

2009 NAFSA Annual Conference
Los Angeles, California
May 29th, 2009
11:00 a.m.-12:15 p.m.

Panel: Educational Aspirations of Migrant Students: A U.S. – Mexico Challenge

What are the challenges of offering higher education opportunities to the increasing number of undocumented Mexican students in the United States? Subnational, national, and binational initiatives will be discussed to develop both governmental and nongovernmental strategies to address an issue of concern and impact to both countries.

The education of the migrant students of Mexican origin has been one of the most challenging issues the Mexican Government has faced since it launched the *Programa para las Comunidades Mexicanas en el Exterior* in 1990. The purpose of this program, which will celebrate its 20th anniversary next year, was to promote the links among Mexican communities abroad and to promote its development in several fields, such as Education.

Along this almost 20 years, el Program for Mexican Communities Abroad has evolved in order to offer a better answer from the Mexican Government to changing and growing needs of the Mexicans migrants in the U.S.

During this time, the education needs of the Mexican migrant communities changed as the communities changed itself.

At the beginning, the Mexican Government focused its efforts in providing educational opportunities to those migrants that never have a chance to educate themselves in México, or those that because of the migration process were forced to stop their basic education at their homeland.

Because of this reality, México implemented programs such as the Plaza Comunitaria network in the US (279 in operation as of today), or the distribution of official textbooks (more than 1 million per year) in the U.S.A.

I think that when we look back, we can say that this strategy has been very successful. But we can not fall in self-satisfaction with what we have achieved.

As the Mexican migrant communities expanded in the last two decades, its educational needs suffered a severe transformation. The children of those first-generation migrants grew up and so their aspirations for higher education.

The Mexican government institutions also evolved to better address the subjects of the new agenda those Mexican migrant communities have forged. The PCME transformed into the Institute of Mexicans Abroad or IME, and new programs were designed and added to the institutional catalog designed for the Mexican communities abroad.

Nowadays, we are facing new challenges in the education field as a consequence of the reality that migration imposed not only in the communities the migrants has chosen to live and work, but at their places of origin. And one of the most demanding issues in this field is the fact that Mexican migrant students have to face serious disadvantages in their education process, slowing their success opportunities and lowering its chances to finish high school or accessing a college or university.

Let me put over the table some questions for our panelists that could help us to bring some light to this very complex issue and guide our discussion:

- The Migration Policy Institute data shows that 60.2 percent of the 8.9 million Mexican-born adults age 25 and older had no high school diploma or the equivalent general education diploma (GED), and only 5.0 percent of Mexican immigrants had a bachelor's or higher degree, compared to 26.7 percent among all foreign-born adults.

How we can help to improve the number of Mexican migrant students obtaining a high school diploma or GED? What can we do to break the vicious cycle that has left this community behind the rest of the U.S. society? What are the reasons of this stream?

- According to the Pew Hispanic Center, nearly 40 percent of immigrant Mexican 16- to 19-year-olds are dropouts, while the dropout rate for Mexican immigrants educated in U.S. schools is 20 percent.

What can be done to keep these kids in school? How governments and organizations can work together to facilitate the integration of these students? What programs are needed to decrease drop-out rates? Is it the lack of English language proficiency the only factor that lead kids out-of-school?

- One of the main obstacles undocumented Mexicans migrant students are facing today is that they no have option to finance a higher education level after graduating from high school. These kids, that arrived at the U.S. at a very early age and that have already overcome enormous barriers to finish high school, suddenly realize that all their hard work and sacrifice were not enough to pursuit successful and productive careers.

What can be done to allow these kids that number 65,000 every year, to fully integrate in the only land and society they know? Is the DREAM Act the answer to their problems? What additional measures can be taken to help them to overcome this barrier, either on the American or the Mexican side?

- As you all know, these 65,000 migrant students that currently do not qualify for financial aid or in-state tuition are left on the sidelines of the society, sometimes integrating into the labor market at the lower levels.

Is it a real option for them to look for opportunities back in their homeland, in higher education institutions such as those represented in this panel, even if

they have to face family separation and adaptation problems in a foreign country where people speaks a different language? Are Mexican institutions ready to absorb a potential influx of these students? What programs are in place in Mexico to help this segment of the population?