

From the Fields to the University: Charting Educational Access and Success for Farmworker Students Using a Community Cultural Wealth Framework

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Abstract

In 2002, the New Mexico State University College Assistance Migrant Program (NMSU CAMP) was created to increase the number of baccalaureate degrees held by students from farmworker backgrounds by mediating structural impediments that typically normalize post-secondary inequities for this population. Migrant and seasonal farmworker students are significantly marginalized and underserved in the United States. There is also a notable lack of research exploring their success in higher education. This article addresses this gap through an exploratory analysis of quantitative and qualitative data spanning years 2006-2011 that include 130 self-administered questionnaires, six key informant interviews, and numerous observations. A “community cultural wealth” framework [CCW] (Yosso, 2005) is utilized to explore factors contributing to students’ entrance into the university and their persistence thereafter. The findings suggest that farmworker students utilized the notions of *familia* and ‘pedagogies of the home’ (Delgado Bernal, 2001) to navigate their transition inside an unfamiliar terrain, while the CAMP program itself utilized similar notions of *familia* to break the practice of ‘manufacturing sameness’ typically experienced by students in the freshmen year.

Introduction

Migrant and seasonal farmworker students are some of the most marginalized and under-served students in the United States. According to the U.S. General Accounting Office (1998), between 169,000 and 200,000 youth ages 14 to 17 work in migrant agricultural jobs (as cited in Cranston-Gingras, 2003). Farmworkers have one of the highest dropout rates and encounter tremendous obstacles in completing high school and pursuing a postsecondary education, resulting in only 50.7% of migrant students graduating from high school (BOCES Geneseo Migrant Center, 2009; U.S. General Accounting Office, 1998). In response, the Department of Education awarded funds in 2002 to the College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP) at New Mexico State University (NMSU), a research extensive, land grant Hispanic-serving institution. The program’s goal is twofold: to serve the educational needs of migrant/seasonal farm workers and to increase their numbers and graduation rates in post-secondary education.

There is a significant lack of educational literature on farmworker students in post-secondary education. Aside from the work of Cranston-Gingras (2003), who explores the High School Equivalency program, a CAMP affiliate that emphasizes GED completion, or Araujo’s (2006) ‘pedagogies of the fields,’ that describes farmworkers’ lessons learned in the fields and their perseverance to succeed in college, few scholars have studied farmworkers’ educational experiences in university settings. Most research has centered on farmworker students in high school and their educational struggles or networks of support. The work of Lopez (2001), for example, focuses on parental involvement of migrant/immigrant families and how parents expose their children to fieldwork for ‘real-life lessons’ that fall outside of traditional school-related parental models. Salinas and Reyes (2004) examine high school migrant students’ educational struggles, but mainly focus on their advocate educators as ‘agents of change.’ Still, the most robust body of research on farmworkers remains outside of educational frameworks and instead focuses on health disparities and pesticide exposure. This article is an attempt to address the literature gap on farmworkers’ post-secondary educational experiences with postsecondary retention data collected through NMSU CAMP.

Relying on qualitative and quantitative data collected from 130 freshman CAMP students spanning five years (2006-2011), interviews with six students in 2009, and observations from 2008 through 2011, this research

utilizes a “community cultural wealth” framework [CCW] (Yosso, 2005) to explore factors contributing to students’ entrance into the university and their persistence thereafter. Building upon Yosso’s (2005) CCW framework, where familial and navigational capital are just two of the many strengths that non-traditional students bring to the university, we contend that familial and navigational capital are key to farmworker students’ access to, and persistence in, college. In confluence with CCW, we also assert that Delgado-Bernal’s (2001) ‘pedagogies of the home’ is actively at play in increasing access and persistence for students.

