

ACHIEVING SUCCESS: PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENTS FROM MIGRANT FARMWORK FAMILIES

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ABSTRACT

In their pursuit of an education, students from migrant farmworker families experience multiple challenges such as high mobility rates and a lack of curriculum alignment and credit transfer across local, state, and national boundaries. Despite these challenges, many of these students graduate from high school and successfully transition into higher educational settings. This study examines the characteristics of a group of diverse students, all from migrant farmworker families, who attend a large metropolitan four-year university and are enrolled in the College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP). Results were derived from a comprehensive individual survey which addressed multiple domains that were relative to students' high school experiences. Findings reveal a strong sense of determination and self-reliance on the part of the students as well as the strong role families played in their decision to pursue an education. A discussion of the results and recommendations to increase college enrollment of students from migrant farmworker families is provided.

INTRODUCTION

Academic success often eludes students from migrant farmworker families whose livelihood necessitates continuous school change. As they follow the growing seasons across the country, students from migrant families frequently arrive in late fall after school has started and leave before the school year ends. In between, they may attend different schools or no school at all. Issues such as a lack of curriculum alignment between states and difficulties with record transmittal and credit transfer across county, state, and sometimes national boundaries exacerbate the already difficult transition from school to school (National Commission on Migrant Education, 1992). In addition, these students come from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds such as Latino and African American (Mehta, Gabbard, Barrat, Lewis, Carroll, & Mines, 2000). Their cultural and linguistic diversity, difficult living situations, and low levels of parental academic attainment further place migrant students out of sync with school systems that are unable or unwilling to accommodate their unique needs. Consequently, high numbers of migrant children do not succeed academically and many fail to complete high school (National Commission on Migrant Education; United States General Accounting Office, 1998).

The number of identified school-age migrant students in the United States is estimated to range from half a million to approximately 800,000 (Gibson, 2003; Lennon & Markatos, 2002). Dropout rates for these students are cited at 45 to 90 percent (United States General Accounting Office 1998). Eventually, the need to work and contribute to family income draws many migrant youth away from an obstacle laden academic path (Martinez & Cranston-Gingras, 1996). Among adult farmworkers in the United States, only approximately 15% have completed 12 years of school or more (Mehta et al. 2000).

Despite these dismal statistics, and in the face of significant challenges, many students from migrant farmworker families persevere toward academic success. Unfortunately, for some of these students, their dreams end with high school graduation because of in-state residency and immigration issues. However, many are gaining admission to colleges and universities. Gibson (2003) and Duron (1995) reported several factors related to migrant student success in secondary school. These include: high-quality academic advising to ensure that students take needed courses, after school tutoring, summer school to make up lost credits, ongoing advocacy and mentoring from family and school personnel, connections to school and community resources, and personal motivation

and beliefs about academic abilities. In addition, Reyes and Fletcher (2003) reported that schools that have an organizational culture emphasizing high expectations and continuous improvement for both students and teachers have greater success with students from migrant farmworker families.

Family, school, and community protective factors play a role in the success of students from migrant farmworker families. When present, these factors also may enable children to develop coping skills when faced with adversity (Chavkin & Gonzalez, 2000). There are few studies on resiliency specific to migrant students. Several studies do exist that address resiliency with "at-risk" students whose characteristics closely match those of migrant students. Horn and Chen's (1998) large scale study of resiliency among at-risk students included students who had changed schools two or more times outside of the normal progression, a defining characteristic of migrant students. They found that parent and peer engagement had the strongest influence on school success. Furthermore, youth whose parents had high educational expectations and discussed school-related matters with them in high school had much higher odds of attending college. In addition, the study found that students whose friends valued studying and getting good grades and had plans for enrolling in college were far more likely to enroll in college themselves.

