ways in which to serve migrant students through the world wide web, however, there is much work to be done in order to develop the infrastructure needed to make these projects both viable and useful.

#### **5.0 An Integrated Distance Learning Program**

The need to offer new educational alternatives for migrant students is clear. Education at all levels, from basic literacy to vocational instruction and career counseling are desperately needed by this constituency. The challenges of delivering educational programs to this group have historically arisen from their high rate of mobility. It would seem natural, then, to develop programs that consider mobility as a given element of the student profile. Distance learning programs that move with the students and which allow them to access their coursework from anywhere they live could provide the greatest potential for academic success. Such a program would integrate a variety of media, including print, radio, television, telephone, and the Internet (Watson, 1997). Some of the features of an integrated distance education program to serve migrant workers and students should include:

- Open access to the learning environment
- Text-based and non-text-based educational material
- Course modules relevant to migrant student issues, needs, and concerns
- Flexible competency statements that allow students to form the learning experience around their individual interests
- Clearly-defined curricular paths towards certification that will allow students to monitor their own progress
- Bilingual coordinators and mentors to offer guidance and encouragement
- Flexible methods of competency assessment
- Course delivery through broadcast media such as radio and television

- Web-based instruction and on-line resources
- Opportunities to meet other students both in person and on-line
- Coordination of activities and courses across the various geographic regions of a migration stream
- A central administration of student records, simplifying the maintenance of records and eliminating the need to transfer records from program to program

Broadcast media and Internet communications make the underserved migrant population more accessible than ever before to innovative educational programs. Much work would be needed to build an infrastructure that could sustain a project of this scope. Partnerships between universities, state boards of education, business communities, and telecommunications providers could provide development resources and scholarship funds for pilot projects that would form the foundation of virtual campuses for migrant students. Migrant students and their families must be involved in the developmental phases of such a project to insure cultural relevance, provide insider guidance, and generate a sense of community ownership. Through a dedicated, multi-level, cooperative effort, an integrated distance learning program for migrants could open new pathways of educational opportunity to a population which desperately needs every advantage it can get.

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