The Context at the National Level

NMSU CAMP is one of 47 federally funded CAMP programs serving the postsecondary educational needs of children of migrant/seasonal farmworkers.¹² According to the U.S. Department of Education (2012), CAMP serves 2,000 students annually through competitive grants to institutions of higher education or non-profit organizations. Since 1972, CAMP nationwide has helped to improve access and completion rates for many migrant and seasonal farmworker students from secondary to postsecondary education.¹³ The national High School Equivalency Program and College Assistance Migrant Program (HEP/CAMP) Association states that approximately three quarters of CAMP freshmen complete their baccalaureate degree (<http://www.hepcamp.org/>).

Across the U.S., children of migrant and seasonal farmworkers often move frequently as a result of their parents’ or their own employment, which greatly obstructs their access to consistent and concentrated formal education. Adding to this challenge is the geographical marginality of farmworkers, especially in communities along the U.S.-Mexico border, one of the poorest regions in the nation (Johnson & Strange, 2009).

The Context in Southern New Mexico

The Border Agricultural Worker Project reports more than 12,000 farmworkers work in El Paso and southern New Mexico (Carmona & Rice, 2010). Most of these farmworkers live in *colonias*, which are communities that lack basic infrastructure, adequate housing, and improved roads (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2003). The median household income in Doña Ana County is 69% of the national median household income (Colonias Development Council, 2010); even worse, farmworkers from the area picking green chile, a major crop in the region, earn fifty cents per bucket, which amounts to roughly \$20 a day (Carmona & Rice, 2010). Poverty dictates the quality of life for farmworkers and their access to higher education, despite the presence nearby of a land-grant, Research One Institution.

NMSU CAMP is located merely 40 miles from the border in a southern New Mexico county that includes 1,691 farms (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2005), with the primary labor intensive crops being pecan orchards, green and red chiles, and onions (New Mexico Department of Agriculture, 2005). This region is one of the most densely Hispanic populated areas in the U.S., one that also experiences severe education problems. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, 46.3% of New Mexico’s citizens are Hispanic and only 25.3% of New Mexicans have a Bachelor’s degree or higher. In terms of high school graduation rates, the state ranks 46th in the nation; only 55% of New Mexico Hispanic students graduated from high school in 2007 (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009).

The NMSU CAMP Program

NMSU CAMP was designed as a social justice program to mediate structural impediments that normalize inequities at the university. CAMP’s primary goal has been to increase the number of baccalaureate degrees held by students from farmworker backgrounds. Program objectives include: 1) bridging educational outreach issues for farmworkers; 2) providing assistance with housing and meal costs, book stipends and monthly stipends, art and cultural activities, tutoring and mentoring, and leadership training workshops; and 3) providing overall

¹² When available, the program receives State funds.

¹³ These programs are authorized under Title IV, Part A, Subpart 5 of the Higher Education Act of 1965 (20 U.S.C. §1070d-2).

educational support and communication with family, community members, and university administrators who serve as the support network for students to successfully complete their education.

Since its inception, the concept of *familia* has been the central principle NMSU CAMP uses in its educational programming and retention efforts with students from farmworker backgrounds. The concept of *familia* serves as a retention tool, one typically eschewed by mainstream interpretations of university success and belonging. Thus, NMSU CAMP breaks from hegemonic patterns of “manufacturing sameness” in higher education. We use the concept “manufacturing sameness” to refer to educational institutions’ approaches to the standard freshmen year experiences that often work to undo familial and cultural rootedness.¹⁴ Under a conventional approach, the expectation is that students will break away from the family and become independent, in spite of the fact that these same students informally rely on family members, friends of the family, or institutional representatives to guide them through the higher education labyrinth.

Following a common interpretation of the White, mainstream, middle-class rite of passage, turning 18 years of age symbolizes independence from the family. Through breaking from the family, youth can forge their own identity while taking on new responsibilities to succeed. In using a CCW framework, we argue against this convention, offering, instead, insight into alternative logics of higher education access and retention by identifying familial and navigational capital (Yosso, 2005) and ‘pedagogies of the home’ (Delgado Bernal, 2001). NMSU CAMP is an example of the confluence and praxis of these two asset based theoretical perspectives in supporting non-traditional student success. Rooted in NMSU CAMP programming is the idea that first generation farmworker students are more likely to succeed within a familiar and family-like educational setting. A supportive, comfortable, and academically driven setting is provided to students where they can seek guidance without judgment about their institutional knowledge of the university.