The purpose of this study was to examine the characteristics of diverse students from migrant farmworker families whose high school achievement earned them entrance to a competitive four-year university and to analyze the perceptions of these students regarding factors that contributed to their academic success.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Participants in the study were enrolled in the College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP) at a large metropolitan university of students and student volunteers. CAMP is a federally supported program that assists students from migrant and seasonal farmworker backgrounds in completing their first year of college. Approximately thirty students per year participate in the program. A total of 57 students participated in the study. The educational level for both the fathers and mothers ranged from grade school or some high school to some level of postsecondary education. While most of the participants were aware of their father's educational level (82%), only slightly over one third (36%) were aware of their mother's educational level.

Of the 57 respondents, 41 in the study were in their first year of college. The remaining participants included 6 sophomores, 10 juniors, and only 1 senior. Forty of them lived in a dormitory and 9 lived with their parents. Their academic loads ranged from 12 to 19 hours, and their ages ranged from 18 to 25 years old. Forty of the respondents were male, and all but two were single. One was married, and one was cohabiting. Thirty nine (68%) were born within the Continental U.S and 43 were Latino American, with the remaining 14 identified as Black/Caribbean American.

PROCEDURE

A packet containing a cover letter explaining the purpose of the study and confidentiality of responses, and a copy of the anonymous survey was given to all the students attending the December 2004 meeting of the CAMP program. A second administration of the survey was conducted at the December, 2005 meeting. As an incentive to respond, participants were informed that five persons returning completed surveys would be randomly selected to receive \$20.00 awards to be used for any academic purpose. A total of 57 completed surveys were returned for a response rate of 86%.

INSTRUMENT

Data were comprised of responses to a 98-item survey instrument consisting of both Likert-type and open-ended questions (Table 1). Domains included demographic information, self-perceptions, interest in education, high school experiences, transitioning to college, and study habits, as well as a section helping other diverse students succeed in school.

FINDINGS

Demographic information has already been provided under the description of study participants. Findings from the remaining six domains are summarized below. High school experiences are broken down into several categories and sub-categories. Categories included school, teachers, and cultural competency, which contains three sub-categories: school, teachers, and peers.

STUDENTS SELF-PERCEPTIONS

Participants were asked a series of questions related to self-perceptions. The majority (88%) of the participants clearly identified with their ethnic

TABLE 1. Sample Survey Items	
Domain	Sample Question(s)
Demographics	Gender, ethnicity, place of birth, number of credit hours
Student Self-Perceptions	I feel comfortable with whom I am.* I worry considerably about mistakes.*
Students' Interest in Pursuing an Education	Who talked to you about the importance of an education? Did someone act as your role model?
High School Experiences	What helped you the most to succeed in high school? Was high school easy or hard for you? What personal qualities helped you succeed in high school?
Transitioning to College	Who informed you of college opportunities? Who talked to you about financial aid and scholarships and what did they tell you?
Study Habits	I studied very hard in high school.** I frequently ask questions in class.**
Diverse Student Success in School	How can the community help more diverse students succeed? How can high schools help more diverse students succeed?
*Indicates Likert response ** Indicates Checklist of descriptors	

roots (Latino/a or Black/ Caribbean American). They indicated that being Latino/a or Black/Caribbean American meant belonging to a rich culture that is different from the dominant culture. They defined their culture as being full of love and as believing in unity of family. They also felt their culture represented a group of individuals who have a strong work ethic and who have persevered through many hardships. For four students (7%), being a member of a minority group meant having to work harder in order to succeed.

When asked to rate a series of statements describing themselves, all participants indicated they were comfortable to some extent with who they were. They were proactive in seeking out information. All participants but one stated that they were strongly motivated to achieve their goals; one of which was to be recognized as authorities or experts in their

chosen fields. Approximately three fifths found it difficult to speak to other people. The majority shared their problems with their families and considered themselves as having a stronger sense of justice than most people. They viewed themselves as competitive and usually as leaders in groups. Although they worried about mistakes, they felt they could easily cope with rejection. Procrastination was an issue for many. Approximately half felt they were consistently punctual for appointments, classes, and dates, but the balance admitted to being occasionally or often late for commitments. Most worked a great deal during high school, often to assist the family financially.

INTEREST IN EDUCATION

The family was consistently identified as the driving force for obtaining an education (78%). One student commented that

“My father, since elementary, has taught (me) to be a success, and I must apply myself. My mother, she wanted me to do better than her. [She] taught me that education is important because it is needed to succeed.”

When asked who specifically talked to them about the importance of an education, mothers outnumbered fathers three to one. Teachers or other school personnel were identified to a much lesser extent (17%). A few (5%) indicated that their friends were the ones who would talk to them about the importance of education. Participants identified their mothers as the persons who inspired them the most. No one mentioned his or her father alone as a source of inspiration, and only 9% identified a teacher as a source of inspiration. When asked who their role models were, 35% stated they did not have any. Of the balance, only two role models outside the family were mentioned. Slightly over half (55%) felt there were no gender differences regarding views on education.

HIGH SCHOOL EXPERIENCES

HIGH SCHOOL. Participants were asked to describe their high school using one word. Responses varied, with 43% using positive words such as fun, interesting, or awesome, 32% using negative words such as unchallenging, or difficult, and 25% using an ambiguous word such as diverse or different. Most considered high school to be “relatively easy” or “somewhat difficult.” Approximately one quarter described it as “difficult.”

Respondents stated that studying helped them the most to succeed in high school. The role of studying was to help them avoid negative lifestyles rather than to achieve success. A majority attributed their own motivation as

the source of their success in high school: "My drive was to succeed so I would not spend the rest of my life at McDonald's; I told myself I had to succeed, [I] set priorities and then met them." One-fifth also credited their parents and family with helping them achieve: "I reached in within myself and realized that I was not alone, I had my family and friends." Teachers and friends were also identified (14% and 5% respectively). One participant claimed that nothing helped her succeed.

Several barriers to success in high school were also identified. These included study deficiencies (31%), peer pressure to participate in activities not conducive to learning (28%), deficits in their school structure (15%), work and family matters that interfered with school work (15%), and personal negative habits (10%). Participants were asked to describe how they overcame setbacks during high school. No one identified teachers or school staff as helping to overcome setback. The following response illustrates how teachers were sometimes viewed as barriers to success: "The teachers who did not care – the ones who gave you busy work and expected you to memorize dates and data instead of teaching the information." Seventy six percent of the students felt they were personally responsible for overcoming their setbacks. Equal percentages of respondents (12%) credited parents, family, and friends with helping them overcome setbacks. Determination was cited as the main personal quality that helped them to succeed in high school.

TEACHERS. Participants were prompted to list teachers who assisted them in their journey through school. Most identified two to four teachers who had been influential. These teachers were from multiple disciplines including guidance. Two respondents were unable to identify any teacher who assisted them. Participants were then asked to describe the characteristics of their favorite teacher in high school. The majority (64%) identified nurturing as the main characteristic, followed by being effective instructors (24%), and passionate about their profession (12%). The same characteristics applied when asked to describe their favorite Latino/a, African-American, or Caribbean teacher, although approximately two thirds (66.7%) of the participants indicated never having had a teacher in high school who was of the same ethnicity as they.

CULTURAL COMPETENCY. Participants were asked to rate a series of statements pertaining to cultural competency in their high school. Questions addressed the school climate, teachers, and peers.

Approximately half (53%) felt their high school did not make clear efforts to understand cultural assets and contributions of diverse students and half did not feel their high school made a clear effort to teach cultural

understanding and acceptance. A large majority (74%) indicated their school made them feel a valued and worthwhile member of their class and four-fifths believed their high school provided them the same opportunities and experiences as majority students. Furthermore, slightly over half (53%) felt their school made a clear effort to understand culturally diverse parents and extended families and to ensure their participation in their child's academic and social life in school. A majority (70%) also reported no experiences of discrimination at their high school.

Slightly over half (58%) did not feel their teachers provided students opportunities to appreciate their culture and individuality, yet 63% felt their high school teachers showed genuine respect for and interest in diverse students and their culture. A majority (67%) of the participants believed that faculty did not contain sufficient Latino/Latina, or Black/Caribbean American teachers.