Each year, NMSU CAMP recruits 30-35 full-time freshmen students. Students range from first-generation immigrant to fourth generation New Mexicans working on small family subsistence farms to large-scale dairy and agricultural operations. A small number of students also come from rural educational settings in Texas or elsewhere. CAMP usually serves students from K-12 Bilingual and Migrant Education programs who are not traditionally recruited to the university. In addition to financial support, CAMP provides academic and emotional support – all elements that have been documented to help retain historically underserved students in higher education (Attinasi, 1989; Hurtado, 1996; Ornelas-González, 2010; Pew Hispanic Center/Kaiser Family Foundation, 2004). CAMP includes an intensive advising model whereby all freshmen have an Individualized Educational Plan, and freshmen attend a CAMP course that focuses on study skills and navigating the University. Students also participate in Saturday morning workshops with their parents three times each semester to strengthen retention efforts and parental knowledge of the university.

A critical component of CAMP is the *Compas* Peer Mentoring Program¹⁵ in which upper-class students are hired to assist freshmen with academic guidance and mentorship. This component is designed based on the idea of *compadrazco*¹⁶ whereby CAMP alumni students take freshmen students under their care and guide them through the educational process. Upper class students (a female and a male) are also hired annually as Living Learning Community Cluster Leaders to live with freshmen in the dorms and to serve as a big brother or sister. Overall, this intensive support model allows staff and alumni students to form bonds with freshman beyond the lecture hall or advising office, to not only provides educational guidance, but to create an environment based on the notion of *compadrazco*.

Since 2002, 263 students have participated in CAMP, with 59 completing Bachelor degrees, eight completing Master’s degrees, eleven completing an Associate degree, and a student completing his Ph.D. The retention rate for students is 71%, including those who have graduated and those who continue their studies at NMSU. CAMP students represent many disciplines including electrical engineering, biology, business and

¹⁴ Manufacturing sameness”, first introduced here, was developed by the first author.

¹⁵ This program was designed by Martha Estrada and Jose Montoya.

¹⁶ *Compadrazco* refers literally to the bond created between godparents who baptize a child within the Catholic tradition. The term is also used loosely to refer to the bonds between good friends. Here we use it to mean the bond formed between students who share a similar life and work background within an educational setting. Students from similar backgrounds learn to look out for one another emotionally, and within this educational environment forging relationships that oftentimes run deeper than being school peers, and more akin to *compadres* (godparents) looking out for younger students, or like *hermanal/os* (relationships like brothers/sisters), and *familia* (family) overall.

education to criminal justice, social work, government, and animal range sciences.

Methodology and Participant Description

A mixed method research approach (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004) involving self-administered questionnaires, observations, and key informant interviews is utilized as part of the ongoing evaluation of the CAMP program. In this process, quantitative and qualitative data are gathered from CAMP Advisory Council members, students, and staff. For the purpose of this study, quantitative data collected from 130 freshman CAMP students spanning cohorts five through nine (academic years 2006-2007 through 2010-2011¹⁷) were descriptively analyzed using Predictive Analytics Software. In addition, qualitative data from six CAMP students representing a cross section of the participants (freshmen and alumni) who volunteered to be interviewed in 2009, and observations of CAMP workshops, graduation ceremonies, annual banquets, and student presentations between 2008 and 2011 were explored in the analysis. Using qualitative data to augment quantitative descriptive results allows researchers to dig deeper into the complexities of human behavior that are not readily revealed through quantitative data alone (Morse, 2003).