As far as peers were concerned, only 56% believed their classmates valued diversity.

TRANSITIONING TO COLLEGE

Reasons for attending college varied. Most participants identified wanting to achieve success, having a good job, or becoming a professional as the primary motivators. Some (31%) mentioned self-improvement, while a smaller percentage (14.5%) said it was because of their family. Only one person stated that they wanted to go to college to make a difference in the community, while two female respondents said they were going to college in order avoid depending on men.

Teachers and guidance counselors were identified as the primary informants of college opportunities and the admission process (34% and 32% respectively). Friends and family were also mentioned, but to a lesser extent (16% and 14% respectively). One participant mentioned no one as informing him/her in the process. Participants were also asked to rate the importance of various resources in helping them make the decision to attend college. A majority (52%) of the participants rated their family as being somewhat to very important in helping them make the decision to attend college. Forty percent rated college printed material, college websites, school counselors, and friends as somewhat to very important. In this context it is important to note that school counselors may also refer to the migrant advocate at the school. Slightly fewer (37%) rated a college visit as somewhat or very important, followed by the college advisor (28%) and a college open house (25%).

Most of the participants (94%) noted that they were aware of college pre-requisite courses, entrance exams, and honors classes. Counselors,

and teachers or other school staff, were cited by the majority of participants as the main providers of information pertaining to opportunities or requirements for college admissions. A small percentage obtained this information through printed materials (9%), or from peers (2%). Although parents played a significant role in encouraging their child to attend college, they were not identified as a source of information on admissions requirements.

School counselors, teachers or school staff, and/or the receiving community college or university again provided information pertaining to financial aid. A small percentage identified a family member (7.5%) or a friend (2%). Two students (5%) did not identify anyone as providing this information. When asked about the information they received on financial aid, 42% said they were told to conduct a scholarship search for independent scholarships, 16% were told to apply to everything they qualified for, 16% were told about FAFSA, and 16% were advised to apply early.

STUDY HABITS

Table 2 shows that when asked about their study habits in high school, slightly over half of the participants stated that they did not enjoy studying (57%), did not study hard for their courses (64%), and tended not to cram before exams (52%). The majority (73%) did not participate in study groups. Half stated they sat in the front of their class, yet 61% stated they did not frequently ask questions in class. A majority (68%) liked their academic program and found their teachers to be approachable (79%). They liked their schoolwork to be neat and well organized (63%). Grades were important to 80% of the participants, and 88% believed that failing high school would have ruined all their plans. A large percentage (78%) expected to be outstanding students in college. Almost all (93%) stated that they would like to help other Latino/a or Black/Caribbean American students.

HELPING OTHER DIVERSE STUDENTS SUCCEED IN SCHOOL

Participants were asked a series of open-ended question on how to assist other students from their own ethnic or cultural background to succeed in school. The questions moved from general observations regarding school failure to specific recommendations for the community, high schools, and post-secondary education institutions. Respondents identified several factors that they felt caused diverse students to give up. Personal limitations were the predominant factor (36%), followed by work obligations (25%). Negative self-perceptions, lack of a role model, and drugs were also identified but to a lesser extent (14%, 11%, and 8% respectively). Factors associated with female diverse students included familial obliga-

Table 2. Study Habits

Statement	Yes Percentage (n)	No Percentage (n)
I enjoyed studying.	43% (24)	57% (32)
I studied very hard in high school	36% (20)	64% (36)
I crammed before exams	48% (27)	52% (29)
I used group study	27% (15)	73% (41)
I sat in front of the class	50% (28)	50% (28)
I frequently asked questions in class	39% (22)	61% (34)
I liked my academic program	32% (18)	68% (38)
I thought teachers were approachable	79% (44)	21% (12)
I liked my schoolwork to be neat and well organized	63% (35)	37% (21)
Grades in school have always been extremely important to me	80% (45)	20% (11)
Flunking out of high school would have ruined all my plans	88% (49)	12% (7)
I expected to be an outstanding student in college	78% (43)	22% (12)
I would like to help other diverse students	93% (52)	7% (4)

tions (28%), pregnancy (25%), negative influences (25%), and negative self-perception (19%). Lack of a role model was also identified, but to a much lesser extent (3%).