The self-administered entrance questionnaire distributed to all freshman CAMP students at the beginning of every academic year includes 39 closed and open-ended questions. In addition to capturing basic socio-demographic information, students have an opportunity to express their anxieties and worries about college. The data explored herein comprises a subset of a larger research effort, however, for the scope of this paper, this data set specifically examines a) the student's and their family's experiences doing farm work, b) the kinds of problems, if any, the students experienced from their involvement or their family's involvement in field/seasonal work, c) what they gained from the experiences that will help them succeed in college, and d) their thoughts about the NMSU CAMP program.

Results

Basic Demographics

Of the 130 CAMP students surveyed,¹⁷ slightly more females participated than males (53% vs. 47% respectively). The majority, 80% of the CAMP students were 17 or 18 years old at the time of the survey, while 20% were 19 or 20. Of the 128 that responded, 59% were born in the U.S. while 41% were born in Mexico. When asked where they grew up, 73% of the students identified only the U.S., 20% identified only Mexico, and 7% identified both the U.S. and Mexico. The average family income of the students surveyed was \$16,500 compared to \$74,000, as the median parental income of entering freshman in 2006 (Higher Education Research Institute, 2008).

Occupation Related Challenges

For 64% of the participants, they and at least one parent had worked in the fields or done seasonal work; for 26% of the students it was one or more parent who worked in this arena; in the case of 10%, only the student had worked seasonally or in the fields. When asked about the types of problems they experienced from their or their family's involvement in field/seasonal work, four themes emerged: long hours (36%), financial challenges (34%), hard work environment (26%), and stressful work (20%).

Social and Cultural Factors Impacting the Educational Context and Experience

When asked how their farm work experience may have helped them succeed at the university, nearly half of the students surveyed (45%) felt the early challenges in their lives taught them to work hard in college

¹⁷ Data were not included from the first four years since several key questions were not yet on the questionnaire. Missing responses were not included in the analyses and some questions allowed multiple responses.

and/or in the workplace. Close to a third (31%) desired to be/live better as a result of these challenges and 14% believed they were more determined. One student explained, “it pushes me and reminds [me] to keep working and trying my best to get a degree,” while another indicated, “seeing the hard work that my parents did and all the financial problems they had made me more determined to continue my education not only to help myself but them as well.” Araujo’s (2006) concept of ‘pedagogies of the fields’ is important here as her work is based on NMSU CAMP students’ farm work experiences which revealed how students learned strategies of transformative resistance as “the memories of working in the fields are motivation to continue with school... the participants were able to see their marginalization and transform it into the motivation to finish high school and enroll in college” (p.143). Students’ memory of struggle kept them focused on their studies as did witnessing their parents’ performing laborious fieldwork.

In addition to the surveys, observations at CAMP functions confirmed over and over again that students were thankful that their parents taught them the values of hard work, perseverance, and responsibility. “Working this hard made me realize that life can be pretty hard if you don’t have an education,” one student commented, while another said, “working there [agricultural fields] showed me how to be responsible.”

For the CAMP students’ parents, their own life lessons learned through fieldwork, a necessary means for survival, harvested a desire for a better future for their children and an investment in their education despite not knowing university systems. In spite of their lack of familiarity with higher education, parents emphasized to their children the need to break the cycle of fieldwork. Although these parents’ responses are similar to Lopez’s (2001) work on farmworker parents’ instilling “real-life lessons” onto their high school children, CAMP parents were negotiating completely unfamiliar University terrain, its institutional policies and its limited access besides new student orientation that farmworkers parents were often unable to attend because of working in the fields. CAMP parents literally entrusted the program staff to become “*encargados de sus hijas/hijos*” (responsible for their children) once their young adult sons/daughters entered the University to live in the dormitories, to study disciplines that were very technical, and oftentimes to see their children’s transformation into adulthood.

During workshops, parents discussed their own fears of engaging the University, and their fears and anxieties for their own children. Yet, they encouraged their children to obtain an education in order to avoid the fieldwork they themselves endured due to the lack of a formal U.S. education. As mentioned above, it is within the family context that the students developed aspirational capital, which refers to their ability to retain hopes and dreams for the future despite facing real and perceived barriers. One student indicated, “I want to be someone that can help others since I know what it feels [like] to have been living a life where things that others have, my family can’t afford to buy them.” Family often served as the inspiration for educational perseverance and the support and encouragement family gave is what drove students to do well academically. Despite tremendous financial and work difficulties, over half of the CAMP students surveyed (59%), aspired before they were 15 to occupations that require a post-secondary degree, with those requiring a bachelor’s or above most frequently cited.