Most of the participants (62%) listed a support system as necessary to help diverse students achieve: "A stronger emphasis on pursuing a college career at an earlier age than high school; Information, resources, workshops to teach the process to get in school info early, when they start high school." Help from teachers and school (14%), personal attributes (12%), and role models (10%); One respondent stated equality as necessary for helping students succeed.

Participants were asked to provide suggestions to assist students who may have encountered negative learning experiences that affected their academic performance. Most (63%) felt it was important to provide students with examples of successful diverse students. One quarter stated that it was necessary to provide diverse students with appropriate information, mentoring and encouragement. Some (9%) suggested providing students with the negative consequences of not obtaining an education. One student stated that educators must learn why diverse students have a negative attitude toward school.

Community can help diverse students succeed by providing equality, acceptance, and recognition (46%) as well as encouragement and scholarships (42%). A small percentage (12%) of participants felt that providing role models would also be beneficial. High schools, on the other hand, can assist students by improving their educational programs (50%), recruiting more diverse and bilingual teachers (23%), and developing cultural competency (18%). One student felt schools should provide assistance with study habits, and another felt they should improve existing support systems. Postsecondary education institutions should provide more scholarships (59%) as well as role models (18%). Cultural competency was also seen as a need in these settings (14%).

When participants were asked what advice they would give to a diverse student who wants to succeed in high school, the majority of responses dealt with resiliency (39%):

I would tell them that they should never settle for a grade lower than a 'B' that they should challenge themselves by taken AP and honors classes; Being Latino is an advantage – you have the fortitude and perseverance of your ancestors inside you. It's up to you to tap into that power and use it.

Developing positive work habits and a strong work ethic were also cited (26% for both). Two students advised surrounding yourself with positive influences and one student advised valuing an education.

DISCUSSION

Results from this study can be categorized into three broad areas: self, family, and school. In all areas, participants may be striving to balance conflicts.

SELF

Participants viewed themselves as resilient, proactive, and self-reliant. These were themes that reverberated throughout each area. They were proud of their heritage and relished being part of a rich culture with a strong work ethic. They described themselves as goal oriented with a strong sense of social justice, and they credited themselves for much of their success. The strong resiliency and self-determination reported by the participants indicated an area requiring further study. At the same time, they expressed difficulty in speaking with others and fear of making mistakes.

FAMILY

The family's role in the participants' decision to pursue an education was paramount. Mothers were credited as the main source of inspiration, although few of the participants were aware of their mother's level of

education. Although family did not provide necessary information regarding the college admission process and/or opportunities, they clearly played a dominant role in the decision to attend college. This finding would seem to indicate that lack of information from parents is not due to a lack of interest, but rather a lack of knowledge about the process. Improved outreach efforts to arm parents with the necessary knowledge regarding college pre-requisites, entrance exams, and financial aid would augment the already strong role they play in their children's pursuit of an education. While this may be a challenge in cases where parents may be undocumented, it is possible to provide community outreach in neutral settings affording those parents an opportunity to gain needed information to assist their children in the pursuit of an education.

The strong familial bond provided support on multiple levels including serving as role models. Few others were identified as serving in that capacity; in fact, 35% stated that they did not have any role models. This finding reveals a gap that, if closed, could provide additional support to those students who are on the margins. The power and influence of mentors has been well documented (Hon & Shore, 1998; Moreno, 2002). Providing this additional layer of support may increase the number of students from migrant farmworker families who continue on to postsecondary education.