At annual retreats and through written responses in questionnaires, students repeatedly explained that they want to support their families and to make them proud. One student writes, “The reason I’m here [school] is because I want them [parents] to feel proud of me.” In her ethnographic work on a California immigrant community, Delgado-Gaitan (2001) found that “Latino parents confronted distress in their households and workplaces, but they adapted wholly to the strident changes, learned to think differently about themselves and others, and overcame hardships. People’s belief system is the foundation of their transformation” (p. 105). For the above-mentioned student wanting to make his parents proud reinforced building on stronger values and actually holding more tightly to his dreams.

When asked what interested students about participating in CAMP, one student responded that “... [CAMP] students were going through the same experiences as me, they were also Hispanic, spoke two languages like me. It felt like they were a great family I would be welcomed to.” Another person said, “well, CAMP is an awesome program. It really interested me because it seemed more like a new family than just a program.” Another student recognized the program as, “CAMP is, like the staff say, ‘a new family for us,’... [by] helping each camper ... [and] pay for almost all your first year of college, [so] it’s really good to be part of the program.” At the end of the freshmen year, one student interviewed said, “the staff cares for you. They don’t leave you

alone.” Most of the interviewees also mentioned the advantages of having a CAMP peer mentor because they already knew how the system worked.

Discussion

A descriptive analysis of the CAMP students surveyed reveals that although as children most of them experienced a variety of challenges related to agricultural work, these challenges may have actually helped prepare them for their transition into and success at the University. The findings also speak to two of the six interrelated forms of cultural capital, familial and navigational, defined by Critical Race theorists (Delgado Bernal, 2001; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Faulstich Orellana, 2003). The remaining four forms of cultural capital – aspirational, linguistic, social, and resistant – also surfaced in the analysis but were typically in relationship to familial and navigational capital. The six dimensions of capital comprise community cultural wealth which, according to Yosso (2005), is a set of “knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts present in and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression” (p. 77).

Familial Capital

Familial capital can be described as community history, memory, and cultural intuition; in essence, the cultural knowledge that is nurtured in the *familia* (Delgado Bernal, 2001). The notion of being *bien educado* as described by Valenzuela (1996), among others, is another dimension of familial capital involving the teaching of morals, character, and proper behavior. Delgado Bernal (2002) takes this notion a step further with the concept of “pedagogies of the home” which offers “culturally specific ways of teaching and learning and embrace[s] ways of knowing that extend beyond the public realm of formal schooling” (p. 110).

Familial knowledge rooted in CAMP students leads to their culturally entrenched ways of celebrating culture and their pride in their farmworker families and backgrounds that make them more determined to graduate. This strong foundation stems from their families’ teachings and work ethic and exemplifies familial capital and ‘pedagogies of the home.’ For the CAMP students in this study whose families faced challenges related to working in the fields, all of them listed at least one example of how their family’s experiences will help them succeed at the university.

Navigational Capital

Navigational capital refers to the skills of moving successfully through social institutions, especially those that were not designed by or for communities of color, while social capital refers to networks of people and community resources (Yosso, 2005). Numerous avenues for networking and receiving social and emotional support were created by CAMP staff and the students themselves. Students enter the program knowing each other from high school or they quickly create bonds through their shared immigrant, fieldwork or educational experiences. This helps them navigate the university along with the assistance from staff who facilitate access to the university.