SCHOOL

Responses pertaining to school experiences also reveal some discrepancies. The fact that a majority of the participants did not consider their high school academic experiences to be particularly rigorous is of concern. Research documents the lack of high academic expectations for students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Garcia, 2001; Heubert & Hauser, 1999). Lack of access to honors or upper level classes impedes the opportunity for these students to continue on to postsecondary education settings. In addition, even though many study participants were successful in upper level or honors classes in high school, remediation was still required at the college level.

Almost all of the respondents noted that they were aware of college requirements. The resiliency and determination exhibited by the participants may have played a large role in their entrance to college. This begs the question: What happens to students who have the ability and desire, but lack the self-determination?

The majority of the participants indicated that they had never had a teacher in high school of their same or similar ethnicity. The increasing diversity of our student population is not evident in the make-up of our faculties. Teachers continue to be predominantly White, female, and

middle class. Increased efforts are needed in both recruitment and retention of diverse faculties, as well as in ensuring that all school personnel have sufficient professional development in cultural competency that goes beyond heroes and holidays. Skills and knowledge are important, but the dispositions necessary to implement culturally responsive pedagogy that addresses social justice issues is equally important. Furthermore, evaluation is needed to assess the effectiveness of such efforts.

Participants also seemed conflicted about the cultural competency of their schools. For example, many participants believed schools did not make a clear effort to understand cultural assets and/or contributions of diverse students, nor teach cultural understanding and acceptance, but they still considered themselves worthwhile members of their classes and believed they received equal opportunities equal to those from the majority culture. While many expressed a lack of opportunity to appreciate their culture, they still felt their teachers genuinely respected for and were interested in culturally and linguistically diverse students. Furthermore, only 56% believed their classmates valued diversity and 70% reported no experiences of discrimination.

While we hope that experiences of discrimination have decreased in educational settings, research indicates that discrimination leading to disparate educational opportunities still exist. Participants' perceptions about discrimination may be grounded in social psychological processes residing within the individual due to socialization of stereotypical views of culturally and linguistically diverse individuals. Is the view of having experienced no discrimination grounded in the self-determination and resiliency noted by each student? Or, is it possible that their world view and self-protective strategies include rationalization such that all experiences are viewed from a personal lens in which they are sanitized?

When asked about barriers to success in high school, responses of all participants were self-directed. In other words, none of the participants identified systemic or institutional barriers. This further supports the possibility of socialization of a "blame the victim" mentality, blurring the lines between personal and social responsibility.

School climate, specifically related to teacher characteristics, also seems to play an integral role in school achievement for these students. Favorite teachers were those who exhibited nurturing qualities. Such qualities may be pivotal in developing and sustaining relationships with significant adults who may be instrumental in students' decision to remain in school and pursue postsecondary education.

Finally, although the results from the study provide valuable information regarding perceptions of students who are achieving well in school,

there are some limitations to the study. Participant responses are based on self-perceptions and cannot be independently confirmed. Participants are representative of a particular group of students surveyed and thus findings may not generalize to other high achieving students from migrant farmworker families. The study is limited to the perceptions of successful students. Exploring the experiences of students who do not achieve is beyond the scope of this study.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings from this study suggest several strategies that could be implemented in PK-12 settings to encourage school success and to increase college enrollment of students from migrant farmworker families. The recommendations, listed below, address school, family, and community factors that can foster resiliency in all students.

- Provide instruction in self-determination and goal setting beginning at the elementary grade levels and continuing through high school.
- Develop a process to ensure students are provided early access to information pertaining to post-secondary education including entrance requirements, financial aid, and application deadlines.
- Develop community-based initiatives to provide parents with information regarding college entrance requirements and sources of financial aid.
- Develop mentorship programs to provide students with individualized guidance and support from individuals from diverse backgrounds.
- Recruit culturally and linguistically diverse teachers, administrators, and counselors to serve as role models for students.
- Ensure cultural competency of all school personnel through ongoing training, support, and evaluation.
- Create an ethic of care in school communities emphasizing supportive relationships from faculty and other adults resulting in a nurturing environment for all students.
- Ensure continued efforts addressing systemic and institutional discrimination to ensure equitable access to a high quality education for all our students.

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