Other students rely on farmworker community members such as Cesario Moran, a former science teacher from Zacatecas, Mexico, known to locals as “El Profe,” who loans books to farmworker students and adults from his personal library. El Profe and his wife are farmworkers/labor contractors who encourage farmworker youth to attend NMSU CAMP, the way three of their six children did. Thus far, 84 siblings from 39 families have participated in the CAMP program, which speaks to both social and navigational forms of capital. Older siblings serve as a support mechanism as do other CAMP alumni who are mentors, tutors, and dorm leaders for freshmen.

In addition, CAMP alumni take their cue from the staff and serve as peer mentors, providing advice to students on study skills, job opportunities, and simply “learning the ropes.” As students began graduating from the university, they became part of the *compadrazco* network, letting younger CAMP students know of jobs, housing openings, and carpooling opportunities. CAMP students come to view each other, broadly speaking, as

siblings.

Conclusion

As suggested in this brief discussion, past and present sociocultural factors appear to have contributed to the entry and persistence of CAMP students at NMSU. Using aspects of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) and 'pedagogies of the home' (Delgado Bernal, 2001), this analysis presents descriptive quantitative and qualitative data revealing clear examples of cultural capital. The students experienced a variety of challenges related to migrant and seasonal farmwork, nonetheless they maintained high aspirations and seized the opportunity to enter the university through NMSU CAMP. Such strategies are clearly aligned with the inner resources, social competencies, and cultural strategies documented by previous researchers (Stanton-Salazar, 2001).

CAMP as Family, Lessons from CCW and 'pedagogies of the home'

It is clear from our analysis that students gained strength and perseverance from their experiences working in the fields, as well as from the memories of witnessing their parents' labor in the fields. Critical lessons of endurance were taught. Consequently, since CAMP's inception, the program recognized the value in creating an atmosphere of support, culture and a sense of *familia* for students' access and persistence. These alternate epistemologies challenge the traditional forms of institutional knowledge about access and student persistence. By recreating a sense of familial capital (Yosso, 2005) through programming reflecting concepts of *familia* (support, cultural and familiar sustenance, guidance and caring), students were able to acclimate to the university knowing that an academic and emotionally supportive space existed for them within the larger institution. Students also understood that their parents had given program staff the responsibility to look after and guide them in their parents' absence, a culturally significant responsibility for staff, whose Latino backgrounds and cultural knowledge allowed for this informal understanding between parent, child, and staff person. This cultural understanding helped facilitate academic success for these nontraditional college students.

Furthermore, the idea of *familia* as epistemology and programmatic structure challenged the practice of 'manufacturing sameness.' Students attended classes, received academic advising, and navigated financial aid systems with the guidance and support of CAMP staff who informed them of who to talk to, where to obtain information, and where they could "come home to within the academic setting (i.e. CAMP office)." Students felt comfortable with the guidance they received from CAMP staff who understood their backgrounds and culture and who recognized the novelty of the university bureaucracy that was daunting for them.

The guidance provided by staff which created a familial and familiar setting for students facilitated students' maneuvering of the larger institution and its intricate systems, thus becoming a form of Yosso's (2005) navigational capital. Students revealed that CAMP's familial approach toward them was critical in helping them to academically persist. In light of these findings, the idea of *familia* as an epistemological tool can be broadly incorporated into first-generation students' programming and used as an educational model to break the practice of 'manufacturing sameness' for other nontraditional students.

Research Implications

Students utilized the notions of *familia* to navigate their transition inside an unfamiliar terrain, while CAMP utilized similar notions of *familia* to break the practice of 'manufacturing sameness' typically experienced in the freshmen year. As noted by Delgado-Gaitan (2001), "empowerment of individuals, families, and the Latino community at large evolves as individuals emerge from isolation into connectedness" (p. 5). The challenge from this point forward is to continue to research and document the various ways in which, for non-traditional students such as those with farmworker backgrounds, familial and navigational capital intersect with 'pedagogies of the home' prior to and after entry into the higher education arena. Accomplishing this will require a continued commitment to question and dismantle the status quo of 'manufacturing sameness,' and while it is a slow and difficult process, it is the only way we will be able to institutionalize alternative educational paradigms that result in greater educational success for non-traditional students.

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